

Our New Selection

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Our New Selection

Sydney

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THIS is the book of Our New Selection written by Arthur Hoey Davis, yclept Steele Rudd adorned with many pleasing Pictures of the Story by the most notorious Artists, and published for Australia by The Bulletin Newspaper Company in the year One Thousand Nine Hundred and Three.

To the memory of The Wives of Australia's Pioneers.

To the memory of the Women who first went out and bore the bushland's burdens and made the silences and solitudes their home. And to the WIVES whom disappointment and misfortune never bereft of hope. To you whose work is never at end, whose days are spent in rearing, in caring, in making, in mending, in comforting and helping; To you who cheerfully strive to make ends meet and keep the home and the homestead together; To you mothers of the yeomanry of our infant nation; Mothers of Australian bushmen; with admiration and respect I dedicate this book.

“STEELE RUDD”

Our New Selection.

I. BAPTISING BARTHOLOMEW.

THE baby, twelve months old, was to be christened, and Mother decided to give a party. She had been thinking about the party for some time, but decision was contemporaneous with the arrival of a certain mysterious parcel. We were preparing for the christening. Dad and Dave drawing water; Joe raking husks and corn-cobs into a heap at the door and burning them; Little Bill collecting the pumpkins and pie-melons strewn about the yard. Mother and Sal were busy inside. Mother stood on a box. Sal spread newspapers on the table and smeared them over with paste, then handed them cautiously to Mother, who fixed them on the wall. The baby crawled on the floor.

“Not that way,” said Mother. “That’s upside down; give them to me straight, ’cause your father sometimes likes to read them when they’re up.”

They chatted about the christening.

“Indeed, then, she won’t be asked,” Sal said; “not if she goes down on her knees — the skinny little — ”

“Min’, min’, mind, girl!” Mother screeched, and Sal dropped the newspaper she was about to hand up, and, jumping a stool, caught the baby by the skirt-tail just as it was about to wobble into the fire.

“My goodness! You little rat!” The baby laughed playfully and struggled to get out of her arms. Sal placed it at the opposite side of the room and the decorating continued.

“I can remember the time, then,” Mother said, “when they hadn’t so much to be flash about, when the old woman and that eldest girl, Johanna, used to go about in their bare feet and with dresses on — dear me — that I wouldn’t give a black-gin! ”

“Not Johanna, Mother?”

“Yes. Johanna. You wouldn’t remember it, of course. Norah was the baby then.”

“You little wretch!” And Sal rushed for the baby and pulled it from the fire once more. She dumped it down in a different corner, and returned to the paste. The baby made eagerly for the fire again, but when half-way across the room it stopped, rested its cheek on the floor and fell asleep — and it on the verge of being christened “Bartholomew” — until Dad came in and took it up.

Mother went into her bed-room and came out with a flaring red sash flying over her greasy gown, and asked Dad if he liked it. Dad looked at the ribbon, then out of the window and chuckled.

“What d’y’ think of me?”

“Think of y’?” And Dad grinned.

Mother looked fondly at the ribbon. She was very satisfied with herself. She was a true woman, was Mother. She tripped into the room again and came out with some yards of print, and asked Dad what he thought of that. Mother was fond of dress.

“Dear me, woman,” Dad said, “what’s going to happen?”

“But how do y’ like it?” — letting it hang like a skirt.

Dad grinned more.

“Is it a nice pattern?”

Dad still grinned.

“Does it suit me?”

Dad looked out the window and saw Joe knock Little Bill down with a pumpkin. He ran out.

“Men haven’t a bit of taste,” Mother said to Sal, folding the print, “except just for what” — (Joe rushed in at the front door and out at the back one — “cept for what’s to go in their stomachs. All they think about’s an old — ” Dad rushed in at the front door and out the back one) — “old horse or something. And then they think” — (Joe rushed in again at the front door, but dived under the sofa) — “think every old screw is a race-horse” — (Dad rushed in again at the front door and out at the back one) — “My word, if he finds you there, me shaver, y’ll catch it!”

Joe grinned and breathed hard. Mother put the print away and mounted the box again. Then Mrs Flannigan — a glib-tongued old gossip, the mother of sixteen shy selector children — dropped in, and they drank tea together and talked about christenings and matches and marriages and babies and bad times and bad husbands until dark — until Mrs. Flannigan thought her husband would be wanting his supper and went home.

Joe talked of the christening at school. For a time nobody paid any attention to him; but as days passed and one and another went home to find that mother and father and bigger brothers and sisters had been “asked,” the interest grew, and a revulsion of feeling in favour of Joe set in. First Nell Anderson suddenly evinced a desire for his society — previously she would weep if made stand next him in class. Then the Murphys and the Browns and young Roberts surrounded him, and Reuben Burton put his string bridle on him and wouldn’t ride any other horse in a race, till at last Joe became the idol of the institution. They all fawned on him and followed him about — all but the two Caseys. They were isolated, and seemed to feel their position keenly.

Joe was besieged with questions and answered them all with a head-shake and a snuffling of one nostril. He disclosed all the arrangements and gave melting descriptions of the pies and puddings Mother was preparing.

How they danced round him and called him “Joseph”! The two Caseys stood off in silence, and in fancy saw those pies and puddings — a pleasant contemplation till Nell Anderson pointed to them and asked Joe if they were invited.

“Nah,” Joe said, “n-n-none of 'em is.”

“Ain't their mother?”

“N-nah, we d-don't want 'em”, and he snuffled more. Then the two Caseys stole away to the rear of the school, where they sat and nursed their chagrin in lugubrious silence, and caught flies mechanically, and looked down at their dusty bare feet over which the ants crawled, until the teacher thumped the end of the little building with a huge paling and school went in.

The Day came, and we all rose early and got ready. The parson, who had to ride twenty-five miles to be present, came about midday. His clothes were dusty, and he looked tired. Mother and Sal wondered if they should offer him something to eat or let him wait until the guests arrived and all sat down to the big spread. They called Dad and Dave into the little tumble-down kitchen to discuss the matter. Dad said he didn't care what they did, but Dave settled it. He said, “Get the chap a feed.”

Joe sat on the sofa beside the parson's tall hat and eyed it in wonder. Joe had never seen so much respectability before. The parson ate with his back turned to Joe, while Mother and Sal flew busily about. Joe cautiously put out his hand to feel the beaver. Mother saw him and frowned. Joe withdrew his hand and stared at the rafters.

“Delicious tea,” said the parson, and Mother served him with more.

Joe's hand stole out to the hat again. Dave, standing outside near the front door, noticed him and grinned. That emboldened Joe, and he lifted the hat and placed his head inside it and grinned out at Dave. Mother frowned more, but Joe couldn't see her. She hurried out. Then from the back of the house Dad's voice thundered, “Joe!” Joe removed the beaver and obeyed the call. Harsh, angry whispers came from the door, then sounds of a scuffle, and an empty bucket flew after Joe as he raced across the yard towards the haystack.

Soon the guests began to arrive. The Maloneys and the Todds and the Taits and the Thomsons and others, with children and dogs, came in spring-carts and drays from Back Creek. The Watsons and the Whites and old Holmes and Judy Jubb, from Prosperity Peak, appeared on horse-back. Judy, in the middle of the yard, stepped out of a torn and tattered old riding habit, with traces of the cow-yard about it, and displayed a pair of big boots and “railway” stockings and a nice white muslin dress with red bows

and geraniums and a lot of frills and things on it. Judy was very genteel.

The Sylvesters — nice people who had come from Brisbane with new ideas and settled near us, people who couldn't leg-roped a cow, who were going to make a big thing out of fowls, who were for ever asking Dad if jew-lizards were snakes — came on foot with their baby in a little painted cart. A large black dog, well groomed and in new harness, without reins, pulled the cart along.

We had never seen a dog pulling a cart before — neither had our dog. He rushed off to meet the Sylvesters, but stopped half-way and curled his tail over his back and growled and threw earth about with his legs. The Sylvesters' dog stood also, and curled his tail over his harness. Mrs. Sylvester patted him and said, "Carlo, — Carlo, you naughty boy!"

Our dog suddenly made off. The Sylvesters' dog pursued him. He tore along the fence at coursing speed, making a great noise with the cart until he turned a corner, where it upset and left the baby. But he didn't catch our dog. And Paddy Maloney and Steve Burton and young Wilkie galloped up through the paddock shouting and whipping their horses and carried away the clothes-line stretched between two trees at the back.

The house soon filled — just room for big Mrs. McDoolan to squeeze in. She came on foot, puffing and blowing, and drank the glass of holy water that stood on the table with bull-frogs careering round in it. She shook hands with everybody she knew, and with everybody she didn't know, and kissed the baby. There was no pride about Mrs. McDoolan.

The ceremony was about to commence. Joe and the young Todds and the young Taits, who, with the tomahawk and some dogs — about twenty-six dogs — had been up the paddock hunting kangaroo-rats, returned with a live jew-lizard. They squatted round the door guarding the trophy.

Dad and Mother, with the baby in a dress of rebellious hues, stood up and faced the parson. All became silent and expectant. The parson whispered something to Mother, and she placed the baby in Dad's great arms. The band of hunters at the door giggled, and the jew-lizard tried to escape. Dad, his hair and beard grown very long, stared at the parson with a look of wild, weird reverence about him.

"In the name of the Father," the parson drawled, dipping his fingers into the water and letting it drip on to the baby's face — "I baptize thee, Barthol —"

Interruption!

The jew-lizard escaped and, with open mouth and head up, raced across the floor. Had it been a boa-constrictor or a bunyip the women couldn't have squealed with more enthusiasm. It made straight for Judy Jubb. But Judy had been chased by a jew-lizard before. She drew back her skirts —

also her leg — and kicked the vermin in the chest and lifted it to the rafters. It fell behind the sofa and settled on Todd's bull-dog that was planted there. Bully seized it and shook it vigorously and threw it against Mrs. McDoolan, and seized it again and shook it more — shook it until our dog and a pack of others rushed in. "T' the devil!" said Dad indignantly, aiming heavy kicks at the brutes. "The child! — Gimme the child!" Mother shrieked, pulling at Dad. "Out w' y'!" said Anderson, letting fly his foot. "Down, Bully!" shouted Todd, and between them all they kicked the dogs right through the door, then heaved the lizard after them.

But the ceremony was soon over, and everybody was radiant with joy — everybody but Bartholomew. He had been asleep until the parson dropped the water on his face, when he woke suddenly. He glared at the strange assemblage a moment, then whined and cried hard. Mother "hooshed" him and danced him up and down, saying, "Did they fri-ten 'im?" Mrs. McDoolan took him and "hooshed" him and jumped him about and said, "There now, — there now."

But Bartholomew resented it all and squealed till it seemed that some part of him must burst. Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Anderson and Judy Jubb each had a go at him. "Must have the wind," murmured Mrs. Ryan feelingly, and Mrs. Johnson agreed with her by nodding her head. Mother took him again and showed him the dog, but he didn't care for dogs. Then Sal ran out with him and put him on the gee-gee — the parson's old moke that stood buried in thought at the fence — and he was quiet.

A long table erected in the barn was laden with provisions, and Dad invited the company to "come along and make a start." They crowded in and stared about. Green boughs and corn-cobs hung on the walls, some bags of shelled corn stood in one corner, and from a beam dangled a set of useless old cart-harness that Dad used to lend anyone wanting to borrow. Dad and Paddy Maloney took up the carving. Dad stood at one end of the table — Paddy at the other. Both brandished long knives. Dad proceeded silently — Paddy with joyous volubility. "Fowl or pig!" he shouted, and rattled the knife, and piled the provender on their plates, and told them to "back in their carts" when they wanted more; and he called the minister "Boss". Paddy was in his element.

'Twas a magnificent feast and went off most successfully. It went off until only the ruins remained. Then the party returned to the house and danced. Through the afternoon, and far into the night, the concertina screeched its cracked refrain, while the forms of weary females, with muffled infants in their arms, hovered about the drays in the yard, and dog-tired men, soaked to the knees with dew-wet grass, bailing and blocking horses in a paddock corner, took strange, shadowy shape. It wasn't until all

was bright and the sun seemed near that the last dray rolled heavily away from the christening of Bartholomew.

II. SOME TROUBLE WITH A STEER.

DEPTH of winter! A cold morning at Shingle Hut. Everything coated with frost. The ground and the woodheap and the water-cask white with it.

The draught-horses stood at the barn, humping their backs, and greedily eating from their nose-bags. The aged saddle-mare, which mostly subsisted on dry grass and long rides, leant over the slip-rails and gazed ponderingly at them. In a corner of the yard a brindle cow, that Dad one day had dehorned with a rail, joyously munched shelled corn-cobs, while near the house an inquisitive steer, with a lumpy jaw, cautiously approached the pig bucket.

Joe, who had brought the horses in, warmed his bare feet at the fire, and sat to breakfast alone, with his hat on. The others had finished and were about. He poured out some tea, and was commencing on a plate of fried pumpkin, left at the fire for him, when "Jacko," a half-grown pet kangaroo, bounded hurriedly in at the door. He fouled the table and fell, spreading his ungainly form on the floor, and resting some of his tail calmly on the fire. Then he rose with amusing alacrity and darted into the back room. Joe laughed and ate more pumpkin. A smell of singed marsupial reached him, and he chuckled again. Then he called to Jacko to know what had happened. The kangaroo was dumb. Joe called again. Dad appeared at the door, out of breath, and wet to the hips with dew from the greenstuff. He faced Joe angrily and said:—

"Where's that d—n kangaroo?"

Joe took in the situation instantly and was about to say he didn't know when Jacko sneezed in his own peculiar way and betrayed himself. Dad entered the room and dragged him out.

"Hand me that knife," — he demanded with fearful earnestness, reaching towards the table with one hand, while he strained to retain Jacko with the other. Joe hesitated. Again:—

"Hand me that kni-knife!"

The kangaroo was struggling. Joe was motionless and sullen. Finally Dad secured the weapon himself. Then:—

"No, no, d-d-dad — don't!" Joe pleaded. "Don't kill him!" But without another word Dad forced back Jacko's head, till the skin over the throat almost cracked, then drew the knife across it. Joe clutched his arm and squealed, "Murder!" Dad shook him off, and again swished the blade across. Again Joe squealed. Still Jacko struggled. Dad struck him on the snout, and kicked him heavily in the ribs. Joe moaned. Jacko was subdued.

Then Dad proceeded leisurely to use the knife as a saw. But the thing

refused to make as much as a mark. Dad got disgusted. He took the marsupial in his arms and heaved it out of the door on top of the dog, which was staring in at Joe's breakfast. The dog yelped, and limped away, but the kangaroo bounced up like a football and attempted to re-enter. Dad's large, heavy boot met him at the door. It caught him full in the stomach, and lifted him back again. Jacko wisely disappeared round the house.

Dad turned to Joe. Joe moved to the other end of the table.

"You blockhead!" Dad commenced, moving nearer him. "Didn't I tell you to get rid of that d—n thing?" (A pause.) "Didn't I?"

Joe made no answer, but prepared for action. He placed both hands on the table, and, crouching in a springing attitude, eyed his parent in an interested way.

"Didn't I tell you to keep it off the greenstuff?" No reply. Dad edged round the table. So did Joe. Then Dad sprang at him and secured a piece of his shirt-sleeve. Joe grinned involuntarily.

"Stand!" cried Dad, reversing his course — (Joe doing likewise.) "Stir another inch, and I'll knock your brains out!" He brandished the teapot.

Joe stirred fully a foot.

"Stand!" Dad repeated, "or by — !" But Joe didn't stand. He dodged one way, then another, and, kicking down a stool that was in his way, bounded across the room and out the door. The teapot followed him.

A few moments later Dad was harnessing the plough-horses, while Joe, with tears in his eyes, sat concealed behind the haystack. He was despondent and remained quiet for a while, thinking and chewing straw. He noticed Dave a short distance away, digging potatoes and putting them into a bucket. He wished to speak to Dave confidentially. He felt a desire to make Dave unhappy. He would tell him that he was going to clear out, and leave Dad and the selection and the pet kangaroo and everything else to go to glory. He would break up the happy home.

Dave wasn't far off, but Joe deemed it unsafe to whistle or call to him, for fear of betraying his whereabouts to Dad. He stood up and waved his hat about to attract Dave's attention. Dave worked on. Joe paused to think. Then he gave a grotesque exhibition of high jumping. Dave dropped more potatoes into the bucket. Joe reflected again, and an idea occurred to him. With one eye round the corner of the stack in the direction of Dad, he crept out and secured a stone. He was an excellent shot — or believed he was — and thought to lodge the missile in the bucket, to attract Dave. Gathering himself together, he let fly. The stone landed with a thud on the broad of Dave's back, and raised dust from his shirt. Gods, how he jumped and

dropped the spade! He contorted his features, screwed and twisted about, and looked up and down. His attention was attracted.

Joe stood still, alarmed and unable to decide what to do. At last Dave's eyes rested on him.

There was an enraged howl, and, with the spade uplifted, Dave ran towards him. Joe decided on action. He fled. Making straight for the back door of the house, he surprised the lumpy jawed steer poking among the pots, his head buried to the horns in a kerosene tin. The startled beast sprang back, and the tin went with him. He had pressed his head into it till it became a tight fit. He looked foolish, and twirled round and round with it. It clung to him. He paused and pondered. Gradually his tail rose to a horizontal position. Then, without warning, he bellowed and blindly stampeded across the yard. The brindle cow started up inquiringly, and some cattle of Anderson's came running down the lane. He carried a portion of an old bark shed away, and nearly brought down Dave, who was hurrying in pursuit of Joe. Dave heaved the spade at the brute, and called to Dad to "Look out."

Dad glanced round and saw the steer coming. "Way! Way!" he cried to one of the horses (Captain, a newly broken colt) as he was throwing a back-hand across the other. But Captain was nervous. He snorted and turned his head just in time to see the steer collide with the dray. That was enough. Before Dad could reach him he made off, careering madly round and round the yard. The steer wasn't in it with him, particularly when his legs became entangled in the chains. Dave said he never saw prettier bucking. He bucked until there wasn't a stitch of harness left on him — then he fell over the fence into the cultivation and galloped away lame.

Dad didn't speak. He stood watching Captain, until a low, pathetic bellow broke the silence. He turned and saw the steer. The brute was on the broad of its back, between the shafts of the dray, its legs beating the air. Dad went to it and feelingly kicked the tin off its nose. Then he took a rail and poked till it struggled to its feet and departed.

That night, after supper, as Dad and Dave and Joe cleaned the guns and cheerfully talked of going out possum shooting, and as the smaller ones played and prattled merrily on the bag carpet before the glowing fire, no one would have suspected that the harmony of our household had ever been disturbed.

III. GOOD-BYE TO THE OLD HOME.

“KIT! KIT!” called Sarah, standing at the back door with a saucer of milk. The kitten lay in the sun, blinked at her, and rolled over playfully, but didn't come. “You're too well fed!” said Sarah, retreating into the kitchen. The kitten purred lazily to signify that that was so.

Everything was well fed at Shingle Hut now. A change had come. An air of prosperity was about the place. Broad-backed, upstanding draught-horses, fat and fresh, fed around contentedly; the paddock was stocked with sleek, well-bred cows and spring heifers, and four and five-year-old bullocks fit for a show; the reaper and binder in the shed was all our own, two ploughs were going, and — ye money-lenders! — the mortgage had been paid right off.

For six successive years our wheat crop had been a big success. No matter what Dad did he couldn't go wrong. Whenever he was compelled to sow late there was sure to be too much rain and early crops would run rank, or take the rust or the smut or something, while ours would come on nicely and be a success. Or else no rain at all would fall — somehow it would wait for Dad — and when Anderson's and Johnson's and all the wheat about was parched and perished, ours was a picture good to see. And Dad earned and enjoyed a reputation for long-headedness, for persistence and practical farming. People praised him and pointed to him as a pattern for their sons to follow — an example of what could be accomplished on the land by industry and a bit of brains.

Yet Dad wasn't satisfied. He talked of selling out — of taking up a thousand acres somewhere and expanding operations. But Mother opposed it; she thought we were doing well enough. Shingle Hut was good enough for her. She had worked hard and spent the best of her days in it, scraping and struggling, and now she asked was to live the rest of her life there — to die peacefully and be buried near the house.

The rest of us agreed with Dad. We wanted a change. What the result might be we didn't consider — we only wished to shift. Ripping up the old house, rounding up the stock, camping under a dray a night or two on the way to the Promised Land — gave food for delightful speculation. We longed for it all to come about.

“See anything of him?” Dad asked, as Dave rode into the yard and dismounted, after searching for a lost horse one day.

“No,” Dave said, and leant on the fence and nibbled the end of a straw. Dad leant on the other side and reflected.

A short distance off a new building was going up. Donald McIntyre, a broad-shouldered Scotsman with a passion for politics, and one McDonald, who didn't believe in governments at all, and confined his studies solely to the weather and pumpkins and profanity, were building a humpy with a shingling hammer. Donald McIntyre was on the rafters, arguing wildly and shaking the hammer menacingly at McDonald, who was on the ground.

Dad and Dave looked up.

"Come doon, ye —! —!" shouted McDonald, and McIntyre sprang from the rafters and pursued him round and round the humpy.

"A fight!" Dave said excitedly.

"come on!" and he ran a few paces. But at the same moment Joe rushed to the scene out of breath.

"I fuf-fuf-found 'im, Dad!" he said excitedly.

"Where?" Dad asked eagerly.

"Bub-bub-bet y' can't gug-guess?"

"Where the devil is he, boy?"

("Look at McIntyre — after him across the ploughed ground!" — enthusiastically from Dave.)

"Down th' w-w-well!"

"Wot?" Dad hissed, showing his teeth and punching the wind with his fist.

"Is he dead?" he added.

"Don't know th-that, Dad, but he s-s-smells!"

Dad groaned and walked inside and out again, then round the yard.

"Yoke up Gypsy and Tiger," he said sternly to Dave, "and bring them down." Then he went off to the well by himself.

Dad peered into the well a moment and drew back and pulled a very ugly face.

Dave arrived with the horses. He went to the well to look down but ran away and spat.

Joe held the horses and chuckled.

Dave thought of the wind. It was blowing towards him. He made a wide circuit and approached the well on the other side. But when he leant forward to look down, the wind changed and he ran away again. Dad was determined. He advanced with a frown and a heavy rope, fastened one end of the latter to a sapling close by, and hurled the rest of it into the well — then he, too, retreated.

"Now," he said to Dave, "go down and fasten it on 'im!"

"Me?" Dave said, backing farther away.

Joe chuckled again.

"Well, y' don't expect me to go down, do y'?" Dad snorted.

Dave grinned a sickly grin.

“It won't kill y', will it?” Then, after a pause, “Are y' going t' do it — or not?” There were shell and shrapnel in Dad's eye, and he looked ugly.

“W-w-wet y'r nose, Dave,” Joe said, advisedly.

Dave hesitated, then reluctantly descended. He disappeared along the rope and was below some time. He came to the surface again, and gasped and staggered and threw himself on the grass and seemed ill. Change of air didn't do Dave much good.

Dad fastened the horses to the rope and told them to “get up.” The chains jerked and tightened. Gypsy and Tiger hung in their collars and strained, and tore the ground with their toes. Dad shouted and waved a big stick over them. Captain's form gradually rose till his head was in sight and his nose caught against the sleepers that lined the mouth of the well. Then he stopped.

“Gypsy! . . . Tiger!” Dad roared, and rattled the stick encouragingly on their hides. Gypsy and Tiger began to tire, and eased off.

“Look out!” Dave cried. “Don't let them back!” Dad seized their heads and held on. But the dead horse gradually descended again and was slowly dragging the live ones and Dad after it. Dad struck Gypsy on the nose with his fist to make her “stand up.” Gypsy reared and fell across the well and kicked desperately. Then Tiger tried to turn round in his chains and lost his footing and lay on his back, his tail hanging down the well. Dad was horror-stricken. He threw away his hat and ran in several directions in search of something. He found a sapling, lifted it, threw it down again, and ran back to the horses and held his hands above his head like a preacher.

Sal came to tell Dad he was wanted at the house, but he couldn't hear her.

“Curse it, can't y' do something?” he cried to Dave.

Then Gypsy made a big effort to rise and fell down the well and dragged Tiger's harness with her. Tiger jumped up and made off. Dad stared aghast.

“W-w-what did y' hit 'er f'?” Joe asked reproachfully.

“Yah!” Dad bellowed, and sprang at Joe. Joe didn't look behind till he reached the house.

But Burton happened to come along with his bullock team, and rescued Gypsy and dragged Captain's corpse from the well. Then Dad went for a drink of water in the gully and sat down under a bush, and Sal came and spoke to him again, and when he was calm he went to the house.

The man from town who had offered us £400 for the selection was at the house waiting. They went inside.

“Well,” said the visitor, “have you considered my offer?”

“Yes,” Dad answered, “I'll take it!” — and Shingle Hut was sold!

Mother clutched her knees with both hands and stared hard and silently at

the fireplace till her eyes filled with tears.

Sal ran out to Dave and Joe, and the three of them discussed the turn things had taken. Mother came out to them.

“It's sold?” Sal said.

“Yes,” Mother replied slowly, “it's s-s-sold.” And again the tears came, and she sat on a sleeper beside the barn and, hiding her face in her apron, cried hard.

Sal hung her head and thought, but Dave went to Mother and sat beside her, and tried to explain the advantages of selling out and beginning afresh. The man left the house, walked to his horse, shook hands with Dad, and went away.

Then Dad paced up and down, up and down, and round about by himself for a long, long time.

A cold, dull day. Heavy black clouds hung low and darkened the earth. At intervals a few drops of rain fell — a deluge threatened. No gentle winds blew, no birds whistled among the boughs. Dave was passing slowly out at the slip-rails with a dray-load of furniture and farm implements, Joe sitting astride Dad's old saddle-mare, in charge of the cows in the lane, Dad loading a second dray, Sal putting a horse in the spring-cart, the rest of us gathering knick-knacks and things about the place. We were leaving — leaving Shingle Hut — the old house we had known so long — the old home where Kate was married — where Bill and Tom and Barty were born — the home where merriment so often mocked misfortune and light hearts and hope softened the harshness of adversity.

And Anderson and Mrs. Anderson came to see us off — kind-hearted people were the Andersons. And Judy Jubb came all the way from Prosperity Peak to kiss Sal.

“Good-bye, then, and God bless y',” Mrs. Anderson said, her large eyes swimming in tears. Mother held out her hand, but broke down and was helped into the spring-cart.

“'N' I hope y' won't regret it,” Anderson said as he shook Dad's hand. Then with a last look around — a look of lingering affection — we bade farewell to Shingle Hut and started for Our New Selection.

IV. A FRESH START.

THUS we came to Saddletop. Dad looking old, Mother older, Sarah tall and womanly, Dave a big, bony man, more reserved than ever, Joe approaching manhood, broad-shouldered, sturdy, full-faced and droll — he was our own comedian, entertained us often, and gave us pains in the side by “taking people off.” The younger ones all stretching out — and — no more babies.

Our new selection was a piece of magnificent country, twelve hundred acres, all rich black soil ten to fifteen feet deep, permanent water, and a government well outside the fence; a wide fringe of heavy timber at the back; plain in front, and grass! — we used to lose the horses in it.

The house was new, a stately palace, after Shingle Hut; five rooms in it; weather-boarded, floor-boarded, iron-roofed; lock and key to every door; kitchen, and a thousand-gallon tank. And such water! We had never known the taste of real water before. No charcoal, no ashes, no traces of a drought, no doubtful flavour of any kind about it, and no scum to scrape off whenever we boiled some.

And Dad was proud of the selection. He was pleased with our prospects altogether, and talked of the progress the district was making.

Saddletop was a rising place. A branch railway line was coming to it — had been coming for twenty-two years. Farmers from South Australia were there — men who, 'twas said, knew how to farm, who understood all about soils and silos, and worked on scientific principles. They were settled along a deserted gully where nothing but burr and thistle and nut-grass grew, and whenever it rained hard they would retreat in disorder to high land, with their wives in barrows and their beds and things on their backs.

There was one farmer from Victoria. He knew something about selecting. He came and rooted the trees out of his land and put in wheat, and watched it grow for a while, then went away one morning and never came back.

A number of old pioneers were there, just beginning to do well after thirty years of toil and struggle — their difficulties and dangers and innumerable hardships but faintly comprehended.

Up dry gullies and blind gullies, hidden away behind ranges and rocks, were selectors who hoed holes in the long grass and dropped pumpkin seed into them, then went away somewhere and came back with a horse at the end of a long rope, which they handled and broke for somebody while the pumpkin was growing.

There were a few of a species who, in wet weather, stood all day long in

their doorway with a wet bag on their shoulders, gazing out philosophically on the pelting rain, and when it wasn't raining, went away with a blanket and looked for shearing.

A weird, silent “hatter” was there, whose hair penetrated his hat, and who stitched patches on his pants with a packing needle and string — the strange man who lived under the range away from everybody, in a bark hut propped up on the downhill side by a stick; the man who avoided all human society — whose hut contained harness, flung on the floor, and scraps of greenhide, and a greasy table with sapling legs driven into the ground; who sat anywhere on the floor, and took his dinner off a tin plate placed on his knees, and asked questions of his watchful dog, and told it things while the birds of the bush came round the open door and hopped in and out unmolested; the man who never grumbled, whose happiness was the silence and solitude of his surroundings, whose God was Nature and whose only hell the toothache.

The selector of regular movements was there — the methodical man who caught the same old horse each morning by gladdening the steed's heart with the sound of the same few handfuls of corn rattled in a dish, and who always went somewhere. His form was known in the district miles off. He was a clock to those working in the fields. They told the time of day by him as he passed along.

There were people from the town there, too — broken-down swells who professed hatred for the bush and were always going back to the city, but never started; polite people who wouldn't drink tea out of a saucer, who loved flower-gardens — and grew one geranium in a tin; whose daughters declared all the young men around rough because they neglected to lift their hats, and who came out in holland riding habits because they were cheap, and said they were all the fashion in town.

There was one man who regularly employed men — who possessed everything necessary about a farm and stored his hay in sheds, and drew cheques. He was the squire of the district. He always travelled to town by train, first class, and never said “Good-day” to the neighbours, except in moments of absent-mindedness. He might have been worth a thousand pounds. People often called him a millionaire and it never worried him; it made him less absent-minded. He met ministerial parties and influential visitors to the district at the railway station and drove them in a buggy to his house, and entertained them, and showed them over the farm, and filled the “special correspondent” with inspirations of his (the squire's) own enterprise, and ideas about “prosperous selectors”, and “a district with a future”.

Scattered about in remote places were average selectors — the plodders;

men who poked along leisurely and reared large families and took reverses as cheerfully as they took pills — men who placed large stones and heavy fencing material on the roof to keep it from flying off when there was any wind (the roof kept the stones from falling through and shattering the dinner table when there was no wind); men who reckoned they could make money and save, if only the seasons could be relied on and they had no interest to meet.

And, some distance from each other, a small school, surrounded by gum-trees, and two unpainted churches of battered, warlike appearance, raised their heads. The school children battered them. They frequently quarrelled over religion on the way from school, and, since there was no one to read the Riot Act to them, wrecked each other's church with stones.

We had not been long at Saddletop when we became acquainted with these people. Many of them came to welcome us to the district — some to borrow things.

Miss Wilkins and Miss Mulrooney were among the first to come. They came one bright afternoon when the air was fresh and the sky was blue — when the birds were singing and the butterflies fluttering — when Dad and Cranky Jack were trenching for fruit-trees and Dave and Joe ploughing on the plain.

They slid off their horses at the fence surrounding the house and laughed. The laugh was to attract attention. They stepped onto the veranda and curtseyed and said it was a “lovely day”. Mother invited them in. They hesitated as though time were precious, and Miss Wilkins said, “We can only stay just a minute, Mrs. Rudd.” Then they sat down and poked out the toes of their boots from under their habits, and looked through the corners of their eyes at everything in the room, and didn't go away till dusk.

Miss Wilkins was a stout person, fat and flabby, and owned to being five-and-twenty. She had owned to five-and-twenty for sixteen years. She laced tight, too, and fancied herself thin and shapely. Polly Palethorpe and Annie Hayes (both jammed into one wouldn't equal her size) were objects of astonishment to her.

Miss Mulrooney had a figure and was only twenty-eight. She had seen some town life, too, and was one of those who wore a holland habit. There were hints of vanished finery about her — she was hard up, in fact, and strove to conceal her poverty by putting on airs.

She sat and drank tea and ate scones and fresh butter with much gusto, praised the provender every time she reached for more, and asked Mother if she made the scones herself — as if she would call in a traveller or get Dad to bake them!

Miss Wilkins talked to Sal about a dance that was at the Rise, and Jim Murphy courting Norah Fahey, and old Fahey chasing Jim with a gun — punctuating her conversation with loud cheerful shrieks. And Miss Mulrooney told Mother in tired tones how hard it was on them all to have to rough it in the bush after being so well off in town, used to their carriage and servants. (Her father, the story went, had been employed by a lawyer in Brisbane as confidential clerk. He used to open the “private” door whenever a client came, which was nearly once a month, and inquire in a respectful tone of the empty chair if he were engaged; then he would hand the client another chair without making a noise and steal out into the street to find the lawyer and drag him in by a back way.) She assured Mother (and Mother, good soul, believed her and felt deeply for the family) that she didn't know how they would live at all only for the little money papa was still receiving from the business in town, as there was nothing at all to be got out of farming.

And as they talked and drank more tea the schoolmaster's wife and Mary O'Reilly and Miss Perkins approached the house. Miss Wilkins saw them through the window and whispered to Miss Mulrooney. Miss Mulrooney fidgeted and was uneasy, but, recognizing the horses fastened to the fence, the schoolmaster's wife and Mary O'Reilly and Miss Perkins turned their heads away and rode past. They weren't speaking to Miss Wilkins or Miss Mulrooney.

Gray (the “squire” of the district) came one morning. He merely looked in because he happened to be passing. But he wouldn't come inside — that would be making himself cheap. He stayed in the yard and talked with an air of superior knowledge to Dad.

“What do you want with a thing like that?” he said, pointing to a new three-furrow plough. (He was a stale conservative who wouldn't see, and regarded everything new with contempt.)

“To plough with, and save time and labour,” Dad answered.

“Save your grandmother!” Gray said. “I've a couple of single-furrows over there,” he went on, indicating his farm, “and I guarantee any of my men'll turn over as much land in a day with any one of them as you will with that.”

“Well,” said Dad, “send a man along with one, an' we'll see.”

“And plough your land for you?” Gray went away.

And Sam Evans came, and stood on the veranda, bashfully turning an old hat round and round in his hands, and wouldn't step inside because the place was clean. But Barney Ballantyne would. He said it was “cheaper sittin' than standin'”, and he sat down on Sarah's hat that had been left on a chair, and told Dad lies about wheat crops, and chewed tobacco, and spat

squares and circles till they evolved into carpet patterns on the cleanly scrubbed floor.

Many others called and in due course we returned their visits. We mixed with them in their homes, mingled with them abroad, shared their successes, their prejudices and sympathies, joined with them in song and sorrow in these new surroundings, and among new friends and true friends we faced the vagaries of fortune afresh and commenced a new life.

V. THE GREAT MILK ENTERPRISE.

AT first we encountered reverses. No rain for months; nothing but heat — heat and scorching gales. Then it rained when we least required it — in the middle of the hay-making — and poured for weeks; poured till the cut-off thirty acres of oats, the only crop in the district, rotted and was ruined.

Two successive seasons the wheat failed — once, when it had grown higher than the fence, a late frost blackened and withered it all up in one night, and once it didn't grow at all.

“Don't know,” said Dad gloomily, “don't know at all.” Then, after reflecting:

“Jimmy Tyson himself couldn't stand much o' these seasons. Most uncertain. A season or two more, 'n' a man might lose all he's ever earned an' not have a bloomin' stick.”

Dad's reflections only made him unhappy. He wasn't as brave as he used to be, and the loss of a few pounds worried him and gave him nightmares. Dad was fond of money now. He thought more of it than he did of Mother.

Dad complained of his prospects to old Martin McEvoy of the Twelve Mile. Martin believed in butter. He milked a few old cows and once or twice a week trotted his cart to the railway station; and the inhabitants of Saddletop would stand at their doors and stare and grin at him whenever he passed along the road. Martin and his butter were sources of amusement to them. They regarded it as undignified to take round a lot of old milkers and drag fluid out of them. They were farmers.

“I carn't see wot you've t' growl about,” McEvoy said, casting an eye over our lucerne-paddocks and at the cattle camped near the gate. “If I hed them paddocks and them cows I'd mek a thousan' a year.”

Dad grunted his incredulity.

“I wud — no darn mistake.” (A pause.) “Out o' ten I mek four quid a week now!” — and Martin looked defiant.

“Out o' butter?” Dad stared.

“Yes, butter!” Martin shouted — “A long sight better'n wheat.” Then he jumped from his cart and dragged some papers from his greasy trouser-pocket. He showed Dad an invoice and a cheque. Dad didn't take his eyes off the cheque till Martin returned it to his pocket with a triumphant snort; then he looked at the lucerne-paddocks and the cows and thought. Martin drove on.

For several days Dad was inactive. He spent his time in a chair on the veranda. Dave and Joe missed him in the paddock. They wished he would stay on the veranda all his life. But Dad was only working out a problem.

Dad left the veranda suddenly one afternoon and went among the cattle. A fine-looking lot they were — sleek and fat; but beyond an odd one killed for our own use, which mostly went bad in the cask and was thrown out, they were only a nuisance on the place and devoured more hay than they were worth. To Dad, though, they were priceless. He was never done with admiring them. They were his pictures — his oil paintings — his art gallery.

“Sixty-five cows twenty-six pounds a week,” Dad muttered and returned to the house and sat till tea. Dad was cheerful and questioned Dave about the ploughing. Then he broke new ground and spoke enthusiastically of dairying. He went into figures and said the cow-yard was to be put in working order the next day. Dave was silent. Sarah was inclined to debate the matter, but Dad silenced her. “I’ve thought it all out,” he said, waving his hand, “and know just what I’m about.”

Breaking day. A hard, biting frost that whitened everything and crunched and cracked beneath you when you walked was over the land. Cold! Charity was nothing to it. The horses stood shivering at the big gate, waiting for their hay, cockatoos screamed in the trees up the gully, Cook’s roosters crowed faintly in the distance — ours lustily answered back; horse bells tinkled-tankled on the reserve, the smoke of a camp-fire curled into the frosty air, forms of horsemen moved quietly about and a thousand head of travelling cattle took shape.

A whip crack, a shout or two, and the cows, with Bill close on their heels, rushed into the yard.

Dave and Joe and Cranky Jack came out, grumbled at the cold, stared at the travelling cattle moving from the reserve, and started milking. They milked in silence and were nearly finished when Dad’s angry voice was heard at the barn. He wanted to know why the devil the horses were not fed, and shuffled about yelling for Bill.

Sarah brought a can of hot tea and some bread and butter into the yard. Dad came along swinging his arms.

“They don’t want that here,” he snapped, “take it away!”

Joe grabbed some of the provender and swilled a cup of tea. Sarah grinned.

Dad scowled and measured the milk in the tins with his eye, then entered the yard and inspected the cows and stared sternly at the milkmen. Dad was a watchful overseer.

Dad turned and called boisterously to Sarah as she returned to the house. Joe, in a cheerful mood, pointed a cow’s teat over his shoulder and directed a stream of milk at Dad. Dad danced round and looked in the air and down

at his feet and wiped his neck with his hand. Then he growled at a red cow that was facing him, shaking her head and throwing froth from her nose.

Joe entered into an argument, across the yard, with Dave about a pony mare of Doolan's.

“Get on with the milkin’,” Dad said impatiently, “an’ let the cows out — lots t’ be done without yarnin’.” And he hobbled round again, returning to the same spot and exhibiting increased impatience.

“She’s by B-b-badger!” Joe went on.

“Gerrout!” Dave said.

“B-b-bet y’ quid.” And, as if to book the bet, Joe stood up, placing his bucket on the ground.

“Dammit!” Dad hollered. “Why ‘n the devil can’t y’ get on? Are y’ goin’ to be — ?”

Joe looked at him. The red cow with the frothy nose had approached Dad closely, and seemed to mistake him for a heap of hay. She wasn’t a handsome beast however you viewed her, or a dangerous-looking one, either.

“L-l-look out that red cow d-d-don’t charge,” Joe said (which was the last thing in the world he expected the brute to do).

Dad glanced down quickly. He was taken by surprise. Sudden consciousness of the cow’s proximity startled him. Like a rooster hit with a brick when half-way up his top note, he cut short a yell intended for Joe and lifting his big right foot aimed a heavy kick at the cow’s head. His boot, a hard, ill-shaped blucher, grazed her forehead and, sliding under the animal’s hoop horns, held fast. The cow swung round. Dad dropped on his back, clutched with both hands at the ground, and waved his left leg menacingly at the brute. Finding Dad a fixture, she became hysterical. She bellowed and ran backwards and put her tongue out in an ugly curl.

“My G-G-God! Help, help!” Dad shouted. The other cows rushed round the yard. One shoved the rails down, and they all passed out.

Dave and Joe sprang to Dad’s assistance. Neither, for the moment, could see a way to extricate him. Cranky Jack jammed a finger into each of his ears and laughed, and looked humorous. Dave rushed to the cow’s horns, Joe to her tail, then the other way about.

Round the yard the cow backed, bellowing more and more. She trampled over Joe’s bucket and spilt the milk, and wiped it up with Dad.

Joe at last seized Dad’s hands and pulled back, pulled till he lost footing and fell down. Then the cow backed right out of the yard, bumping Dad heavily on the fallen rails. Dad cursed at every bump. She proceeded backwards towards the barn. Sarah rushed on the scene, wailing, “Oh, my gracious!” and frightened the beast more. Joe recovered himself and seized

Dad's hands again. Two small dogs, constant companions of Dad's, arrived. They barked and bit the air near the cow's head — sometimes near Dad's — and fell over one another in a struggle for position, till at last Dave, who got tired of shouting to them, let go Dad's leg, which he was struggling to release, and kicked one of them into the air.

Mother, in state of wild alarm, appeared and added to the uselessness of Dad's rescuers. Dad lost his hat; he was covered with dust and his shirt came out and hung over his head like a bag. He looked very undignified.

The cow went back against the dog kennel. A bull-dog was tied there. He crouched down and waited for her. “Give us a pull 'ere — quick,” Dave gasped, and Joe jumped to his side. “Little more — now sh — ” Just then the dog fastened his teeth in the cow's leg. She roared and plunged forward, knocked Dave and Joe down and trampled all over Dad. Then she dishonestly raced out of the gate with only Dad's boot under her horn.

We picked Dad up and dusted him and set him on the veranda to cool. Mother gave him a cup of hot tea. She said he looked as if he needed it. He said he felt as if he did.

Somehow, after that day, Dad took no interest in the milk enterprise. He found other jobs for us, and Cranky Jack forgot to bring the cows in and was not reprimanded.

In a week or so we had forgotten Dad's dream of fortune and were once more busy with “hard graft.” And presently Dad said that he believed things were on the mend.

VI. DAD IN DISTRESS.

HOW time passes! Those days of toil and moil — that weary, uphill struggle at Shingle Hut — were now thought of only in moments of merriment. Queer old days — wild old ways that all of us loved to remember — none of us wished to forget.

Farming was not the drag — the wretched, murderous drudgery it used to be. We were improving every day — climbing rapidly to the lap of comfort. The wheat turned out a success again, and the profit made us all rejoice. Still we kept our heads. The frequent want of a shilling had taught us the worth of one. We were not extravagant. Mother, in her thankfulness, attributed our success to the mercy and goodness of God. Dad reckoned 't was all due to his own head.

“Well, yairs,” he would sometimes admit, upon pressure, “th' boys do a good deal, an' the women've done a bit one way er another, too, but all with th' hands; an' where'd be the good o' it if there wer' no head? . . . Their hands, but my head!”

On that point Dad was emphatic. From his decision there was no appeal. Dad was the Judge, the Full Court, and the Privy Council, too, on our selection.

Things were worked methodically — almost reduced to a science. To Dave was allotted a three-furrow plough and a set of horses which none but himself used; Joe had a double-furrow and separate horses; Little Bill rose at cockcrow and brought all horses from the grass-paddock and drove them back last thing at night — drove them gently in obedience to Dad's orders until he got out of sight, when he rushed and raced them for their lives and flogged them through the rails. The horses did their best to get through without maiming themselves, but the odds were always on Little Bill.

Dad poked and potted about — didn't do much — did very little in a most impressive way. He fed the horses, and patched bags, and made a leg-rope occasionally, and sooled the dog on the fowls if ever they approached the cultivation, and cooed and shook his fist menacingly at Dave and Joe when they sat on the ploughs yarning, and followed in the tracks of the men who pulled and gathered the corn, and found cobs they missed, and swore. He rarely remained longer than a minute in one place; he was everywhere, warning and worrying everyone. He praised the farm and explained things to anyone who called and in a lofty manner disregarded the solicitations of travellers. He put them all off with an eloquent wave of the hand. Travellers were not fond of Dad.

A bright, sunny day, after a heavy frost. Dave and Joe following the ploughs, up and down, and round and round. Joe came to a standstill and stared across the field.

“What th' deuce is he after now?” he said, following the running form of Dad with his eyes.

Dave stopped his team and stared also.

Dad crossed the cultivation, entered the grass-paddock, and ran along a wide gully through some thick timber. Three of the Regan boys — from fourteen to twenty years old — were there doing something with a stout, springy sapling. They had it bent, bow-fashion, to the ground, and kept in position by a lever. A wire noose was fastened to the sapling. It was an ingenious arrangement they had conceived to catch dingoes with, and they were standing contemplating its construction. Dad came with a rush, and tried to fall on one of them. But the Regans were all runners. They decamped.

“If I don't make y'r eyes black when I catch y'r, then d—n me!” Dad shouted after them. They ran harder.

Dad turned to the bent sapling — looked at it — wondered what it meant. He kicked up leaves and dirt in search of enlightenment. He kicked his foot into the noose and tripped. The sapling left the lever and flew up, taking Dad with it. Dad was enlightened. The sapling wasn't strong enough to swing all of him in the air — it elevated his heels till only his head and chest and arms were in touch with the ground. He swung like a slaughtered bullock partly hoisted to the gallows. He swore lamentably — he roared and wriggled, he kicked with the limb that was free, and clutched at the grass. He bared a patch of ground about his head and went through a series of swimming movements with his hands. Yet he swung.

A pocket-knife and a two-shilling piece fell out of his trouser-pocket. He clutched them and held them fast in his hand. Then he ceased struggling and began to use his head.

Dave and Joe were still staring in the direction of the gully and wondering. But they were nearly a mile off.

Regan's dog, which had gone hunting through the paddock on its own account while the Regan boys were setting the snare, returned panting to the place. It was a dog with a lot of the bull breed in it — an ugly, surly, sulky dog with a thick drooping under-lip. It had a bad name in the district. Dad knew of its reputation. It trotted up. Dad was hanging motionless, thinking.

He heard the noise. Feelings of hope and thankfulness entered his soul. He strained, and leaning on his hands turned his eyes up to welcome his

deliverer. He saw the dog and recognized it and groaned. The dog saw him and stood, staring. It was surprised — astonished. It growled coarsely, gruffly. A cold, creepy feeling passed all through Dad. He glared at the brute with eyes of terror. Then, spurred by desperation, he kicked vigorously and howled for help. The dog sprang back, inclined to fly, but seeing that Dad remained stationary it faced him and barked. And such a bark!

Dad blackened in the face — his eyes threatened to burst. He tried to throw the two-shilling piece hard at the dog. It rolled short. He opened the pocket-knife with his teeth. The dog came closer. It trotted round Dad, drew still nearer, barking, barking. Dad flinched and grasped the knife tighter. There was a pause, on the dog's part. Dad collected his thoughts. He became resourceful. He softened his voice and said affectionately:

“My poor chap! . . . poor old fellow! . . . poor — old — boy!”

But Regan's dog knew a thing or two; besides, it had become conscious of Dad's helplessness.

Meanwhile, Dave and Joe, weary of wondering, went on ploughing. But the Regan boys, attracted by the barking of their dog, cautiously re-entered the paddock and approached the gully. When in sight of the snare they took in the situation and ran up, shouting to the dog to desist. The sound of their voices only emboldened the brute. It misunderstood. Their shrieks it took for words of encouragement, and, laying bare its teeth, it rushed in and barked close against Dad's ribs. Dad shuddered and writhed. His flesh twitched. He missed the dog's nose with the pocket-knife. In return the dog snatched a mouthful of his pants and some of his thigh and would have had more only the Regan boys came up and beat it off with sticks.

They released Dad in a hurry and ran away again, and didn't wait for anything; there was nothing mean or mercenary about them.

Dad always referred to that experience as one of the things that had aged him before his time.

VII. A SURPRISE PARTY.

WE saw that changed circumstances had made a new girl of Sarah. She had an abundance of leisure time now and revelled in reading *The Family Herald* and other intellectual papers; took a keen interest in fashions; studied etiquette hard, and wherever she visited took stock and learnt things. Norah, teaching in town, supplied her with much up-to-date information.

Sarah was never done with inflicting new ideas upon us. She would doll Mother up and parade her round in things that made the good old soul blush the whole time she was in them. And such innovations! She scrawled "Ruddville" on some tin and nailed it to the front gate. She wrote out laboriously a lot of rules for good manners and tacked up the list in our room as a kind of perpetual warning. She checked Dad for stirring his tea with a knife and quarrelled with Joe if he swigged milk from a jug or grabbed up the bread and pitched it to her when she asked him nicely to pass the plate. The table, too, was never twice laid the same way, while pieces of furniture constantly swapped corners. Enter the rooms in the dark and approach the corner where, in the morning, you had seen the couch, and the chances were you would wreck the whatnot or tramp on a toy dog or something. Had Sarah been able to slew the house round, she would have made it face the east one day and the back yard the next.

One New Year's Eve we had visitors. Farrell's wife was at our place (Farrell, who was the schoolmaster, frequently handed her over to us while he went to town to enjoy himself). Miss Mason, a young lady from town, was spending the week with Sarah. And the Rev. Peter Macfarlane dropped in — but only for dinner.

Sarah called Joe and Bill into the kitchen.

"Have some manners to-day!" she said to Joe, "and don't act as though you had never seen anyone before. And you" — to Bill — "you great gawk, be careful and don't make a fool of yourself."

"We'll be most p-p-lite," Joe said (he only stuttered occasionally now and often carried pebbles in his mouth to cure himself). And Joe bowed low to the kitchen wall, and inquired how it did and whether it would oblige by "p-p-passing th' s-s-spuds". But Bill blushed to the ears. He anticipated a bad time. Like Dave, Bill abhorred company. Dave was sullen over the matter. Bill was fidgety and flurried, and his large, lake-like eyes would roll in their watery sockets.

We were restless. Dinner was very late, but when we were called we forgave Sarah everything, for the table was most inviting. It would have

attracted a painter, or a pig, or even a cockatoo, there was so much variety. Ferns, flowers, corn-cobs, wattle blossoms, corn-stalks and things waved all over it, and a large, healthy piece of pumpkin-vine sheltered the butter. Sarah stood by, smiling, her hands clasped on her apron, waiting the effect.

Joe was the first to enter. He stood, stared, guffawed rudely, and would have run back only the others were on his heels. "Dear me, girl!" said Dad, "what's all this?"

Sarah smiled. Everyone sat down. The visitors talked cheerfully and in turn admired the piece of pumpkin-vine.

Dave was solemn and silent and indifferent as a tombstone. Dave had no taste, no eye for art. Joe passed him a corncob, and he grinned in his weird way, but, recollecting there was company, composed himself and was silent again. Dave was never boisterous long at a time. He looked along his nose and waited.

Dad rattled a knife on the steel and began to carve.

A short interval of silence.

Mrs. Farrell looked at Dave and asked him had he seen the lovely corn Mullins had. As if she couldn't have asked someone else! Dave started, fumbled his fingers, lifted his eyes and dropped them again, but couldn't think of a word to say. Joe rescued him. Joe had seen Mullins's corn.

Dave was very unhappy. He thought everybody must be staring at him, and sat in dread of Mrs. Farrell's asking more questions.

"A very, very small helping of fowl — if you please," the parson said, in answer to Dad.

Bill's eyes and mouth moved rapidly. He seemed to be repeating poetry or a prayer to himself.

"N' what's fer you, Bill?"

"Er — a very, very small helping of fowl, if you please," he said rapidly.

Joe made an ugly spluttering noise in his throat which disconcerted Bill. He changed colour.

Sarah tried to frown at Bill, but his eyes were on the parson. Mrs. Farrell smiled.

The parson stirred his tea, took up his knife and fork, and began. Bill did these things, too.

Dave was getting on well. The others talked about music and concerts.

"Do you sing, Mr Rudd?" Miss Mason asked, fixing her lovely big eyes fair on Dave. Poor old chap! His fork fell right out of his fingers and he did look sheepish.

"He won't sing," — Sarah chimed in; "we can never get him to try, Miss Mason."

It was good of Sarah to help Dave out.

Joe grinned. He always did when he was going to say something useless.

“He t-t-ried one night,” he said. “The night the s-s-stallion broke out!”

There was a lot of tittering. Everyone seemed to enjoy it but Bill and Dad — and Dave. Bill was studying the parson and Dad had failed to hear what Joe said.

Joe lifted his voice.

“I say D-Dave s-sang orright th' night he f-f-rightened th' s-s-stallion!”

Dad looked at Dave and “hoo-hooed”. Everyone looked at Dave. Dave could feel them. He stared stolidly and stubbornly into his plate, wishing to Heaven an earthquake or something would shatter the house.

Dinner continued, but Dave couldn't eat another mouthful — and puddings and fruit and things on the table, too! He sat for a while, then, as if he had had a real good dinner, rose and left. Outside he kicked the dog for nothing at all, and went across to the thresher's tent and threw himself on a bunk. McPhee, the boss-thresher — who had knocked off early and put on his Sunday clothes in honour of “the night” — produced a bottle from the head of his bed and asked Dave if he'd have a drop. Dave smiled and took two or three drops, and stayed all the afternoon.

At tea-time — “Call Dave!” Mother said to Bill.

Bill found it hard to make Dave hear. But he came at last, came singing, “Poorsh honish parens, born in Cashl (*hic*) maine!” Everyone listened.

“No stransher he (*hic*) didsh fear” — and in the door Dave walked, looking happy. He sat at the table close to Miss Mason and smiled.

Bill began to giggle. Mother and Sarah stared at each other.

“Wheresh parshun?” Dave said, looking about the room. Joe got the giggles too.

Dave grinned and closed one eye, and said to Joe, “C'n you (*hic*) shing, Miss Rudd?”

Mrs. Farrell leant back, and shrieked, and held her sides.

“Where've you been?” Dad said, looking across at Dave like a Chief Justice.

“Been? Shup there — ” And Dave spread himself out and took possession of the table. And how he did eat!

Dad finished and left abruptly, and went straight to the thresher's tent.

Mother became anxious, and went to the veranda. She was afraid of a quarrel, and stood watching. The tall green corn rustled and rasped its tangled leaves as it tossed and bent in the breeze that was springing up.

Mother gave a nervous start. Dad's voice, strong and loud, floated in the air. “You dud!” “I deed-ant!”

“You dud! d—n you, man, you dud!”

But the row ceased suddenly. McPhee, who was a good judge of character, resorted to persuasion. He spoke softly to Dad, and patted him on the back.

“I'm frae Dumfries,” he said. (So was Dad.)

“Ye'er haun',” said McPhee.

Dad gave it, and they shook like brothers and peered affectionately into each other's eyes. Then McPhee sprung the bottle on Dad. Dad wouldn't take very much — he took about an inch.

They talked of Scotland — at least McPhee did. Dad didn't know anything about Scotland.

“No — no more,” Dad said and shook his head. “Beh! Ye're nae frae Dumfries!”

“Wull — just a drop, then!” And Dad took some more, and smacked his lips, and said it was good stuff.

Mother remained on the veranda. As it got dark Dad came along and with him McPhee, the thresher.

The night was bright as day and a cool breeze blowing. Mother and Sarah and Joe and the visitors sat on the veranda listening to Cook's boys, about a mile down, putting their calves in. Curlews and mopokes were about, and we could hear the possums round the corn at the seventeen-acres. Dad was inside entertaining McPhee.

Dave came out and leant against a veranda-post. “Cansh make up dansh?” he said.

“Make up a dance? Make up your bed!” Sarah answered, and Mrs Farrell shrieked again.

“D-dance, y' want?” Joe said. “Well, come on” — and he seized Dave round the waist and proceeded to pull him about. They were tumbling and sprawling on the veranda like two bears when the dogs rushed out and barked. The tramp and rattle of horse hoofs, the clinging of bits and irons blended with voices, came from the rear. Next moment quite an army of mounted men and women were crowding and clamouring at the front. They yelled all sorts of friendly greetings. One, to attract attention, spurred his horse into the paling fence and swore because the animal couldn't shake an old kerosene tin off its foot. Sarah ran down the steps and hugged and kissed everything that dismounted in a riding habit.

Dave stood on the brink of the veranda and called out, “Night!” and raised one hand, as though he would address them. Then he slipped, and fell on top of a pack of snarling dogs, and sent one yelling round the house, and made Jim Black's horse pull back and rear and mix itself up with other horses.

Dad came out and wanted to know what the devil all the row was about. Then the mob, which was a surprise party, fastened its horses to the palings and proceeded to load the veranda with provender. All were armed with eatables. Some carried them in baskets, some in bags, some in paper. Wild Dick Saunders — a rough, hairy man with a harsh, aggressive voice, who carried his in a red handkerchief, volunteered to stand guard over the pile and keep the — dogs away.

Such a crowd! And so tall and sombre-looking at night! They tramped clumsily on the veranda and seethed and shoved like scrub cattle yarded in the moonlight.

Dad and Mother were ever so long shaking hands before they got round the lot. Long Jerry Johnson was the last, but he couldn't shake hands at all — his arms were full. He carried their baby, six weeks old, concealed in a shawl and a long dress. There the great elf stood like a dead tree, holding his offspring out from him as though it were a wet dog.

“Ullo! wot've y' here?” Dad said; “more grub?”

“No — a ba-by,” said Jerry meekly.

“A baby? Wull, keep it, keep it; we don't want any o' them — do we ol' woman?” — to Mother — “we've had plenty. Wot wer' it ol' gal — sixteen!”

“Go along!” Mother said.

“Sixteen o' 'em, Jerry! But let's see if it's like y'.” And Dad grabbed the child and pushed his way in with it.

Joe grinned and whispered in Jerry's ear, “W-watch if the ol' man don't d-d-drop it. He's a bit m-merry.” Jerry jumped as if he had been struck with something. “Look out!” he said, and went through the crowd at the door like a race-horse. He asked Dad to give back the baby, but Mrs. Johnson came and took the mite and put it on a bed in a back room where you couldn't hear it squeal if anyone sat on it.

The surprise party took possession of the house — bundled the tables out — hunted round for chairs and gin-cases, and set the concertina going. Then they proceeded to play “games”. They arranged chairs and gin-cases in a line down the room and half-way to the kitchen, and while the musician strained and jerked out a jig they pranced round until the music shut up suddenly, when they yelled and squealed and rushed headlong at the same chair, and fell on it until it collapsed and went to pieces. After that the concertina broke out again, and they picked each other out of the dust and puffed and prepared to prance more.

Wild Saunders, left in charge of the provisions, appeared at the door. “Jerry Johnson!” he shouted. “Come out here an' mind this ham-bone o' yours or the — - dogs'll have it, bag and all!”

“Oh, dear!” some said. Others went, “Sh! sh!” — and Miss Mason, sitting near the door, covered her ears with her hands.

But Saunders didn't apologize; he simply added, “It's a — - good job y' didn't leave the piccaninny i' th' bag!”

Dave sauntered in and looked round. Prompted by new-born feelings of hospitality, he went silently through the company, and, with a broad smile and no collar, shook hands with everyone, including Joe and Sarah. Then he raised himself in triumph against the wall, and struck his head hard against the shelf, and shook down the clock, and a cob of corn, and a bottle of murky looking water in which Bill, a year before, had corked a snake. The clock didn't break much, nor did the cob of corn, but the bottle containing the snake did. And the crash was hardly over when a panic set in. Such a scramble! To see them getting out both doors! And to hear them choking when they got out!

“Whatever wer' in the bottle?” said old Andrew O'Day in an injured tone.

Joe explained, and Andrew spat more.

“A deed horrse is naething t' it!” said McPhee, walking towards his tent. And they all assembled at the foot of the steps and laughed. Inside the bottle lay silently on the floor, and the snake cast its robust fragrance upon the atmosphere in a visible cloud.

They collected the provisions and, making use of the kitchen, invited Dad and Mother and the rest of us to supper. Then all went out again and danced on the grass. And as midnight approached, and the Old Year went and the New crept in, in the shade of the sinking moon and the light of a million stars they joined hands in hearty grip and filled the corn-fields and hollow with dragging echoes of “For Auld Lang Syne”.

VIII. DAVE BECOMES DISCONTENTED.

ZEAL was what Dad wanted on our new selection. He told us so often. He liked to see people zealous — people who took pleasure and pride in working — for him. We could never work too hard or too long for Dad.

After dinner. Dave and Joe at the barn waiting for the horses to finish feeding. Dave sitting with his back to the slabs, his hands embracing his knees, staring thoughtfully from under an old felt hat at the stubble-field, over which a million grasshoppers sported themselves in the scorching, simmering heat. Joe lying flat on his stomach, supporting his chin in his palms, digging earth up with the toes of his boots, and dextrously spitting at ants that passed within range.

“Don't know wot you think,” Dave said gloomily, “but it ain't good enough for me. I've told the old chap, too, over and over again, that I won't stand it any longer. Slog away as much as y' like, an' look after things all the year, then when y' want a few bob you've to ask him for it” — a pause — “an' when y' do ask he growls like a bear.”

“That's so,” Joe said.

“Y'd think,” Dave continued, “a feller was on'y a kid, the way — ”

Just then Dad appeared, using strong language to Cranky Jack for heaving a shovel at one of the mares.

“Not yoked-up yet?” he growled. “Y'll take all day soon!”

“Oh, give the horses time to finish,” Dave said sharply.

“Time t' finish!” Dad snorted. “Time for y' to yarn and idle.”

Dave fixed his eyes on Dad.

“Wot 're y' talkin' about?” he said.

“What 'm I — D—n you, feller, will y' sit there givin' impudence t' my very face? Get up, and go on with the ploughin' — the two of y'.”

“Not another turn'll I do,” Dave said, the tears starting into his eyes. “Not another d—n stroke! . . . Y' ain't satisfied mooching round the place all the morning, pokin' in everybody's road, but y' must come here 'n' meddle with things y' know nothing about — ”

“Know nothing about?” And Dad shook with rage.

“Yes, know nothing about.”

“Confound you! You insolent — ” (Dad was lost for a word.) “Clear out of this — clear!” And up went his big right hand, after the manner of a railway guard.

“No need t' tell me,” Dave said. “I've stayed here too long as it is — for all thet ever I get from y'!”

“Get from me? What the devil do you want, you hound?”

“Something more than the few miserable shillings I get once a year.”

“D—n y', feller! D' y' think I'm a millionaire?”

“No — nor anyone — ”

Here Mother came and intervened and tried to make peace.

But Dave was determined to leave home. He went into the house and put on a coat, then he saddled a horse and rode away. He went as far as Delaney's — five miles up.

Dad began to think, and discussed the situation with Mother.

“Well, you know,” said Mother quietly, “the boys is men now, and I suppose they think that it's time they had something to themselves.”

Dad thought some more, then went down to the seventeen-acres, where a man we had engaged and one of the Regan boys were pulling corn and carting it in. Dad went over their tracks and, finding a small cob with scarcely any corn on it, brought it along and threw it into the dray and lectured the man for missing it.

The man offered no explanation, but young Regan grinned.

“You imp!” Dad yelled. “Get on outer thet. What the devil 're y' standin' for?”

The boy waded in.

Dad then lent a hand and worked hard. The dray was nearly full. The man mounted it to square the load.

“Wot 're y' lookin' at now?” Dad shouted again to the boy, who was watching the man on the dray.

“I've finished me side,” whined the boy.

“Lead the horse on, then.”

“How kin I, till — ”

“Lead th' horse on!”

The boy ducked in time to dodge a cob Dad aimed at his head.

“You whelp!” And Dad went off round the dray after him.

Regan dodged. Dad pelted more cobs at him, and roared. “Stand, you young devil, or I'll knock your head off!”

Regan gathered cobs as he ran and returned Dad's fire over the back of the horse. The man on the dray sank in a lump on the load and laughed. Regan left the dray, charged into the corn, and disappeared.

Dad threatened the man on the dray with violence and the sack, then left and went across to Cranky Jack and a traveller who was putting in a day or two for tucker. They were filling the shed with hay and must have been doing it all wrong, because as soon as Dad set eyes on it he started swearing and dancing round.

The traveller stood, holding an immense forkful of hay above his head, and listened a second or two. Then he said, “Be d—d to you!” — and

threw all the hay on top of Dad, smashed the fork on the ground, heaved the pieces down the paddock, and walked off, cursing.

Dad threw the hay off himself and spat and shouted, “You coward!”

“Go 'way boss, go 'way,” Jack said, “an' don't insult the gentleman. Jim's from Ireland.”

Dad scowled at the half-witted man and went away. He harnessed Dave's pair of plough-horses and joined Joe.

“I'll show th' feller he can be done without, I know,” he said to Joe.

Joe smiled and said, “Git erp . . . Jess! . . . Jolly!” And when he stopped to clean the plough again and looked round there was Dad walloping Dave's horses with a shovel.

Joe ran back.

“What th' deuce is up, n-now?” he said.

“Confound the feller!” Dad answered — “he's got the horses completely spoilt.”

“They're all right,” Joe said, approaching the plough-handles.

“They're not all right — they're all wrong. Stand aside, sir!” And Dad took the reins again.

“Now then!” he shouted, shaking the plough. “Get up! . . . Horses!” They jerked and swerved and shoved each other. “You d—n rubbish! . . . get up!”

“No wonder!” said Joe, making a discovery. “They're not in their right places. Put the b-black horse in th' f-furrer!”

“He'll go where I put him. Get up . . . you pair o' dogs! . . . Gee back . . . way! Wa-ya!” Dad dropped the plough-handles, slipped up beside the horses, and then brought the shovel down on them again so suddenly that they both bounded off before Joe could seize the reins. The next moment they were bolting across the paddock with the plough flying behind them.

Dad turned to Joe. “Dammit, why couldn't y' take the reins?”

“W-well,” and Joe grinned — “there's some things a feller can't do.”

“There's a d—n lot o' things y' can't do!” Dad snorted out, and went after the horses. He found them, and a portion of the plough, stuck in the fence near the barn, surrounded by Mother and Sarah and the dogs and the man who was pulling corn.

Mother wanted to know what had happened, but Dad was uncommunicative. Next day he ordered a new plough and for months afterwards the black horse hopped about on three legs.

Dave came back after tea, but scarcely looked at anyone. He rolled some clothes in a blanket, hung about for a minute or two, as though he felt sorry, then said good-bye to us all and went back to Delaney's, leaving Mother crying on the veranda.

“Mark my word,” said Dad, pacing up and down, “he'll be glad to come back yet.”

Dave wasn't away a week when everything was going wrong. Three cows burst on the lucerne, a mare and foal were lost, the chaff-cutter smashed in two places, and every ounce of a bullock that Dad salted went bad and was thrown out.

A hot day at Delaney's. Dave ploughing. He had scraped the plough and was standing, reflecting. He felt lonely — it was the first time he had ever been away — and couldn't help thinking of home and Mother — crying on the veranda — and of Joe and Sarah at home. “Poor old Sarah!” he said aloud, when a form he knew well rode up to the fence and greeted him cheerfully.

“Hello, Dad!” Dave said with a glad grin. It seemed like old times to Dave to see Dad, though it was only eight days since they had parted.

Dad dismounted and crawled through the fence.

“What's he putting in here?” he asked, surveying the ploughed land.

Dave told him. Then there was a dead silence. Even the birds and the horses' tails kept still. Dave played with some mud he had scraped from the plough, Dad with his trouser-pocket.

Dad spoke.

“Better come home, Dave?” he said.

“Dunno,” Dave answered, colouring up and throwing the mud down.

“This is no place for you, man” — (a pause) — “no place at all!”

Dave gazed in silence at his boots.

“If there's enerthin' y' want, say s', lad!” Dad went on, knowing when he had an advantage. “Here,” dragging his hand out of his pocket with a jerk, “here's a fi-pun'-note for y' now.... An' goodness on'y knows, if ever y' want t' go t' town, or enerwhere, yer can always take a day, or two days, or a week for that matter — can't y'?”

“Yairs . . . I s'pose s'.”

“Well, come along.” Dave came. And two days later Dad called him a useless dog.

IX. DAVE IN LOVE.

PLOUGHING and sowing all over. A hundred acres of the plain-land under wheat and light showers falling every week. Dad's good luck was continuing. Yet we were sharing other misfortunes freely enough. The children were all down with measles, Sarah with face-ache, Joe with a broken rib — a draught-horse broke it for him (Joe had sandy-blight, and one morning approached the wrong end of a horse with the winkers), and Dave was the victim of a fatal malady.

Dave was always the unlucky one. When he wasn't bitten by a snake or a dog he was gored by a cow or something. This time it was a woman. Dave was in love. And such love! We could see it working in him like yeast. He became affable — smiled all day long and displayed remarkable activity. He didn't care how hard he worked or whose work he performed. He did anything — everything, and without help. He developed a passion for small things — trifles he had hitherto regarded with contempt, purchased silk handkerchiefs and perfume and conversation-lollies at the store, and secreted them in the pockets of his Sunday coat, which he left hanging in his room. Sarah would find them when dusting the coat and hawk them to Mother, and they'd spend an hour rejoicing and speculating over the discovery. Sarah never allowed any dust to settle on Dave's Sunday coat.

Dave went out every night. It amused Joe. He would be on pins and needles till supper was ready, then he'd bolt his food and rush off to saddle a horse, and we wouldn't see him again till breakfast-time next morning.

For more than a year Dave rushed off every night. "Damme! look at that horse!" Dad used to say, when he'd be at the yard. Then he'd think hard, and begin again when he met Mother. "This night-work'll have t' stop, or there won't be a horse about the place fit t' ride. What the devil the fellow wants chasing round the country for every night I don't know, I'm sure." (Dad knew well enough.)

"Well" — Mother would say good-naturedly, "you were just as bad y'self once, Father."

"Never, woman!" — with virtuous indignation. "*I never left a horse hanging to a fence night after night to starve.*"

But there the matter always ended, and Dave continued his courting without interruption.

It was Fanny Bowman, of Ranger's Rise, Dave was after. She was twenty, dark, fresh-complexioned, robust and rosy — a good rider, good cook, and a most enterprising flirt.

Tom Black, Tom Bell, Joe Sibly, and Jim Moore all had sought her affections unsuccessfully. And young Cowley climbed into a loft one night and would have hanged himself with the dog-chain because of her inconstancy, only a curlew screeched “so awfully sudden” just outside the door that he rushed out and fell down sixteen steps and “injured himself internally”.

Fanny Bowman was a dairymaid — mostly neat and natty and nice. But there were times when she didn't look so nice. She had frequently to go into the yard and milk fifteen and twenty cows before breakfast; and a glimpse at her then — especially in wet weather, with a man's hat on, her skirts gathered round her waist, bare-footed, slush over her ankles, slush on her arms and smeared on her face — wasn't calculated to quicken a fellow's pulse. But then it wasn't at such times that Dave passed judgment on her, any more than the city swell would judge his Hetty while her hair was on the dresser and her teeth in a basin.

Some Sundays Dave used to bring Fanny to spend the afternoon at our place, and Jack Gore very often came with them. Jack Gore was Bowman's man — a superior young fellow, so Bowman boasted — one that could always be depended upon. He took his meals with the family and shared the society of their friends; went to church with them, worked his own horse in their plough, and was looked upon as one of the family.

Dave didn't look upon him as one of the family, though. He was the fly in Dave's ointment. Dave hated him like poison.

When it was time to leave, Dave had almost to break his neck to reach Fanny's side in time to lift her into the saddle. If he were a moment late, Gore would lift her. If he were slow at all in mounting his horse, Gore would coolly ride off with Fanny. If he didn't happen to be slow in mounting, Gore would ride on the near side of her and monopolize the conversation. He monopolized it in any case.

Mother and Sarah used to talk about Jack Gore.

“If *I* were Dave,” Sarah would say, “I'm blest if I'd have her carrying on with him the way she does.”

“But Fanny only means it as a sister,” Mother would answer in palliation.

“Does she indeed! . . . Dave's an old fool to bother about her at all, if y' arsk me!” Sarah was developing a keen interest.

Jack Gore left Bowman's service one morning. He left it suddenly. Bowman sacked him, and Mrs. Bowman talked to the neighbours about him with the wrath of an insulted mother.

“The cheek of him” — she said to Mother — “to think he was good enough for Fanny! Why, we wouldn't have kept him a day if we'd thought

— if we'd even dreamt. Fanny, indeed!”

But she spoke highly of Dave. She moved Mother to tears of admiration for him. And Mother couldn't resist telling Dave all that was said. Dave went to Bowman's a little earlier that night — but returned quite unexpectedly and went to bed in a bad humour.

A change came over Dave. He ceased to smile, and scarcely did any work, and never brought Fanny to see us on Sundays. At last Dave met Fanny on her way to the railway station one day, and when he came home he went straight to the album and took out her photo and jumped on it.

Jack Gore had been away from Saddletop for several months, when — “Girls are more of a trouble than boys,” Mrs. Bowman said despondingly to Mother one evening, at the gate. “Boys is nothing; they can always take care of their-selves. But girls — ” And she shook her head.

Jack Gore returned to Bowman's one day and neither Bowman nor Mrs. Bowman attempted to chase him away. Work was suspended for twenty-four hours, and at midday, a tired, dust-covered parson came to their door astride a poor horse and got down and married Jack Gore to Fanny.

It was a quiet wedding.

When they heard of it Mother and Sarah whispered things to one another, and Dad thought of Dave.

“Thank God!” he said, “th' horses'll have a chance ter get fat now!”

X. WHEN DAD GOT BUCKED OFF.

MRS. TALTY stood at the door of her humpy looking out. She was watching Dad and Cranky Jack, on their way to the railway yards with fat pigs, about to camp for dinner in the Gap near Talty's.

Dad rode across to the humpy, got off, and asked for a billy of hot water to make tea with. Mrs. Talty filled the billy, and would have handed it up when he was mounted, but Dad did not allow that — he always refused assistance in such small things. So he waved her off, and, seizing the billy, held it with the reins in his left hand. Scrambling up clumsily, he spilt the water over the mare's neck, scalded her badly, and made her buck right on to Mrs Talty. Then he fell off, and made a fool of himself.

That was how Dad happened to be in bed when a lot of people came to the house one day.

Dad was very bad — bruised all over, and the pain made him groan all day long, and whenever Mother smeared oil on him he yelled till he could be heard over at Regan's. And bad temper! If any of us poked a head into his room and asked meekly how he was, he bellowed, "Clear out!" We always obeyed. And when we didn't go in to ask how he was, he roared out to know where the devil we all were, and accused us of having no more sympathy in our compositions than a lot of blackfellows. He said we were only hanging round, waiting for him to die.

Dad was a difficult old man to please when he wasn't well. Joe reckoned if he put the same energy into prayer that he put into profanity he would never be sick.

Nearly every female in the district called to inquire how Dad was. At least they made that their excuse. They didn't care how Dad was. It mattered little to them whether he lived or died. They came only to yarn and drink tea, and tell lies about themselves, and libel absent friends. "So sorry," they said, and made mouths and ugly faces about it. Women always make themselves ugly when they wish to appear sympathetic. It's a way they have of carrying conviction.

None ventured into the room, though, to see Dad. They questioned Mother, then sat down and sighed and took their handkerchiefs out. Fifty times and more Mother had to relate how the accident happened, and every time she came to the "bucking off" part Dad's voice would break through the wooden wall, "Dammit, I tell y' again I wasn't bucked off! Wasn't on the mare" — and Mother would get confused, and turn all colours. And some of the ladies would smile, and some wouldn't. Then rounds of heavy groans would come from Dad, and Mother would shiver on the verge of

nervous collapse lest he should break out in a passion and yell violence at the company.

Mother was unhappy. She wished the visitors had stayed away. But they didn't notice her discomfiture. They sipped tea, and ate up all the scones and cake Sarah carried in, then became boisterously convivial — screamed and took possession of the house. They forgot there was a suffering invalid on the premises, and no one heard Dad groan any more — no one heard him growl savagely, “Blarst them — blarst, why th' devil don't they shut up and go home?” — no one but Mother. And she ran in to pacify him.

The bedlam eased off a little, and a political discussion commenced on the general election that was approaching.

Mrs. Brown asked Mother whom Dad intended voting for, and, without waiting to hear an answer, Mrs McFluster, a crane-necked, antagonistic old aunt of Mary Gray's, said her man (meaning McFluster) didn't believe in Griffith at all. In Mrs. McFluster's own sinewy opinion he was of no account. She was proceeding to make remarks about him when Dad's voice fairly shook the partition. Dad believed in Griffith as he did in milk. He was Dad's political god.

Mrs. McFluster pricked her ears. “What's he saying?” she asked of Mrs. Higgins.

“Wher' th' devil's ther' a better man for th' country?” Dad shouted, his voice quivering with rage.

“Thun who?” Mrs. McFluster shouted back.

“Than Griffith!” (very loud).

“McIlwraith is,” squealed Mrs. McFluster, “McIlwraith is — McIlwraith!”

“Never in his life! Rubbish!” Dad roared, raising himself on his elbow in the bed and glaring at the wall. “Pshaw! y' don't know the ruffian!”

Fire flashed from Mrs. McFluster's eyes as she stood up and faced the wall on the other side.

“He is — doesn't everyone know it?”

“A lie, woman; no one knows it.”

Mrs. Higgins and some more tugged at Mrs. McFluster's skirts to induce her, in the interests of peace, to desist.

“Name me one act,” Dad yelled, “one single act of McIlwraith's that was ever any good to the country; name one — name it!”

Mrs. McFluster, struggling to disengage herself from the clutches of her scared niece and Mrs. Higgins, lost the thread of the argument.

Encouraged by the lady's silence, Dad got fairly on his mettle. Forgetting his bruised back, he bounded clean out of bed and grabbed his trousers.

“Name one!” he continued, yelling while he fumbled the garment

excitedly. "Name one single" — (he got one leg in, and, giving the pants a tug, sprang to the door, which he opened just wide enough to disclose his face and the leg that was clothed; the rest of him was concealed) — "one single act" — (fixing Mrs. McFluster with a wild eye to keep her to the point) — "of your McIlwraith's that was ever any good to the country. Name it!"

"The school," Mrs. McFluster screeched, flying at Dad like a wild cat. "The school, the dam, the — the roads, an' —"

"Dammit, woman, they're Griffith's!" And in his excitement Dad threw open the door and stepped right out, waving his right hand (the left held up his trousers), and swinging an empty trouser-leg and displaying a huge undressed limb, all hair and joints. Sensation!

Girls squealed and jumped up and ran out in disorder.

"Father! father!" Mother pleaded, placing her hands lightly on Dad to restrain him.

"Fanny!" Mrs. Bruse called to her daughter. "Fanny! come home."

"I declare t' God," Miss Mahony (a single old body, grave and religious) cried as she hurried away, "th' man have no trousers on. Shame for him!"

And when she reached the door she turned and cast another glance of reprobation at Dad, then, passing the window, outside, looked in once more to satisfy herself that she wasn't doing him an injustice after all.

But Mrs. McFluster saw nothing wrong. She stood up to Dad and stamped her foot and squealed out, "It's a lie! It's a lie!" — until Dave came in with a run, seized Dad in his arms and carried him back to bed.

Dad ceased yelling and calmed down, and was taking kindly to a basin of gruel Mother brought him when someone knocked at the door again.

Mother answered the call.

It was Mr Macfarlane, the minister. He smiled and squeezed Mother's hand, then his face changed its expression. He became solemn as a death sentence. He had heard Dad was in a nigh fever, and spoke in a low anxious tone about him. He wouldn't see Dad — he thought it well he shouldn't be disturbed — and he suggested a short prayer for his recovery.

Sarah came, and Mother sent her to call the boys.

"Yous fellows is wanted at th' house," Dave said to Joe and Bill, neither of whom knew the minister was there. Then Dave, who did know, went away to close the slip-rails in the seventeen-acres. He took till night to close those slip-rails.

The minister was proceeding in soft, solemn tones to pray when Dad's voice broke in upon the service.

"Ellen!" he called. Joe grinned, Mother fidgeted.

“Ellen!” he called more loudly.

“Grant them strength to bear their trial” — came feelingly from the good minister. “Where th' devil 'a' they gone t' — El-len!” came from Dad.

“Restore our dear brother to health, an — ”

There was an irreverent interruption.

“Dammit!” Dad yelled, punching the partition with his fist till it seemed the house would fall — “damn it!”

Mother went into him.

“Where the devil've y' been?” Dad roared.

Mother motioned him to be silent, and whispered that the minister was in the dining-room.

Dad howled harder. “Has he brought Darkey back?” Darkey was a horse Dad had lent the parson some weeks before.

Mother thought it wise to answer in the affirmative, and told a lie.

“Has he been feeding him?”

Mother lied again.

“Has he fetched the ten shillings he borrowed?”

“He's wandering!” the minister remarked to Sarah; “they all do in fever.” Then he thought he would be going and went away.

XI. DAD AND CAREY.

A SUMMER'S night. Inside — close, suffocating, outside — calm, tranquil, not a sound, not a sign of life.

The bush silent, restful. Dad on the veranda, in his easy chair, thinking; Dave, Joe and Bill stretched on the grass near the steps, dreamily watching the clustering stars.

Close to the house the eerie note of a night bird suddenly rang out. Joe and Bill turned over to locate it. Dad and Dave took no notice. The moon came slowly over the range, weird shadows fell before her and crept over the earth, and Budgee plain was a dim expanse in the hazy, languid light.

Dad spoke.

“Whose stock's on Lawson's selection now?” he asked.

“Everyone's,” Dave said. “Carey's, mostly.”

“Well, turn everything out t'-morrow that isn't ours.”

Dave sat up and chuckled.

“And the Careys 'll run 'em all back,” Joe joined in, “an' put ours where we'll never see 'em again.”

“If they do I'll make it warm for them,” Dad said.

Bill laughed.

“You wasp, get inside and don't be grinnin' like a d—d cat at everythin' y' hear!”

Bill whined and said he wasn't grinning.

“Well, hold y'r noise then!” Dad shouted. Then he dragged his chair nearer the steps and spoke softly. “T'-morrow that selection's mine,” he said. “Lawson's thrown 't up.”

Dave mounted the steps. “What, after fencin'!”

“After fencin'!” Dad chuckled and sat back, and no more was said.

Next morning Dad repeated his instructions to Dave to turn all stock off Lawson's selection, and started for town in the sulky.

At the Lands office he was told that Lawson's selection was in the Ipswich district, and late in the day he left for home, intending to take train to Ipswich the following morning.

Dad pulled up at a wayside pub. Several men were leaning on the bar, their empty glasses before them. Dad invited them all to drink. They drank.

Dad lingered awhile and chatted sociably and grew very enthusiastic about dairy farming. He exaggerated his interest and spoke of Saddletop as though he owned it all. The men became interested, one in particular. He was a Carey, and Dad in his exuberance failed to recognize him. Carey's

horse had got away and he was walking home. He had twelve miles yet to tramp, and when Dad asked the company if any of them wanted work, Carey said he did. Carey knew Dad.

“Jump into the trap, then,” Dad said, “an' I'll drive y' out.”

Carey climbed in, and Dad drove off. All the way along he boasted of his possessions and prospects. Carey was an attentive listener and encouraged Dad to talk. Dad took a fancy to his companion, and in a lowered voice, in case some of the trees or fences concealed a pair of ears, became confidential. He revealed all he knew of Lawson's selection and his intentions regarding it, and, approaching Carey's own place, he whispered, hoarsely, “Nice set of scoundrels live there!” His companion never flinched.

“Whose place is it?” he asked.

“Carey's,” Dad said — “a bad lot!” And Dad shook his head in the moonlight.

Dad pulled up at the gate.

“You camp in the barn there,” he said, indicating the building with a sweep of his hand, “an' tackle the milkin' in the morning with the boys.” Then Dad unharnessed the mare and went inside. The “man” went home chuckling.

Next morning Dave and Joe and Cranky Jack were in the yard milking. Dad came out.

“Where's the feller I brought out last night — not up yet?” he asked.

Dave didn't understand. Dad explained and hobbled off to the barn. The man wasn't there. Dad returned to the yard, swearing.

“That cove wouldn't be after work,” Dave drawled. “He had y'; he only wanted a lift. Plenty of his sort about.”

Bill, bailing up, stood and laughed. Bill's hilarity always annoyed Dad. He chased Bill out of the yard, then roared to him to come in again. Bill slunk back.

“Go in there!” — Dad pointed the way through the rails. Bill hesitated sullenly. He dropped his head and turned the whites of his eyes on Dad.

“Y' hear?”

Bill moved sideways to the rails, then judged his distance and dived. But he miscalculated. His head struck the bottom rail and he rebounded, and Dad got in his kick and grinned, and forgave the man who had taken him in the night before.

Dad reached Ipswich at night and strolled about till he found a place to put up. Then he went into the streets again and gaped at things. But he

didn't see many sights. There was a large store with the shutters up. The pallid light of a few flickering gas-jets revealed the outline of an old, weird weather-worn fountain, around which "the Army" crouched and yelled for the salvation of souls — and a church fence — and a policeman, motionless. At regular intervals a huge clock broke the silence. It had a sad, unhealthy note, and seemed to toll a requiem for the dead. Dad stared up at it and wondered.

Morning again. Dad halted at the foot of the Lands office steps and stared in surprise. Old Carey was feeling his way down them with a stick. Carey saw Dad and grinned. Dad went into the office and came out breathing heavily. He went down the street and searched for Grey till he missed the train.

"How's it y' didn't get it?" Dave said in an unhappy kind of voice.

Dad gave no reason. He sat down and thought, and we all stood round waiting as if something was going to happen.

"They've got it all right," Dad groaned at last. Then Dave's opportunity came.

"Yairs," he said, "an' they've got all our cattle — pounded every one o' them, an' ten shillings a head damages on them."

Sarah rushed out, so did Bill and Barty; but Dave and Joe held Dad down and saved the furniture.

XII. WHEN DAD WENT TO MAREE.

Dad yarned to a man passing with horses from New South Wales and invited him to dinner. An interesting man, well-informed, acquainted with Tyson and Bobby Rand; knew the Queensland and New South Wales bush through and through, and told Dad where some good grazing land was to be selected.

Before leaving, the man sold five horses to Dad for £50. Horses were horses then; any old sketch was worth a £5-note, and Dad went among the neighbours boasting of the bargain he had made. Dad always let the neighbours know when he had made a profitable investment; it helped to keep their hearts up.

A brown mare among the five — by Butler, a blood horse, the man said — turned out to be worth more than £50 herself; not to Dad, though.

Dave fed her, and raced her at Pittsworth, and was promptly “taken up” on the course as soon as she won.

“Stolen from old Magnus, on the Barwon!” the policeman said; “been watchin' six munch forrer.”

The other four were stolen also.

Dad cursed. Said he would never buy another (adj.) horse as long as he lived.

Then the neighbours chuckled. They always liked to remind Dad of any bad bargains he had made. It helped to keep his pride down.

Newspapers gave full accounts of the arrest of Palmer, *alias* “Whistler” Smith, on the Border.

“That's the man,” Dad said. “That's the d—n scoundrel — red whiskers, strapped trousers, bow-legged, finger missing — the daylight robber!” And he clenched his fists on the newspaper as though he held the delinquent in his grasp and walked up and down like a caged lion.

A constable from Toowoomba waited on Dad with a handful of legal documents and a cheque for fifteen pounds, to solicit his attendance at Maree Circuit Court as witness against Whistler Smith. He explained that the law couldn't compel Dad to cross the Border, but if he could see his way to make the sacrifice he (the Law) was certain of a conviction.

“B' heaven, then!” said Dad, “I've a mind to!”

He paced about, thinking the matter out. “If y' do,” the Law observed, “call on the sergeant at Goondi, and he'll fix you with a fresh horse and give you directions. An' I'd advise y', meself, to put a revolver in your

pocket — it won't be any load, an' y' might want it.”

“Pshaw!” Dad blurted out. “Pshaw, man! Wot wud I be doin' with fire-arms? Haven't I travelled the country long before you were born? An' see” — (Dad paused before the constable, and raising his hands, punched his own left palm hard with his right fist) — “see here! An' though I'm saying it meself, never yet did I see the man” — (Dad tapped his palm gently) — “never yet did I see the living man” — (Dad raised his right hand above his head) — “I was afeared” — (elevating his voice) — “to take me shirt off to!” Dad pounded his palm hard.

The constable smiled and said he quite believed it.

“Well, y' better let it slide, an' stay at home,” Dave said advisedly. “Y'r too old for that sort o' thing now.”

Mother and Sarah, who were listening, agreed with Dave.

“Tut, tut,” Dad said, “not a bit of it — not a bit of it.”

Then his thoughts reverted to the £50 he had lost, and an angry, vindictive spirit rose within him.

“I'll go; policeman!” he said, in a loud, decisive voice, “I'll go!” And when Dad spoke in that tone persuasion was futile.

Mounted on his old brown mare, Dad started one Friday for Maree, and how anxious Mother became the moment he disappeared from view!

Maree was three hundred miles off on the New Couth Wales side, and most of the track and the country were new and unknown to Dad. Yet we were sanguine enough about him. Dad had always been a wonder and an object lesson to us in the way of courage and endurance. Floods, fires, droughts — nothing ever stopped him, and for anything the bush contained in the shape of beast or being he never held a dread.

But a drought was upon the land. Grass round Saddletop withered, stock poor, water scarce; and as Dad travelled on, covering mile upon mile, plain after plain, ridge after ridge, things got worse and worse. All was parched, perished; nothing but dust and desolation. The mighty bush was a vast sorrowful waste — cracked, burnt, baked. A horror? — It was hell!

Shapeless, blear-eyed, loony bullocks — grotesque caricatures, staggered pathetically by the way. All day a foul, fetid air filled his nostrils; hateful crows flocked from carcass to carcass, clamouring in fiendish exultation. And skeletons — skeletons and bones lay everywhere.

At intervals Dad met pairs of grim, sullen souls along this infernal avenue — mates on the terrible track — strong, able-bodied men — men with bright, clear intellects, not loafers, not liars — British men, Australian men — shouldering their swags, almost bootless in the blistering sand, plodding through sickening, thirst-provoking heat in search of a job.

Dad left Goondi with a fresh horse, a water-bag, tucker, a head full of directions, and a revolver.

The latter the sergeant had pressed on him, and Dad finally took it, saying, "Perhaps it'll be company." He carried it projecting from his coat pocket like a cob of corn.

The fourth day Dad penetrated a dense scrub, emerged on the bank of a creek, watered his horse, and, throwing the reins on the ground as with his own old mare, left him standing on the bank while he filled the water-bag. The brute made off. Dad tried to catch him, but the old moke was as knowing as a detective. He trotted when Dad ran and walked when Dad pulled up.

Dad was in a mess. Determined not to lose sight of the horse, he followed at its heels, sweating, swearing, tripping over ruts and sticks — followed till it got dark and he could see the fugitive no longer.

Weary and hungry, Dad rested at the foot of a gum-tree and thought of home and Mother and us, and called himself a darned fool, and wondered if, after all, convicting horse thieves was worth the candle.

In the morning Dad's horse was only a few hundred yards away, standing, its hind-leg fast in the bridle. Joy! Dad's heart thumped till he placed his hands on the brute and was in the saddle again. He was never so proud of a horse before. He leant over and patted it on the neck. Any other time Dad would have tugged its mouth and belted its ribs with a waddy.

A stifling day. The sky a great flaming oven. A hot wind blowing. Sandy, wretched, waste land to the right, the same to the left. Never a soul had Dad seen for forty miles but one solitary horseman, and he, at the sight of Dad's revolver, had galloped away.

The sun went down a ball of fire. A swamp with water and ducks in it showed itself, then off the road a public-house — a dusty, tumble-down old rookery. A couple of saddle-horses outside, fastened to trees. Four persons lounged on the veranda, two with beards, strapped trousers, and spurs, the other two scarcely more than youths — one a half-caste.

"G' day," Dad said.

"'Day."

And when Dad dismounted every eye there was on his horse.

Behind the bar, hurriedly scrubbing a glass with a dirty towel in anticipation of trade, stood a lame, one-eyed warrior with scars on his head.

Dad called for a beer, then glanced back at the horse. Dad remembered the sergeant's warning.

Dad took the beer and drank it at the door.

“Come far?” the publican said, eyeing Dad closely.

“Two hundred and fifty miles, I dare say,” Dad answered.

“Queensland?”

Dad was wondering whether he would answer or not when a horseman of the flash bush type reined up at the door. He spoke to those outside, then called out — “Riley!”

Riley crept under the counter and limped to the door.

“Th' traps passed Bingiloo yesterday with the Queenslander,” the horseman shouted.

Riley didn't understand. “With who?” he asked. “The witness to fix ‘Whistler’; they're fetchin' him in irons.”

The half-caste sniggered ironically. Riley looked grave.

Dad stepped out, and, clearing his throat, fixed the man on horseback with both eyes. “It's a d—n lie!” he roared.

Every eye was upon Dad in an instant. For a moment a dead silence. Dad squared himself and stood up to it, hasty, haughty-looking.

“It's a d—n lie!” he roared again. “F'r I'm th' man, an' where 're me irons?” He stepped aside, displaying his big feet for inspection.

The horseman scowled, but something he read in a glance from Riley changed his expression.

He dismounted and approached Dad, smiling. “You're Mr Rudd, then,” he said, “from the head of the Condamine?”

“I am,” Dad answered, never changing a muscle. The man said he had been to Dad's several times. He spoke well of it and told Dad he was a nephew of old Gray's.

Dad forgot the sergeant's warning. He seized Gray's “nephew” by the hand and shook it.

“Wull, wull,” he said, “an' I took y' for a horse stealer” — and Dad chuckled by way of apology. Gray's “nephew” chuckled also.

The publican proposed a drink. Dad drank and returned the shout. That was at seven o'clock.

Midnight. The moon shone fitfully and lit up the belt of cabbage gums; from the swamp came the trumpet note of wild geese; owls on noiseless wing were hunting round; a dim, sickly light flickered at the pub. Two horsemen rode away from it through the trees, leading a horse with a saddle on. From a back room a voice kept calling, “Dorgsh! — Robbersh! — P-ubli'an! — P-ubli'an! — wher'sh me — hic — r'holver?”

The voice was Dad's.

The principal witness for the Crown failed to attend, and the case against

Palmer, *alias* Smith, broke down.

XIII. THE NEW TEACHER.

VERILY, Saddletop was going ahead. A new church and an old public-house went up, the public-house that used to be at the Gap. A camp of men came along with a tent and some tools, and dug a new government dam; some more cleared the lanes of timber and trees, felled them and chopped them up and left them stacked in heaps on the roadway to frighten horses and make them bolt.

A lot of new selectors came and brought large families with them and murmured like the Israelites because the school was six miles from them.

Dad became their Moses. He couldn't see what they had to grumble about, but Dad always listened to people with a grievance. He went to work and agitated earnestly for a new school at our end of the district. Dad worked night and day to get them that school, and when at last it was granted and the building went up they murmured more because it was erected within a few feet of Dad's land.

One day, a young man, overwhelmed with a collar — a lean stripling of a man, with no more hip than a “goanna,” a clean face, a “haw” in his voice, a cane in his hand, and a gorgeous band on his straw hat — mounted the veranda and announced himself to Dad as the teacher of the new school.

Dad scarcely heard him. He was confused. He stared and couldn't think of anything to say. Had the Angel Gabriel, or the hangman, suddenly appeared before him, Dad's equanimity couldn't have been more disturbed. Dad was never himself in the presence of leading people, and the prig-pedagogue and the sage were one and the same to him.

The teacher bowed and said he believed Dad was Mr Rudd. His own name was Wood-Smyth — Mr Philip Wood-Smyth — and he handed Dad a card, and, sitting in an easy chair, began to talk of schools and curriculum in an earnest and learned manner. He believed in teaching a boy mathematics, and mentioned Napoleon Bonaparte and others whom Dad hadn't heard of, but he condemned classics and the dead languages.

“What is the use of them?” he said. “What earthly use is Greek to you now on this farm, Mr Rudd?” (Dad looked along the veranda boards.) “Can you say you have ever found your Latin or your ethical problems in Shakespeare of any use to you since you left school?”

Dad, in tones of uneasiness, said he hadn't.

“And yet — ”

Mother found her way to the veranda and Dad told the teacher she was Mrs. Rudd. They shook hands, and when Mr Wood-Smyth looked round to address Dad again he was gone.

The new teacher was a polite man and enjoyed society. Never before had there been anyone like him at Saddletop. Whenever he met Miss Wilkins or Gray's daughters or Sarah he would smile and take off his hat and strike his knees with it. And it didn't matter how far off they were, whether on a veranda a mile away or on horseback or carrying in sticks, he smiled and took his hat off just the same.

Dave regarded Mr Wood-Smyth with disfavour. The polish of him and his attention to girls annoyed Dave.

"He's a goat, no matter how much he knows," Dave said in the kitchen one day.

Sarah stood up for the ways of the pedagogue. She thought it proper such respect should be shown to her sex.

"Then you're mighty fond o' being noticed," Dave answered cynically.

Young Bill was sitting at the table, having late dinner alone. He joined in.

"Not when they're m-milkin', Dave, an' haven't their stockin's on" (Dave looked at him and grinned), "or 'n a tub."

Bill struggled on the floor from a poke Mother gave him with the teapot.

"But it wouldn't hurt you," Sarah went on quietly, "to lift your hat."

"No, it wouldn't," Dave snarled, "an' it wouldn't hurt anyone if I didn't. An' who wants t' wear a hat out swingin' it about as if he wanted t' block a cow?" And Dave chuckled triumphantly and went out.

Mr Wood-Smyth was a frequent visitor at our place, and if he chanced to remain for a meal any time Dad would become agitated. He would lose his head and at the table make all kinds of mistakes. When he didn't pass meat to someone who didn't want any, he dropped the plate and spilt gravy about or mutilated his fingers with the carver.

But Dad usually contrived to avoid Wood-Smyth's society. Dad had never received a great education himself, and the presence of so much learning annoyed him. But always when the teacher had left Dad talked favourably of him. Once Mother asked how much salary he thought Mr Wood-Smyth received, and Dad reckoned he would get "at least a thousand."

Politeness was the broad plank in Wood-Smyth's curriculum and he hammered it hard into his pupils.

One day Dad was riding on the road and met the scholars returning home. Several raised their hats to him. Dad stared and went on. Some more hats. Dad scowled. Then Tom limped along, swinging a lizard by the tail.

"Hello, Dad." — and up went his hat.

Dad turned the mare sharply and went after him.

“Yer young devil!” — he shouted, striking at Tom round the base of a tree with a riding-switch. — “would y' make sport o' me, too?”

“'E tol' us t' — ” Tom whined.

“Oo?”

“S-S-Smith.”

“T' mek fun o' me?”

“No — t' — ” Dad attempted to dismount and Tom dropped the lizard and escaped.

Boxing Night. A party at our place — Sarah's party. Such a gathering! Every soul on Saddletop must have been present — everyone except the Careys. And the display of lights and lanterns would have almost blinded you. The verandas right round were hung thick with them. Two accordeon-players and a violinist were in attendance, and to hear the music they made when you reached the gate would make your heart jump.

Sarah flew about everywhere, met her female friends at the steps and hugged them, and escorted them in and took their hats and things and found sleeping places for the babies.

Joe looked after the men for her — warned them of the dog and the barbed wire, showed them where to put their horses, and conducted them to the ballroom and introduced them to any young ladies they didn't know.

Dancing about to commence. Mr Wood-Smyth arrived. He came late and McGregor, a very old mate of Dad's, strolled in about the same time. Dad hurried forward and seized McGregor by the hand and welcomed him boisterously. Dad hadn't seen McGregor for a number of years and the pair sat together at a table and talked of old times. They talked for hours.

Intermission. The room containing Dad and McGregor became crowded and cake and coffee were being handed round.

A lull in the clatter of tongues. McGregor turned to Mr Wood-Smyth, who sat near him sipping coffee, and in a loud sonorous tone said, “N' hoo's th' auld mon — quite weel, Phil?”

Dad stared and nudged McGregor. He thought his old mate was making a mistake.

But Wood-Smyth understood. He blushed and fidgeted, then forced a smile and answered, “He's — ah — pretty well, indeed.”

“An' auld Mick?”

Mr Wood-Smyth fidgeted more. He wished someone would come to the door and call him. The company appeared interested.

“Pretty well, I think,” he said, eyeing the door.

McGregor turned to Dad.

“Y' ken,” McGregor said, “auld Micky, who cleanit the dustboxes i'

Dreeyton — uncle to this mon?” And he pointed his thumb at the teacher.

Dad drew himself up like a cockatoo, aroused. “Not his uncle!” he exclaimed, his eyes opening like a door.

“Yes, mon” — and McGregor laughed at Dad's astonished look — “yes, Phil's a son o' auld Jem Smith, o' Quartpot, is he nae? An' wus nae auld Micky a brither o' Jem's?”

The discovery was too much for Dad. He stood up and stared at Wood-Smyth.

“Dammit!” he said. “I know y'.”

“Y' couldna f'get auld Jemmy.” McGregor said.

“Remember him well,” Dad answered, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. And turning to the company, who, to the discomfort of the teacher, were all grinning, he said, with a ring of pride in his voice: “His father an' me knew one another thirty year ago.”

“Eh! An' th' auld woman tae!” said McGregor.

“An' his mother!” Dad answered.

“An' y' min' th' bannocks she used tae mak' us a?”

Dad burst into a loud laugh at mention of the “bannocks.” But Wood-Smyth didn't. He only smiled, but his face was very red.

“An' min', too, th' auld black hen she used to hae sittin' wi' eggs in the bed?”

Dad held his sides, and the tears ran down his furrowed cheeks.

“An' the p-p-p — ” (McGregor couldn't speak for laughing) “the pig i' the hoose wi’” (choked again) — “wi' ribbon tied tae it!”

Dad gave a tremendous roar. The whole house exploded, and it was minutes before Joe's voice could be heard yelling:

“S'lect your partners for a waltz!”

XIV. THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN.

HARVEST-TIME: Dave and Joe and Bill carting barley off the house-paddock. Dad poking round on his old mare annoying the cows.

Dave, in the act of heaving a sheaf into the dray, paused and looked up: "Who's the cove?" he said wonderingly.

Joe, from the top of the load, stared in the direction of the house. Bill, on the opposite side to Dave, walked round and took observations. Bill, always dog-tired, never lost an opportunity to recover.

"Dunno," Joe said; "They're all shakin' his hand, anyway."

"Another parson, I s'pose," Dave groaned apprehensively. Dave disliked the clergy. Their presence always made him unhappy, and one of them in the house would almost drive him from home. And parsons were never in any hurry to leave our place now. Different from Shingle Hut. It was rarely that they remained there for a meal; never when there was a well-butchered leg of a kangaroo hanging under the veranda; Dad mostly saw that one was dangling there whenever a parson was reckoned to be due. And he would tear it down and heave it into the grass the moment the pilot had left. Dad was a wise man, though he is not mentioned in Proverbs.

"His nag's p-poor enough for a parson's," Joe chuckled; "on'y y' never see 'em with two — one's always dead 'fore they get another."

Bill laughed a stiff, ready-made laugh — to encourage the conversation and prolong the "recovery". But Dave wired in with the fork in silence.

To gain time Bill asked Dave a useless question. He said:

"Ow'd yer like t' be a parson, Dave?"

Had it been anyone else Dave might have committed some violence. But he always got on well with Bill. He only turned his eyes on him in forgiveness.

The stranger, wagging his head and working his hands and arms like a temperance orator, was walking between Mother and Sarah — both hatless and holding newspapers above their heads, towards the house. They seemed to know him, and listened eagerly to things he had to say.

Joe couldn't make him out. Bill volunteered to run up and see what he was. Then Joe grinned. He remembered when he had been like Bill.

The stranger tossed a greasy bundle he had taken from his saddle on to the veranda, and the next moment was striding over the stubble towards the dray. He carried his head high, his hat well back, and walked like a person not afraid of trespassing.

"I know that stride," Dave said thoughtfully and stared hard.

The man drew near. His hair and whiskers were long and wild, and

running to seed.

Bill giggled and stared. Dave stood thinking of “that stride.”

In the tongue of the cheerful aboriginal the man called out things as he approached. Joe didn't understand, but he disapproved of them and yelled back, “Get y'r 'air cut!” Bill sniggered and, crouching down, took the pitch-fork with him under the dray. But Dave suddenly cast his away.

“Bless me! It's Dan!” he exclaimed, and damaged several barley stooks tumbling over them to reach him.

Bill crawled out from under the dray without the pitch-fork and rolled his eyes about. Joe slid off the top and tore his trousers and dragged half the load down on top of himself.

“Dan!” each murmured, following Dave.

Dan it was. The same old Dan that Dad had twice hunted from home, but older, shabbier, more useless, and more dilapidated.

He shook Dave's hand with fervour, but he didn't know Joe from Bill or Bill from Joe till Dave mentioned their names.

Bill looked pleased. He felt proud of Dan. Often he had heard of him; he used to wonder if he would ever see him; and now all at once Dan stood before him. And as Dan proceeded rapidly to account for fourteen years of absence, Bill stared him all over, and hugged the ground near his careless, greasy form.

Almost before you could think, Dan had plunged into the back country; fought several fights with naked blacks; dashed into a scrub in pursuit of brumbies on a horse called Silverstar, coming out without a stitch on but his boots and belt; had broken his right leg three times in the same place; lost £300 on the Cooper, and was rejoicing on his way to Sydney in charge of a thousand wild C.O.B. bullocks.

Bill's breath threatened to leave him. His mind wasn't nearly large enough to hold the impressions Dan made on it. Even Joe — Joe who was always cool enough to calculate — was carried away, and a lively longing to see some “out-back” life filled his soul. But Dave was only moved to a smile. Dave remembered Dan.

“Let's go up to the house,” Dave said, and as they all walked on Dan continued.

“I've seen life! Fancy humpin' a swag from Nudgee Nudgee to Normanton — five hundred miles — without a boot on or a bob about y', and the last stage havin' t' pull off and fight two infernal big Danes fer three hours fer your own water-bag. An'” (pausing to breathe) “after knockin' 'em both out, t' have t' pour every drop o' water down their blanky throats t' bring 'em round!”

A thrill of excitement went through Bill. He swung his clenched fist at

the imaginary forms of the Danes and caught Dave in the small of the neck.

“D—n you!” Dave yelled. “D—n y’!” And he sprang on Bill, and squeezed his neck, and there must have been trouble only Bill managed to gasp that he “didn't m-mean t”.

They reached the house just as Dad arrived at the steps on the mare.

“Don't! See if he knows me,” Dan said, silencing Bill, who began yelling to announce the home-coming of the heir.

Dad stared hard from the party approaching him to the horses left unprotected in the dray, scowled, and looked ugly.

Dan separated himself from the others.

“Doesn't know me from a crow — told y' he wouldn't,” he said, saluting Dad as though Dad were a colonel with gold lace and a wooden leg.

“I don't know who y' are, man,” Dad answered gruffly and was about to revile Dave for wasting time when Dan bowed like a man winding water and said —

“Your fust-born . . . Daniel, sir . . . Daniel Damascus Rudd.”

Dad nearly fell off the mare.

“Dan!” he blurted out and urged the old mare towards the prodigal and stretched out his hand. But all at once he checked himself. He remembered he had kicked Dan out and never wanted to see him again. He changed colour.

Then it was that Dan showed himself a strategist.

“Not a word — not one syllable,” he said in grave tones, seizing Dad's hand without a blush. “I know what's in your mind, exactly. Say nothing — it's past. Let it slide . . . You turned me out, that's true, but I don't mind — I deserved it. But I went — I obeyed like a man, didn't I? And now” (Dan paused, so that Mother and all standing round might hear) “and now I'm back ” (paused again) “back a wiser” (another pause) “a better” (here Dan smote himself hard on the thigh where his pocket had been, before he tore it out to wear on his foot) “and” (elevating his voice) “a richer man — wanting no one's favour, fearing nobody's frown!”

Dan was a rare speaker.

Dad never before displayed so much agility in dismounting, except when he fell off.

He gripped Dan by both hands. Large tears like hailstones gathered and broke in his big eyes, and one smothered sob like a colt choking was all we heard. It was too much for us. We stared at our feet and felt we should have been dead. If there was one thing more than another we couldn't stand it was Dad blubbering.

“Never mind!” — Dan said in tones of forgiveness, holding a hand high above Dad's head. “Never mind! . . . Fer me own part it's fergotten long

enough ago, 'n' I'm back. 'N', as I hinted before, well off, Dad, well off — independent!”

And he looked down on Dad and smiled.

Dan was an object lesson in filial affection.

Dave smiled, too, and went back to work. Dave smiled because he knew what a beautiful liar Dan was.

Dan followed Dad inside and had something to eat. He ate everything Sarah placed before him. Then he sat back, and all the rest of the afternoon talked to Dad and Mother, and admired the furniture, and smoked and spat. But he didn't spit on the floor. He rose every time and went to the door and did it on the clean boards of the veranda that had just been scrubbed.

Dan confided to Dad his plans for the future. He'd had enough outback life, he said, and intended putting a bit of money into a farm and settling down. If he could get a suitable place, about eighteen hundred acres with water, he'd start dairying, milk a hundred cows, feed them on lucerne, and fatten wethers and steers beside.

Dad said there was a big thing in it, and knew the very place Dan required — “Curry's,” he said, “joining me. Two thousand acres, creek runnin' right through it, £2 10s. an acre.”

“We'll have a look at it,” Dan said reflectively.

Approaching tea-time Dan apologized to Mother for the sad condition of his clothes. “Fact is,” he remarked, “me wardrobe's comin' down be train, so I'm afraid y'll have to put up with me as I am till it's here.”

Mother said if he liked he could put on some of Dave's for a change. Dan thought he would. He put on a full suit of Dave's, besides a shirt and collar, and came to tea a new man. He put them all on the next day, too, and never took them off any more.

For nearly a month Dad accompanied Dan through the district, inspecting farms that were for sale, and at night they would sit together on the veranda and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each. And when Dad would advise Dan to buy a certain one, Dan would disagree and express a preference for some other, always concluding with “Better t' wait a bit yet, 'fore decidin'.” In the morning Dad would have to go to work, but Dan preferred to sit on the veranda smoking, and making up his mind.

Dan was going to give £5 to a young lady who called one day collecting for the hospital, but all his money was in the Savings Bank and he hadn't any change about him. “Worst of banks,” he said, “can't run to them when y' wants to.”

But Mother had plenty in the house and offered him the sum till he could draw some of his wealth. Dan accepted it and went to the veranda and gave the young lady a half-sovereign he had found in Dave's trouser-pocket.

“Alwez like t' give t' the hospital,” he said, returning to Mother. “Altergether, I s'pose I've given hundreds o' pounds, now.”

Mother was delighted with the way Dan had turned out and was anxious to know the property he meant to buy. She questioned Dad about it one morning.

“I don't know,” Dad said angrily, “I don't know what the devil he's going t' do.”

Dad began to treat Dan badly again. He showed feelings of distrust towards him and refused to accompany him any more to inspect properties. Dan took offence. He went away one morning to buy Curry's place, and when we heard of him again he was working among the selectors at McCatta's Corner, about eighty miles away.

Dan never bought any farm, but he settled down. He married Mary MacSmith; had a great wedding, too; and lived comfortably and happily on his wife's people. And he promised to do well, till one day, about three months after his marriage, Mrs. Geraghty dragged her daughter Polly, who was crying, into MacSmith's place, and, within hearing of the whole family, told Dan he wasn't a man or he would have married Polly, and asked him what he meant to do.

Dan was imperturbable. He laughed and said, “Git out!” and would have argued himself innocent, but his wife, the very person you'd expect to stand up and fight for him and decline to hear anything the MacSmiths would say, believed it all and flew into tears and hysterics . . . and Dan, of course, was thrown on the cold world again.

In compensation for Dan's infidelity, his wife rushed to the store and got a cart-load of goods in his name. Dan got the bill. It made him restless. He came to Dave for advice. Dave read the bill and when he saw the last item looked up and asked:

“What did she want with twenty-four pair o' stockin's?” “Dunno,” Dan said.

“She must be a blessed santerpee!”

XV. HOW DAD FELL OUT WITH DALY.

DALY had been to Brisbane, and returned bursting with enthusiasm and information. He called at Ruddville to unburden himself to Dad. Daly was a welcome visitor at our place, and always got on well with Dad.

Besides Daly, Dad was the only man on Saddletop acquainted with the capital. Dad posed as an authority on the geography of Brisbane — knew every hole and corner of it, and could tell you exactly where Cribb's, and Junkaway's, and Toppin's, and Winship's, and old Bartley's places were. It was no credit to him, though, because he had worked there a whole month nearly forty- five years before.

“You wouldn't know it now, man,” Daly said, deprecatingly, “you 'd get lost!”

Dad wasn't so sure.

“Don't know,” he said, thoughtfully stroking his long grey beard.

“Why, it's all built on fer miles — houses everywhere; an'streets! — y' don't know where th' divil y' are fer them. . . . It's a fact!” (turning aggressively on Joe, who displayed an inclination to doubt) “yer can smile!” (Then to Dad) “And people! By gad!”

Daly couldn't convey any idea of the population. Language failed him.

Sarah instanced the crowd that attended old Mrs. Delaney's funeral by way of comparison.

“Be damned!” (Daly was not a polite man). “Pshaw! Nothing! . . . You've seen big mobs of sheep, haven't y'?” (All of us had.) “Well, they're simply nothing to th' crowds y'll see in the main street on a Saturd'y night. S' 'elp me goodness!” (addressing Mother — his mouth, eyes, and hands all working) “I never thought there was so many people in the world, Mrs. Rudd!” Dad reflected.

“Must go down when th' wheat's in, an' see it again,” he said.

“If yer do” — Daly went on — “stay at Mrs. O'Reilly's, in Roma-street. Best place in th' whole town, an' on'y thirteen bob a week. Tip-top table and two all-right girls waits on y'. Look after yer as if y' wer' a juke; no mistake; an' look here” (turning excitedly to Mother) “polish yer boots every bloomin' mornin', and” (Daly paused to cough) “an' fetch tea inter th' bed t' y'!”

All of us laughed, except Sarah. She turned up her nose and went out. Sarah was a Sunday-school teacher now.

“Who, the girls?” Joe shouted, above the noise.

“O' course.”

“Go on with you!” Mother said, looking on the floor. She didn't believe

Daly.

“My colonial!” Daly said.

“That's th' place for us, David, when we go down!” Joe put in, poking Dave hard in the ribs. Dave grinned his long slow grin.

“You go t' Reilly's,” Daly continued, addressing Dad again, “ask fer — ”

“There were a place,” Dad mused, interrupting Daly, “on the crick, where I used t' stay; near — ”

“Crick!” Daly guffawed. “Crick! . . . there isn't any crick. . . . Damme, I tell y' it's all built on, man; all houses — miles and miles of 'em. Th' river's wot you mean!” And he laughed cheerfully.

“Nonsense!” Dad snapped, turning red in the face; “there's a crick as well. Mulcahy's place is on th' bank. Did you see Mulcahy's place?”

Tears ran from Daly's eyes. “What part of Brisbane d' y' mean?” he asked of Dad, in a voice that implied ridicule.

“Confound it, feller!” Dad broke out; “do y' think I've never been there?” “Now, don't get angry over it,” Mother interposed, in her quiet, kind way. But Dad would never suffer a contradiction.

“Here!” he shouted, violently displacing a portion of the tablecloth and brandishing his pocket-knife — “here's Brisbane, ain't it?” (He savagely scratched a tracing, something like a square, on the table, which annoyed Mother.)

Daly smiled and, when Dad glared round at him, nodded assent. “There's th' river!” — raking the knife through the square, and making Mother jump.

Daly, watching closely over Dad's shoulder, chuckled acquiescence.

“An' that 's th' bridge?” — gashing the river in two.

“Correct,” Daly said, grinning more.

“Here's Windmill Hill; here's Rafferty's pub in South Brisbane” (Dad dug a hole in the table to mark the pub., and Mother shuddered); here, just behind Rafferty's, is a ridge, an' a waterhole where me an' Andrew Rafferty got our water, an' a lot o' scrub runnin' right along this way (hacking another channel in the cedar).

“Bah!” Daly exclaimed in disgust — “waterhole! . . . scrub! . . . Wot'n th' devil 're y' talkin' about? Don't I tell y' th' place is all houses!”

“Houses be d—d!” Dad roared, showing all his teeth (he only has three now), “there's no houses there” (prodding the knife into South Brisbane). “Here's where th' houses is” (he stabbed North Brisbane hard and angrily), “all along here. . . . And this, runnin' up here” (more mutilations which pained Mother), “is th' crick.”

“Pshaw! Crick! . . . That” (Daly struck the tracing with his fist, and didn't notice he shook Sarah's flower-vase off the table), “that's all shops.”

“Shops!” Dad yelled, plunging the knife into the cedar and snapping the blade, “are y' mad ? How th' devil can there be shops in a crick?”

Daly turned green with rage. “Yer don't know ennerthin' about it,” he said, taking up his hat, “yer know nothing!” Mother pleaded for peace, and Joe grinned at Dave.

“Look here,” Dad roared, following Duly to the verandah; “I was in Brisbane before you or y'r father, or any one o' y' ever saw the country.”

“Yer might,” Daly sneered, “yer might, but yer know d—n little about it all the same!” And then he went away.

XVI. DAD'S TRIP TO BRISBANE.

THE wheat was in, and Dad decided to take a trip to Brisbane. For seven or eight years he had been thinking of that trip, but something or other always came to prevent his going. According to Dad himself, the farm would suffer if he went away for a month; there would be no one to look after it, no one to manage. According to us there would be no one to look on while the cows were being milked; no one to stand in the paddock all day while the hay was being raked and carted and stacked; no one to fuss round and be a nuisance to Dave while he sold a draft of fats to a butcher, or drove a profitable deal with the pig-buyers; no one to yell boisterously for the whereabouts of any of us when we chanced to be concealed from view for a moment or two by a dray, or a hay-stack, or something; no one to annoy the men who worked hardest, and to incite them to strike and seek employment elsewhere; no one to molest Regan's bull when it came round our way; no one to take the gun down when little Billy Bearup came to see Sarah; no one to soothe the dogs on to travelling stock and challenge the big dusty drovers to get down and be obliterated; and no one to aggravate Dave and Joe to blasphemy and rebellion.

Yes; we would miss Dad when he went away. Still, we encouraged him to go. We were not selfish. We said it would be a pleasant change to him. We said nothing of the pleasure it would be to ourselves. We thought only of Dad. Some families never think of their father at all. We never forgot Dad for a day. He was never out of our minds.

Mother was to accompany Dad to the city, and Bill, with the buggy, was waiting at the door to take them to the train. We admired the tall hat that Sarah had bought Dad for a Christmas present.

"Don't f'get, now," Dad adjured Dave for the hundredth time, "ter start chaff-cuttin' t'morrer, an' look out th' milk doesn't be late at th' fact'ry — an' see Regan sends that collar back t'day — an' if thet feller comes for pigs, have them all ready for 'im — an' min' if Thompson" — (Sarah exchanged kisses with Mother and hoped she would have a good time, and sent her love to Norah) — "wants th' lend o' th' filly, he carn't git her; d—n ye, weh, horse!" — (the animal had switched its tail just when Dad placed his foot on the buggy step) — "don't f'get now ter — " ("Won't you put your hat straight, Dad?" from Sarah) — "ter start chaff-cuttin' first thing — WEH! Will yer — an' see th' men ain't loafin' about all day."

"It'll be orl right," Dave answered; then Bill stirred the horse up, and the buggy started.

"So-long!" Dave said. Sarah waved her hand. "Take care of y'selves,"

Joe called out; — “remember me to Henry Norman, and watch you don't get run in!”

Dad turned his head and shouted back, “Don't leave th' cows too long in th' luce'ne.”

“Bust th' cows!” — cheerfully, from Joe.

“Don't leave th' cows too long in th' luce'ne,” Dad yelled again.

“Or-right!” Dave shouted between his hands, loud enough to be heard in Parliament. “Or-right!” from Joe, louder even than Dave. “Poor Dad!” Sarah mused, “the cows are a worry to him.”

A few turns of the wheels and the buggy stopped. Dave wondered. “Changed his mind,” said Joe. Sarah laughed.

“Hadn't y' better put them out now!” Dad shouted.

“For Heaven's sake, get them out,” Joe advised, “or he won't go.”

“Yairs, yairs,” Dave bawled, and packed Tom off to turn the brutes out.

Then the buggy disappeared round the corner, and Dave and Joe and Sarah and the rest of us marched inside and looked round. All of us rejoiced. We had never had so much freedom at home before, and we felt would never have again.

Joe pulled on an old faded smoking-cap of Dad's that lay on the parlour table, and declared himself king. In a voice like Dad's he ordered Bill to “Clear t' th' devil, an' do some work.” Bill disobeyed. Joe took him by the neck. Bill resisted, and a brilliant engagement took place on the new carpet. They tumbled and rolled about like bullocks, broke the legs of two chairs, and shook down from the wall an enlarged picture of Dad's father that had cost a lot of money. Sarah flew into a passion; said she wouldn't stay another hour in the house if that was the way they were going to carry on. And when the combatants fell under the table and rose with it on their backs, and tilted it with a loud crash against the piano, she appealed distractedly to Dave.

“Steady there, now, you fellers!” Dave said; “steady!”

“It's only th' pedigree,” Joe answered, puffing hard, and restoring grandfather to the shattered frame.

Sarah was irate. But Tom's voice announcing the approach of Billy Bearup calmed and conciliated her.

“He's not!” she said, eagerly turning to the door. Then, changing colour, she cast an eye over her attire, and fled to doll herself up.

A new idea occurred to Joe: “See me startle Bearup!” he said, and pulling the smoker on again he slipped away. Robing himself in a familiar old rag of Dad's, he took down the gun and hobbled forth to welcome Bearup, who at the moment was bending from his horse to open the gate.

“T' 'ell outer this!” Joe roared at a range of sixty yards. Bearup looked up

and saw the gun. He did n't wait for anything more; he didn't wait to open the gate again either. He spurred his horse and galloped down the headland. Joe fired the weapon off, and yelled as Dad several times had yelled before.

Bearup made a wide circuit through the' stubble, doubled back on Joe, reached the gate at racing-speed, and while we wildly rejoiced from the verandah, disappeared down the lane and was lost in dust.

“You're nothing but an ass!” Sarah said when Joe returned. “You're a fool! I'll let father know your carryings-on when he comes back.”

Then we went cheerfully to work.

XVII. THE GREAT METROPOLIS.

DAD and Mother arrived in Brisbane at dusk and alighted at the Central railway-station. Dad took his bag, and, with Mother laden with parcels, went to seek lodgings.

They were welcomed to a boarding-house on Wickham Terrace that Norah had recommended to them. A daughter of the woman who kept it taught in Kangaroo Point school with Norah. 'T was a large house and a lively place to stay at. Twelve boarders in it; twelve gentlemen boarders of different degrees and dress and dispositions. One was born with a gift for music, and had the patience and courage to develop it. He used to spend his nights thumping "Alice, where art. thou?" out of the piano. Another constantly mortified the landlady, and made her miserable and unhappy. He would stay in on evenings she had company, reading the newspaper; and when the room was silent would straighten himself up and read aloud the house advertisements, dwelling on the "comforts" and "accommodation" with emphasis that made it sound like an indictment for perjury.

And there was a luxurious lodger who always had a ball or something to go to, and used to return late in the night or at early morning in a cab, and fly up the stairs pursued by the cabman. The others were harmless, quiet-living fellows, who only growled about their shirts every week and gave notice to leave.

Sweeney, a cheerful, red-haired lodger, coming from the bath, discovered Dad and Mother mooching about the balcony. He didn't say "Good-morning" to them, or anything. He stared with all his eyes, and darted into a room as if they alarmed him. Then he and three of the quiet, harmless boarders poked their heads through a half-open door and grinned and grimaced at Dad and Mother.

But Dad didn't notice them. Nor did he notice that they stole into the room of Doonan (the nasty member of the house). Doonan, who had lost a lot of sleep, was angry. In a loud voice he abused Dad and Mother, and accused them of tramping about all night, and asked if they were elephants. Then he took observations of them, and hammered on the wall of his room, and called lustily for Jacobs, another lodger, to come and see Esau.

The bell rang, and a host of gentlemen boarders with high collars and stiff shirts and soft hands trooped in to breakfast. The lady of the house, stout and stately, sat at the head of the table guarding a dish of sausages.

"See you've new lodgers, Mrs. Foley?" said one, a thin, satirical lawyer.

The others sniggered; the lady coloured slightly, smiled, and asked Mr.

O'Rourke what he would take.

"Sausages, I expect," Mr. O'Rourke said, sadly, seeing no second dish.

"Sausages for choice," the lawyer added, and there was more sniggering, and fresh colour came into the lady's face.

Doonan bounced in.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, "where's Esau?"

Sweeney spluttered, and lost some of his tea. A small, big-footed girl, pouring out tea at a side table, giggled into the cups and scalded herself.

The lady rebuked her.

"Mary!" she said; "Mary, behave!"

Mary bent forward to place a cup of tea beside the lawyer, and broke out again in his ear and emptied a quantity of the boiling beverage into his lap. He sprang up and said "Blast it!" and Mary was sent to the kitchen.

Then came a noise as if someone was leading horses down the stairs, and Dad and Mother wandered in, looking as though they were afraid of being turned out again.

"Makin' a start?" Dad said, pushing Mother to the front and removing his "other" hat, a broad-leafed felt trimmed with white calico.

The gentlemen boarders looked up, then dropped their heads like curlews hiding in the grass, and at intervals stole glances at each other and at Mrs. Foley.

Mother showed signs of uneasiness in the presence of so many strangers, and sat on the chair as though she distrusted it. She had no appetite, and would take only a cup of tea. But Dad squared himself and breathed noisily and took sausages every time.

Conversation flagged. The rattle of cutlery was the only sound for a good while — until Dad stirred his tea with a knife and started to drink. Then Sweeney, who had no self-control, lost some more of his tea.

Mrs. Foley looked distressed, but Doonan, who always knew when to say something, relieved her.

"Was that you walking about early this morning?" he asked of the lawyer, sitting opposite.

The lawyer smiled and reached for the jam.

"Where was it," Dad joined in; "up here?" pointing his fork, with a sausage impaled on it, at the ceiling.

Doonan chuckled and said "Yes."

"Thet wer' me," Dad answered proudly; "but it weren't early" — (turning to Mother) — "weren't it after four?"

Mother said timidly she thought it must have been.

"I expect you are used to early rising, Mr. Rudd?" said the landlady to Dad.

“Well” — stowing away the sausage he had been pointing at the ceiling — “middlin', mum; 'bout three mostly. Dave, he gits up fust; then Joe an' Bill they gets the cans ready, an' Sarah she sees ter th' tea fer th' yard an' —”

The boarder with the mania for music suddenly left the table. “A minute or two to spare,” he said, addressing no one in particular, and threw himself down at the piano.

The others swallowed their breakfast hurriedly and left. Dad had another sausage, some more bread, and his fourth cup of tea. Encouraged by the music or the absence of the boarders, Mother tackled some bread and butter.

Dad finished, and shifted his chair beside the piano and stared into the face of the musician. The man of music became flustered and struck wrong notes. He wasn't used to being admired.

“Wot 's thet th' chune o'?” Dad asked.

Without shifting his eyes the other shook his head as though he did n't know.

“Wot are y' playin'?”

No response excepting a violent conglomeration of sounds.

Dad waited till the storm was over, then put the question again.

“Al'ce 'r' art Thou,” the musician hissed, striking a run of discords, and poking among the keys for the lost notes.

“C'n y' play th' 'Wil' Colonial Boy' on thet?” Dad inquired.

“Play th' deuce!” the musician said, savagely, and jumped up and ran away. In the hall he encountered Mrs. Foley. “What is it?” he asked, turning his thumb in the direction of Dad; then went out into the street, working all his fingers in imaginary manipulation of the keyboard.

Dad and Mother thought they would “mooch about” a bit, and strolled into Queen-street. They stood at the *Courier* corner for half- an-hour, staring in wonder. The people, the traffic, trams going and trams coming, and the row and rattle of it all bewildered them. Dad confessed that Brisbane had changed a bit since he knew it fifty years ago. They strained their eyes and ears trying to absorb everything, and got headaches.

“Look here! look here! look here! Eighteen lovely epples fer wan shellen', and put 'em in a baag!” Dad felt his pocket. Twenty newsboys rushed him, pushing and scrimmaging, Shoving their wares into his hands and into his face, and claiming his custom. Mother smiled compassionately on Dad, and they both moved with the throng.

A female astride a bike attracted Dad; he grabbed Mother by the arm. “Look at thet 'un!” he exclaimed; and both of them stood staring and

grinning after the wheeling female until she was lost to them in the traffic.

Three more pedalled past. "Another!" Dad gasped, tugging violently at Mother again — "two — three of 'em, be d—d!"

The excitement was too much for Dad. He was compelled to rest. He leaned against a verandah-post and reflected on the scene around. "Never see th' like," he said to Mother. "They're thicker'n wallabies!" And a cheerful growl rumbled from him.

They walked Queen-street most of the day, and went without lunch. Dad was not a success on the pavement. The city people claimed all the space. They got in his way, pushed him about, collided with him, and whenever he stood a moment to stare back at anything, they carried him off his feet. Dad got sick of it all, and took to the street. The street was wider, and more in Dad's line. He got on well there, could see everything, and was striding along, his hands locked behind his back, one eye on Mother, the other on some girls hanging out of a window in a top storey, when a 'bus driver yelled — "Heigh there! — heigh!" and cracked his whip.

Dad felt the moist breath of a broken-winded horse on his neck, and had just danced safely to one side when a fat, perspiring female, moving in the same direction on a bike, spurted to pass the 'bus, and drove her front wheel fair between Dad's logs, and lifted him up in front of her. Then, like a woman, she let the handles go and screamed, and turned the bicycle over on the wood blocks, and mixed Dad up in her skirts. Dad was more bewildered than ever. He didn't know what had attacked him until he regained his feet; then he scowled on the fallen female, struggling and kicking at the machine like a horse in a fence, and clutching her skirts to hide her great, black-stockinged calves, and said —

"One o' them damn things!" and returned to the footpath.

Dad joined Mother again, and together they purchased some fruit and explored George-street. Several barristers wearing wigs, their gowns ballooning in the wind, issued from the Supreme Court and swept by. Mother watched them till they were swallowed up in Burnett-lane, then said she supposed they would be bishops.

Dad shook his head. "Might be Judges," he remarked; "ain't bishops, or they'd be in tights."

Assembled at the gates of the courts were a number of legal lights. Among them Dad recognised the lawyer from the boarding-house. Dad was delighted.

"Hello!" he said, "this where y' are?"

The Law resented Dad with a look. But looks were nothing to Dad. The rest of the fraternity smiled and smoked.

"Have some o' these," Dad said, producing a fistful of bananas from a

large brown paper parcel that Mother was hugging.

The lawyer frowned. "No, thanks," he snapped, turning his back on Dad.

"Put 'em in yer pocket," said Dad, amiably, proceeding to load his reluctant beneficiary with the fruit.

Fire flashed from the lawyer's eyes. He drew back fiercely, and shouted: "Go to the devil!" His learned brethren laughed, and they all moved away, leaving Dad staring perplexedly at Mother.

Dad and Mother got tired of the streets, and made their way back to the boarding-house. Dad took the lead and found Wickham Terrace without any trouble. Dad was a good bushman. The bump of locality was strong in Dad. Then he stalked into a private dwelling courageously, dragging Mother after him, wandered among the furniture looking for the stairs, and alarmed the inmates. A man with a capacious stomach hanging to him like a staghorn, and wearing glasses, came and saw them both off the premises again, and remained on the steps till they closed the gate and departed.

Mother remonstrated with Dad in the street for being "a stoopid."

"I could 'a' sworn that wer' it," Dad said, staring back at the place. Then, after eyeing a house a few doors up, "Ah ! this is the one."

He placed his hand on the gate, and opened it eagerly. Mother hesitated. She was n't going to follow Dad any more. She was n't quite sure of him. Dad chuckled. " You're bushed!" he said, mounting the steps heavily and striding in at the open door. Inside Dad saw himself revealed in a large mirror, and was confused. He stood staring and trying to remember the surroundings.

"Well?" from a sonorous voice in a corner of the room. Dad glanced round, and saw another fat man with glasses on, looking hard at him from behind a book.

"Ain't this Mrs. Brown's boarding-house?" Dad asked.

"Three doors up," the voice said.

"Dammit!" Dad said, and rushed out.

Finally Mother recognised Mary grinning from a balcony, then Dad knew the place and rejoiced. They wandered in and mounted the stairs and found their room. Dad said he would have a wash. He threw off his coat and shirt and splashed and bubbled noisily in a basin, and made a great mess of the wall and the floor. When he dried himself he pulled his boots off, and like a horse that had been ploughing or ridden hard all day, rolled heavily on the bed and groaned.

He had scarcely stretched himself when Mrs. Foley, pale and looking as though she had seen a ghost or 'buried a boarder, appeared at the door of the room, and asked Dad if he'd thrown any water over the balcony.

“No,” Dad answered, sitting up, “On'y what I jest washed meself in.”

“Good gracious me!” Mrs. Brown exclaimed, putting her palms together, “then it went all over a lady an' gentleman passing in the street!”

“It dud?” Dad said, jumping up and going to the balcony for verification. Below he saw a tall swell holding a wet silk hat in one hand, while with a handkerchief in the other he mopped splashes from the skirts of a gorgeous female. At intervals the swell glared wickedly at the walls of the house and made threatening remarks.

“Wot!” Dad called out apologetically, “dud thet go on y'?”

The swell looked up.

“Was it you threw that watah, fellah?”

Dad turned to the room, snatched up the towel he had dried himself in and rolled it into a lump.

“Here,” he shouted — hanging over the balcony again — “wipe 'er with thet!” And he threw the towel down. It opened in its flight like a fan, and spread itself over the swell's head and shoulders and blindfolded him.

“Blackguard!” the swell cried, dragging the moist rag from his head — “damn your insolence!” And he looked up fiercely.

“John!” the lady interposed, “don't get exasperated, my dear!”

“Damn — !”

“JOHN!”

Then they moved away and left Dad staring from the balcony.

XVIII. SEEING THE CITY.

NEXT day, Saturday, Dad and Mother were out early enough to gather mushrooms. They wandered through the streets again, for hours, and finally found their way to the Museum. At first they saw only collections of stones and a lot of bones and things, and Dad felt disappointed, and was loudly condemning the institution when they happened on a family of dingoes and a number of kangaroos, and an eagle-hawk standing tragically on the neck of a cowering old bear.

Dad opened his eyes. He guffawed excitedly and looked from one to the other. Dad could have slept in the Museum then — he could have died happily there. He spoke cheerfully to the kangaroos, hooted the dingo, looked down with a grin on the form of the native bear, and said, “Well, I’m d—d!”

Dad was always glad to meet anyone from the Bush.

A man came along — a man with long, ragged coat sleeves and boots with hardly any heels or soles to them — a man who trembled as though he were addicted to eating indigo — and stood beside Dad and looked at the kangaroos, too. Dad told him the sort they were, and explained how high they could jump, and showed him the toe they ripped dogs with.

“And which one do they rip men with?” the man asked in a harsh, unsympathetic voice.

“Oh, same one, same one!” Dad answered.

“Oh, they do!” the man shrieked. “I thought perhaps they stung them with their tails!” Dad laughed merrily.

“Y’r thinkin’ o’ death-adders,” he broke out; “they stings with th’ tail!”

“Same as bears?” — and the man made an effort to button his coat, but there were no buttons on it.

Dad laughed more.

“Bears?” he yelled, in an amused tone, “they haven’t got a tail. . . . Here’s a bear!” — turning and pointing to the one the hawk was standing guard over — “no tail — see?”

But the man didn’t pay any attention to Dad. He pointed triumphantly to the dingo and asked, “Hasn’t that one got a tail?”

The laugh Dad made went all over the Museum.

“That’s not a bear, man,” he cried, when he got his breath; “that’s-ha!-that’s-ha, ha-a-ha! ha! ha! a dingo — a nater dorg.”

An ancient official came along and asked Dad to be quiet.

“Or y’ll frighten the kangaroos,” the ragged man added, turning his back and slinking away a step.

“Well, thet chap,” Dad chuckled, “calls this” — (lifting his big boot and placing it against the glass case and indicating the dingo) - “a bear!”

The official smiled and disappeared.

Dad laughed some more to himself. Then the man returned and, stepping up to Dad, motioned him with his head as though he wished to confide something to him.

Dad ceased laughing and bent down and placed his ear close to the man's mouth.

The man spoke in a low, reverent tone. He said:

“Have y'a bob about y'?”

Dad had. Then the man glided out like a ghost and disappeared too.

Dad and Mother struck the boarding-house for dinner. At the table Dad led the conversation.

He spoke enthusiastically of the 'roos and dingoes in the Museum, and, waving his fork with a potato on it, advised everyone to go and see them.

“Y'd split y'self laughin',” he said, addressing the boarding-house keeper — “t' see th' ol men sittin' there as if they was up in the bloomin' Bush.”

“What about the young one?” Mother chirped, smiling shyly.

“Ah; I f'got” — and Dad chewed hurriedly — “Yes, an' they've a big she there standin' up starin' at y' ” — (Dad threw back his head, opened his eyes and mouth and displayed a lot of chewed meat and made himself wild-looking) — “an' a big lump of a joey hanging out of 'er pooch and cockin' its head all round the place, as cunnin' lookin' as y' like!”

Most of the boarders burst out laughing. The lady of the house smiled, then got red in the face, and smiled again when the lawyer asked Dad whether kangaroos were better to eat than bears. But a young lady, a school teacher, sitting opposite Dad, asked to be excused, and bounced away from the table leaving her dinner almost untouched.

A dead silence followed. The lawyer grinned at O'Rourke.

“She don't eat much,” Dad said, following the teacher with his eyes. “If she had nothin' but kangaroo for a while she'd eat more than that!” The boarders roared some more, and when they left the table they collected in Jacob's room, and yelled again, and the lawyer said Dad was “worth a quid.”

Afternoon. Mother rested herself, and Dad stalked out alone. He found Queen-street almost empty. The crowds of chattering, jawing females flaunting their frills and furbelows were gone. (Thank God!) And the “blokes” with their sticks hanging to their arms, and their panamas pushed up behind — and the contented-looking aldermen with their ponderous stomachs — and the politicians arguing at corners and waving umbrellas

and folded newspapers about — and the long-coated divine tapping a book with his lean forefinger and interpreting Solomon to an anxious disciple — and the wildlooking, unshorn “man about town,” with the long stride and heavy boots — and the rowing men flying their colours in their coats and talking “clean blades” and “dirty oars” and “getting y'r hands away” — and the swaggering footballers with coloured handkerchiefs thrown about their necks — and the “toffs” and the “dudes” and the “Johnnies” and the straw-hat push — all were gone.

Dad stood on the kerbing and gazed down the almost deserted street. A 'bus drawn by four stiff, starved-looking horses, laden with footballers in caps and overcoats, went by. The footballers hung out of the 'bus and waved a flag, and clamoured and called derisively to Dad. Dad smiled.

“Pum! pum! pum!” Dad jumped round and stared up the street. A brass band burst violently upon the air. It blared out “Men of Harlech.” Behind it a regiment of foot volunteers, armed with rifles and waterbags and haversacks and helmets, marched fearlessly.

They were a dashing lot of chaps — brave, formidable-looking fellows, too. A grand galaxy. Some were tall as gum trees; some just beginning to sprout; some old and hoary and hump-backed; some all stomach and head; others all helmet and no head or stomach at all; one without a uniform; one with two rifles; one with an eye-glass; and one dead lame — but he managed to keep up.

As the band approached him, belching music out of itself, Dad began to prance like an old horse. Dad had been a soldier himself. He nearly went to the Crimea — so he said. He often regretted not having gone, too. Sometimes we regretted too.

Just opposite Dad the officer in command — a heavily-medalled person — sitting cautiously astride a well-polished horse — lifted his voice and yelled: “Shoul-dah-UM!” And “Shoulder arms!” was yelled all along the line. Those who had been in engagements before manoeuvred their rifles calmly — others dropped them in the street and excitedly groped for them again, and brought trouble and confusion to the ranks.

Dad was carried away with enthusiasm. He stepped from the pavement and joined the volunteers. He walked beside the band, carrying his hat in his hand. The volunteers marched down George-street and entered the Botanic Gardens. A crowd, composed mostly of girls and old women and noisy, ragged youngsters of the street, followed.

In the gardens there was great excitement. A lot of big guns were there mounted on wheels, all pointing steadily at the people on Kangaroo Point. And talk about soldiers! talk about Aldershot or the handful of men Bonaparte dropped returning from Moscow! The grounds were swarming

with them. They were moving in all directions marching in file, in line, in groups, and marching right at each other. And the generals, and majors, and sergeantmajors, and adjutants and lieutenant-colonels that were there! You'd wonder bow they all found uniforms.

The generals careered round on horseback, flopping and bumping about in the saddle and shouting out orders. They were all in authority. Some yelled “Left batal-yarn!” at one end of the field, another “Compa-n aay lead-ahs!” at the other end. Several others — “Second di-visharn, r-right incline — for-r-ward — harlt - dress up!” Several score others — “R-r-rightwhee-YEL!” And all at the same time. 'Twas a stirring scene — a memorable sight. Dad reckoned he would never forget it.

Finally the forces combined and formed a huge square, two deep. They prepared to fire a *feu de joie*. The majors and colonels and all the rest galloped about inside the square. You'd think word had just been received of an invasion.

After numerous warnings and words of advice from different officers, the order was given to “Pre-sent!”

Every rifle in the lines was instantly pointed at the clouds — except about half-a-dozen in the rear ranks. They were unconsciously levelled at the head of the man in front. Several youthful warriors, when their fingers felt the triggers, trembled with excitement, and one let his rifle go off before it was time and made a gorgeous officer swear and the spectators laugh.

“Fire!” was the next order, and the rifles went off like a lot of crackers — “bang ! — bang ! — bang!” all along the line. Some of the horses reared; several officers fell out of their saddles; a man in the front rank reeled about and fell down; the man behind had shot him in the ear, blowing it all away and blackening his neck and jaw with powder. Two others grew confused and couldn't pull the triggers at all, but they persisted and got their weapons to go off when the rest had finished firing.

The wounded soldier was taken away by the ambulance, and Dad followed “to see what they were going to do to him.”

The forms of Dad and Mother became familiar to residents of Wickham Terrace. When they were passing people used to stare out at them and grin, and some would run out and lean over the garden fence and watch them going along. With the boys round there, too, Dad became a great favourite. They used to call him “Ironbark” and advise him to get his hair cut, and often they would follow him along and aim orange peel at him till he turned and glared. Then they would pretend to be frightened, and skedaddle.

One evening at dusk Dad and Mother, after spending an enjoyable day in

Queen-street, were mooching along the Terrace making for the boarding-house. Dad was carrying a pair of glass vases Mother had purchased for Sarah, and was wondering how Dave and Joe were getting along at home. Mother had a new umbrella in one hand and a brown paper parcel in the other.

Suddenly a snake wriggled across the footpath, almost from under their feet. Dad got a great start. He jumped back, tugging Mother with him. "A snake!" he said in a surprised tone. Mother clutched Dad's arm. But Dad never allowed a snake to escape him. He looked round for something to attack it with. Nothing was handy. Several men and a girl on a verandah near by watched interestedly. Dad placed his hand on a white fence and tried to move some of it, but all the palings were firmly nailed.

The snake glided slowly along. There was no time to lose. Dad snatched Mother's new umbrella from her hand and pounced on the reptile. The snake didn't take any notice of the blows Dad rained on it. It headed leisurely for the other side of the street, where there was some long grass and a park inside a fence. Dad jumped after it and walloped it all the way across, and smashed the umbrella into a lot of pieces, and didn't hear the roar that came from the men on the verandah. The snake reached the grass, and as it disappeared Dad heaved the vases at it, which made a great crash.

Then a lot of small boys jumped up and fled with the snake on a string. Dad stared after them. They looked round, but kept running.

"Well, I'm damned!" Dad said, turning to Mother.

XIX. THE RETURN HOME.

DAD and Mother tramped about Brisbane for three weeks, and but for meeting old Delaney dodging through the crowd one evening they might have been strolling about there yet. Dad and old Delaney were enemies at home, but when they met in Queen-street they gripped hands and rejoiced as though they were never to part any more. Dad laughed and said he didn't know Delaney was down, and inquired where he was staying. "An' how're them boys o' mine doin'?" he asked.

"Doin' splendid," Delaney said.

Dad was pleased.

"They guve great raices in yur paddick a week come Winsdy."

Dad stared and struggled for breath.

"An' they're to guve a ball to-morrer."

"Whaht?" Dad shouted, opening wide his mouth and attracting much notice — "Whaht?"

Next moment Dad was stumping up Edward-street in advance of Mother, who was compelled to trot to keep in sight. The great metropolis had no more charms for Dad. At nine o'clock the following night Dad and Mother arrived at Saddletop. Gray's cart happened to be at the station, and they were given a lift to the gate. Mother thanked the man and gave him a banana, but Dad was thinking heavily.

Sounds of music floated on the peaceful air and provoked Dad to profanity. He threw wide the big white gate, leaving Mother to close it. Dogs barked and bounded down the track, at first threatening to eat Dad, but then, recognising him, jumped for joy, and climbed and clawed all over him, heedless of kicks and curses.

Dad expressed no pleasure at seeing the house again you would never think he had been away at all. A large area of newly-ploughed land discernible in the moonlight, and a number of fresh lucerne stacks that changed the whole aspect of Ruddville, failed to attract his eye. He noticed nothing till he came to a long line of saddle-horses fastened to the fence. One had its nose in a bit of hay. Dad spotted that horse and, like a plain-turkey taking wing, threw out his arms and rushed on to the verandah.

Inside the "Prince of Wales Schottische" had just ended, and the perspiring party stood round the ball-room, ablaze with candles, listening attentively to the voices of Miss Tod and the schoolmaster's wife blending pathetically in song together.

"After the ball is o-ver," they were screeching just when Dad burst into the room.

“Wot th' devil's this?” he bellowed. (They stopped like a clock.) “Who brought all you into my house?” (Consternation.) “Out of here! out o' this — th' whole damn lot o' you.”

“Dad!” Sarah gasped, her voice scarcely audible.

Dad's enraged eye rested on the trembling form of Billy Bearup by her side. Such a howl! A brown paper parcel he held in his hand, containing a pair of heavy boots, flew at Bearup's head and struck big Mrs. McManus on the chest.

Commotion! screams! and a wild rush to escape. In the stampede Bearup was left behind, and while the little fellow frantically fought and sparred for an opening, Dad kicked at him as if he were a wallaby fast in a fence.

“Stop it!” Dave cried angrily, “don't make a fool o' — ”

But Dad silenced Dave.

“Clear out!” he roared, shoving him; “leave my house.”

Dave was inclined to resist.

“Leave th' place,” Dad yelled in a wild, broken voice, “or I'll send for th' p'lice.”

“Pshaw!” Dave hissed, and walked out.

The ejected guests secured their horses in haste and left in disorder.

Sarah and Dave and Joe, bareheaded, stood in the yard and silently stared after them. The last one passed out and the gate closed. Voices and hoof-beats died away. The neighs of a horse and the “whoop, whoop” of a night-bird came from the ironbark ridge.

“Robbed — ruined!” from the house.

The clock struck two.

“Ruinin' me! ruinin' me!” from the house again.

“Mo-poke, mo-poke,” from out the gully on the reserve.

The clock struck three.

The moon ceased to shine, and Dad to shout. Sarah dried her eyes and stole quietly to her room.

“Ah, well!” Dave said, “let it rip,” and he and Joe turned to the barn and camped with the men.

XX. OLD UNCLE.

IT was about three months after the tremendous excitement of Dad's trip to Brisbane. Things had gradually got back into their old routine; and by degrees we had patched up a peace with all our insulted guests. We were quite calm and happy. Then, one day suddenly, trouble came.

Often we had wondered if Dad had any relations in Australia. As a rule Dad rarely discussed his pedigree or bragged of his native country. Unlike hundreds of others who left home to better their condition, Dad wasn't given to boasting of the place and the people he had left behind. Dad was honest and generous.

"They're all dead now," Dad said one day, referring to his family — "all dead — but one." Then he changed the subject. Occasionally, though, he would talk freely of those who were dead, and tell us if we resembled any of them, and laugh over things they used to do. But about the surviving one Dad was reticent. He seemed to value the dead more than the living.

Harvesting in full swing; all of us busy; Dad digging potatoes to feed the men on.

An oldish, odd-looking little man with scars, a faded, famished beard, tender feet, boots of hard wrinkled leather that turned up at the toes and collected roley-poley grass, and a small calico swag on his back, greeted Dad cheerfully across the fence.

Dad straightened up and stared.

"You was diggin' a dam, last time I saw you Murty," the stranger said, crawling through the fence.

They shook hands — the odd-looking one hard and heartily, Dad almost reluctantly.

The stranger was delighted to see Dad. He complimented him on his looks and the way he carried his age. "You've got awfully like the ol' man," he said, looking at Dad again with weak eyes full of affection or something.

Dad wasn't moved much. He hardly said anything. He seemed to be thinking of a lot of things at once. The presence of the stranger appeared to flood Dad's mind with all his past errors and omissions or debts or things of that kind.

The little man cast his eyes about and in a surprised tone asked Dad if he owned "all this!"

"Oh — yes," Dad drawled restlessly.

Just then Mother came out, carrying a dish.

"Hello!" the little fellow said, "there's Ellen!" and he hastened to meet

her.

“Lookin' younger than y' did twenty year ago,” he remarked, joyously shaking Mother's hand.

“Bless me!” Mother answered, staring hard at him, “is it Peter?”

“All that's left of him!” And “Peter” placed his hands on his hips and gazed down at his boots, the tops of which were several inches below the legs of his soiled, sorrowful-looking moleskins.

Mother was pleased to meet “Peter,” and was asking where he had been all the years he was away, when Sarah, just returned from the store, came along in a riding-habit and leading her horse.

“Norah, if I ain't mistaken,” Peter said warmly, extending his hand to Sarah.

Sarah hesitated, blushed, looked at Mother, then smiled.

“Doesn't know 'er old Uncle!” Peter said with a deep grin.

Mother confirmed his claim to relationship.

“Brother to your father,” she said, looking at Sarah. Then our Uncle held out his hand again and Sarah gave him hers, for Dad's sake. Uncle shook vigorously, and, looking Sarah in the eyes, said he'd have known her from Mother if he had met her in the dark.

“You'd better come inside,” Dad said to his brother in passing with a load of potatoes on his back, and without turning his head to look at him.

Uncle followed along with Mother. Sarah went and let her horse go.

Dad didn't remain in the house any time. He left his brother in Mother's charge and went down the paddock and quarrelled with Joe.

In the evening, as we came in from work, Sarah, with a broad smile, met us in the yard and asked us to guess who was inside. It wasn't the parson or the pig-man or the governor. So we gave it up.

“Dad's brother,” she said, “and he's no more like Dad than a crow!”

“Thank God for that, anyway,” Joe said, pulling the harness angrily from off the draught horses and heaving it from him, We laughed.

“What do y' call him?” Dave asked, chuckling — “Uncle?”

We laughed again.

When we were ready and reached the door of the house we felt nervous — we were almost afraid to enter. We expected to see a man with a presence — an imposing personality — a stern old warrior like Dad himself. But when we saw the man he was all our composure suddenly returned.

Our Uncle didn't look anything except poor and dirty. We had seen plenty of him going along the roads every day of our lives. We tried to think what he could be. He looked like a “sundowner,” but he might have been a burr-cutters' cook. Being a relation, we were inclined to favour him.

We decided he was a cook.

“Don't remember any of this lot,” he said, limping across the room to shake hands with us.

We grinned and gave him ours.

“How are y', Uncle?” Joe said, shaking him several times violently; “pleased t' meet y'; glad you've” — (Uncle hollered and pulled to free himself from Joe's grip) — “come to see us!”

“Lord Harry!” Uncle said, and returned to his corner with tears in his eyes. Then we all took our places at the table and stared at our Uncle and grinned at one another.

Mother and Sarah engaged Uncle Peter in conversation. Dad didn't take any notice of him. We couldn't make Dad out. We expected he would be overcome with joy. But he didn't show any delight at all. He looked morose and surly.

“You going to have meat?” he asked, glaring at Bill.

Bill didn't hear him. Bill was gaping at Uncle.

“You going to have meat?” Dad's voice shook the things on the table and made Mother nervous.

Joe laughed. Dad glared at Joe, but suppressed his wrath when Mother called “Father,” and savagely slashed at the joint.

Dad didn't ask his brother what he would have. He just piled meat and potatoes on a plate and sent it along to him.

In the middle of the meal Uncle apologised to Mother for the old clothes he was wearing. “Out west,” he explained between mouthfuls, “we ain't so p'tic'lar; no one thinks o' clothes there. He can tell y' that,” pointing to Dad with his fork. But Dad neither endorsed nor denied Uncle's explanation.

When Uncle had finished he didn't sit back and talk old times with Dad. He strolled out and stretched himself on the verandah, and at intervals made remarks about the stars. After a while he found fault with the verandah boards.

“Too 'ard f' me!” he said, and crept down the steps and lay on the grass.

A useless old cattle-dog of Dad's joined him, and they made friends. He said he had seen the time when he would have given ten pounds for Rover. Joe offered him the brute for five bob.

Mother prepared a bed for Uncle, and came and told him where to find the room when he was ready to turn in.

Uncle laughed. Mother's idea of hospitality seemed to amuse him.

“A bed,” he chuckled. “I hav'n't slep' in one for forty year!”

Old Uncle went off to the barn and made a bed for himself out of the empty bales. In the morning he was out early and watched the milking going on. After breakfast he dodged about and took an interest in the place.

Different from other people who came to see us, Uncle required no waiting on or running after. Whenever he saw anyone at work he made for the spot and offered to give a hand. When he finished helping one he went to the next. We had never seen anyone so willing. But Dave wouldn't accept any assistance from him. Dave said it was a mean thing to let him work when he was only on a visit. Joe didn't hold the same views as Dave. Joe had Uncle almost bursting himself during the heat of the day, and in the afternoon he handed him his pitchfork and asked him "if he didn't mind" to fork-up while he went up the paddock to run a horse in.

"Certainly," old Uncle said, and went at it like a young colt.

With the first sheaf he tossed up, Uncle nearly knocked off the dray the man who was loading. The man glared down at Uncle, but didn't say anything. Next attempt Uncle put a prong of the fork into the man's leg. The man yelled; then he swore and nearly unloaded the dray throwing sheaves at Uncle's head.

Dave smoothed matters over and Uncle continued. But he seemed to have no wind. He began to flounder. The sheaves got heavier and heavier, till at last Uncle couldn't put them on the dray at all. He kept looking anxiously round to see if Joe was returning. But Joe didn't get the horse in till night.

Next day Uncle didn't go into the paddocks. He found a lot of things required attention about the house, and put in some time in the kitchen. The day following he put in all his time in the kitchen.

Three weeks went by, and we began to wonder how long Uncle intended staying. We asked Mother, but she hadn't any idea.

Three months passed. Old Uncle was still with us. He mostly lived in the kitchen now. Took all his meals there in company with the dog, and waited on himself. From the dining-room we could hear him chuckling and talking to Rover. To us he became the subject of remark and amusement; to Dad he was an irritant. Sometimes Mother would show compassion for him, and in a half-hearted sort of way she'd reproach Dad for not inviting him to the table.

"Did I tell him to eat there?" Dad would snort. "If he likes it, let 'im!"

Now and again, though, Dad would relent. "What d' y' want buryin' y'self out here f'?" he'd say to Uncle; "why th' devil can't y' eat inside like anyone else?"

But old Uncle would only shake his head and say, "Go on, go on; it's all right."

If any one else asked him why he ate in the kitchen, though, he would sneer and say he hadn't a dress suit.

Years went by. Uncle Peter was one of us. He owned the kitchen and most of the barn. Somehow we were not proud of our Uncle. We knew we should have loved him and all that sort of thing, and sometimes felt remorse; but when Sarah, who taught Sunday school and believed in loving her enemies, couldn't endear herself to him, we were consoled. Uncle was a bigger nuisance to us than the Bathurst burr. The burr we had to eradicate, but there was no way of ridding ourselves of old Uncle. He wouldn't ride on a flash horse or go about where any trees were likely to fall, and we didn't like to murder a relation. He was always in good spirits, though, and nothing ever seemed to go wrong with him. It was all the same to Uncle whether corn was bringing five shillings or five pence. He took his meals just as heartily.

Old Uncle was always at his best when any visitors came to the house. He would be first to show out — with patches and long stitches all over him, too! He would take charge of the visitors' horses if they had any, and fasten them to the fence. When they were settled inside having tea, he would hobble in and ask if their horses had had water or if any of them would pull away. Then he'd loiter at the door and pass remarks about the crops and the weather, till Mother felt forced to ask him to have a cup of tea. Uncle would. Then he'd sit down to it and be one of the company, and lead the conversation into family history, and rake up things that needn't have been mentioned at all, and make Sarah uncomfortable.

In Uncle, Sarah had an everlasting grievance. We could forget him sometimes, but with Sarah he was always present.

“Can't you give him something to do that will keep him down the paddock?” she said to Dad one day.

“Do?” Dad yelled; “what th' devil can he do? Could he ever do anything?”

Joe sympathised with Sarah. He said: “Get him to crawl up a hollow log after something, Sal: then you run and block the hole!”

There were times, though, when old Uncle might have been useful to us — when he might have harnessed a horse or chopped wood or chased calves out of the greenstuff. But he never did any of these things; he was a hopeless waster, not worth his salt.

Uncle caught a heavy cold one winter, and for several weeks we were all anxious about him. We wondered if he would die. But he didn't. He cured himself with a medicine he made from a common herb growing round the barn.

It was a great blow to us. We cut down every scrap we could find of that herb, and burnt it.

For seven years old Uncle stayed with us. Stayed till one Christmas Sandy and Kate came to spend the week. Uncle liked their style, so he said, and decided to go back to Sleepy Creek with them. When we saw he really was going we felt that for once, anyway, the Lord had remembered us. But we were sorry for Sandy and Kate!

XXI. THE WATTLE-BLOSSOM BRIDE.

THERE was to be a wedding at Sandy's place, at Sleepy Creek, and the neighbours got excited over it. Wild Dick Saunders, from Saddletop, who had selected on Sleepy, and lived by himself in a disorderly humpy nearly large enough to hold several dray-loads of corn, and did his own cooking and washing, decided to get married.

Dick would have got married two or three times while he was at Saddletop, but for the girls that were there. Not that they wouldn't have him; but they were all sentiment and formality — there was no business about any of them; their idea of matrimony was seven or eight years' hugging and mugging and riding about on Sunday, then a ring and a ceremony and a big dance, and off up the country.

Dick wasn't a cove to shilly-shally about things and waste time; he was imperative and impatient, and couldn't fool and poke round anyone's place to find out if he was liked by the old man and the brothers and the little sister and the dog and the pet kangaroo, and approved by the old woman, before telling the girl what he was after.

On two or three occasions Dick got disgusted with himself and single life, and knocked off work in the middle of the day, and rode straight to a place where there was a marriageable daughter, and hung his horse to the fence and walked right in, and regardless of the presence of the parents and two strangers asked the girl in a loud voice if she would have him, and with an ugly frown on his face stood waiting her answer. And when the girl opened her eyes and stared and blushed and giggled, and shook her head, and referred him to Mary Molloy or someone of The Gap, he drew nasty comparisons between himself and other young chaps in the district, and warned her that she might "do a d—n sight worse," and went home and remained single.

But Minnie Simpson, a one-eyed girl with two front teeth missing and a large head of faded, straggled hair and a round fat face, employed in the hotel at Sleepy Creek township, saw something in Dick one day and risked him. Dick risked her too.

Kate took great interest in Dick's wedding. Mad on weddings, Kate was. Most women are; that's why so many of them get married. Kate placed all her house at Dick's disposal, and spent days cleaning and cooking — making sandwiches and pumpkin pies and prickly-pear tarts; and, because there was no wood chopped, grumbled and growled all the time at Sandy and Uncle.

Sandy got tired of Kate's nagging at last, and the day before the wedding he chopped a whole dray load of wood; and everything Kate cooked that day got burnt and was no good. She perspired, too, every time she took a batch of stuff from the oven, and walked in and out slashing her apron about, and whined, and asked Sandy if he had tried to bring the very worst wood there was in the paddock. It's always the way with a woman! — leave her no wood, and she'll cook anything; give her plenty of it and she'll burn the inside out of the oven.

Kate papered the walls of the house, too, and put a new cover on the sofa — in fact, made the place look new. You'd think Kate was to be the bride herself!

Everyone on Sleepy Creek was invited to Dick Saunders's wedding, and all of them turned up and brought their families and their dogs. They came early, too, and hung round looking at things, at intervals engaging Sandy in fragments of conversation, and wondering how much longer the old clergyman would be turning up.

Dick himself was the only person who seemed unconcerned about the clergyman or about the arrangements, or the wedding itself for that matter. He remained on the sofa all the while with Minnie sitting on his knee, mauling her neck with his big hands and listening to her tearing the inside out of a concertina that he was getting along with her. They promised to be a devoted couple, did Dick and Minnie.

About noon the clergyman showed in sight, crawling along on a poor, downhearted-looking animal which might once have been a horse.

Sandy, in a clean shirt and a tweed coat, stepped forward and welcomed him and introduced him to his friends. The friends seemed more taken up with the steed, and stared it all over. But it didn't seem to mind. It wasn't a sensitive animal. It seemed glad it had arrived, though. 'T was a rare piece of horseflesh: it looked like the last of its tribe. There it stood without leaning against anything - its head down and its eyes closed, until you felt solemn and reverent and inclined to take your hat off.

Uncle, who had not had time to clean himself, hobbled up like a disreputable hotel-groom, saluted the clergyman, and taking hold of the bridle-reins with both hands pulled the animal across to the shed, and quarrelled with it because it showed signs of life when it saw hay there and shoved him about with its shapeless head when he started to take the bridle off. But when one of Sandy's old mares approached to see what it was, and the skeleton put its ears back skittishly and assumed a rakish attitude, Uncle took kindly to it. He chuckled and threw it a bundle of hay.

It did eat, too! — looked as if it would have tackled a feed of bark or bottles with gratitude. When Uncle saw the appetite it had he gathered up

the cart-saddle and winkers and some bags that were lying about, and put them in the shed. Then, with an old rag of a coat of his own hanging on his arm, he returned to the company.

Dick Saunders, with his long hair and whiskers combed, came out.

"This is the chap!" Sandy said, and the clergyman smiled and extended his soft white hand to Dick and asked how he was.

Dick claimed to be "tip-top," but didn't know how he would feel directly.

Uncle guffawed and made several suggestive remarks about weddings. Dick frowned on Uncle and called him a turnip. Fire and water came into Uncle's little red eyes, and if Dick had been a small man and less like a bushranger there might easily have been an inquest in place of a wedding. The clergyman spoke to Sandy, and they both went inside. Dick and the others strolled over to the shed, smoking. When Dick set eyes on the clergyman's horse he stood — spell-bound!

"Holy!" he said. Then he walked up to it and said "\Shoo!" and threw up his arms. But it wasn't a nervous beast; it didn't lift its head from the hay.

"Should have been kept for a sire!" Dick remarked. The others laughed.

Then Dick stole the hay and ran round the yard with it. The brute wearily pursued him, whinnying imploringly for the fodder. It was a grand entertainment. Dick kept it going until Sandy called out from the back door that they were waiting; then he threw the hay to the brute and walked off, hitching his trousers and girthing himself up as he approached the door.

Inside was a great crowd. Dick could scarcely get in. At the table sat the clergyman, calm, composed; a leather bag, some papers, and a bottle of ink rested innocently before him. The guests, expectant and reverent-looking, stared at him nervously — only their breathing was audible.

"Where's she?" Dick said, glaring all round the room.

Riley, who could never keep his tongue quiet, ejaculated, "Elorped!" and made Mrs. Riley and Daley's wife shriek, and destroyed the solemnity.

The clergyman motioned Dick into position. Dick, who had been coached for several weeks in the ceremony by Sandy, dropped on his knees; but Daley, who had been married three times and knew more of the business than Sandy did, poked him up again. Dick stared and looked awkward, and stumbled about like a horse being shunted in a truck. At last Mrs. Harris and Kate, in charge of the bride, processioned from the bedroom.

Everyone got a surprise — even Dick. You wouldn't have known Minnie in the rig-out she had accumulated round herself. Her hair was curled, and she wore a white dress all tucks and bespattered with ribbon and bows of different colours. Her head was a mass of wattle blossom, and she carried a huge bunch of it in her hand. She smelt of wattle blossom — you could

scarcely see her dress for it — she was all wattle blossom, in fact; it was a distinct triumph of Nature over Art. A more interesting bride couldn't be presented to anyone's imagination. She would have looked well in a garden.

The bride took her place beside her Dick, and dropped her head modestly and giggled. Dick fumbled about with his big hairy paw till he found her hand and clung to it. And there they stood, the embodiment of love and courage. Our opinions differed as to which of the two was the more courageous.

Riley, in a loud whisper, reminded the guests of the “fust kiss,” but none shifted or made any preparations to rob Dick of his rights. Perhaps it was because they knew Dick. Perhaps because they knew Minnie.

The clergyman took the floor, and the marriage proceeded. Save the cleric's resonant voice, not a sound was heard inside. But outside, beneath the window and under the verandah roof — there were no floor-boards connected with Sandy's verandah — Uncle commenced rattling a tin-dish about.

A short prayer was concluded while Uncle splashed and bubbled in a dish of water.

“You take this woman to — ”

Uncle, stripped to the waist, and holding his hands wide and his head low to the ground, while water ran off him, appeared at the front door and made efforts to catch Kate's eye.

“ — to be your wedded wi — ”

“The old bloke wants a towel,” Dick jerked out across his shoulder to Kate, who was behind him.

The guests grinned, and strained their necks to see where Uncle was. But Kate paid no attention — she had eyes only for the bride.

Uncle withdrew, growling, and splashed more water over himself.

The clergyman repeated his question.

“I do!” Dick responded with decision, then said things after the cleric.

Uncle showed himself at the door again with soap in his eyes and on his whiskers, and more water dripping off him.

“For better, for worse — ”

Uncle beckoned Kate with his wet finger. Kate had no respect for Uncle.

“ — richer, for poorer?”

“Just as she stands!” Dick said.

Uncle broke into a loud interested chuckle. “Just as she stands!” he echoed noisily, then turned away and laughed with himself under the window.

The clergyman's horse sauntered round to see what was going on. It

stood with its head under the verandah, looking in casually.

The clergyman asked for the ring. Dick stared at him, then released the bride's hand and felt himself all over; finally he said he hadn't one. It looked as if something would go wrong. But Kate, always good in emergency, slipped her wedding-ring off and handed it to Dick.

“Where'll I put it?” Dick asked — “on her thumb?”

The guests laughed; the bride tittered and held out the proper finger to receive the ring. Uncle, with a glow on his face like fresh meat, came to the door again, smiling, and wiping himself on a bag.

The clergyman began to bless the alliance. Uncle lowered his head devotionally. The horse reached out behind Uncle, dipped its nose into the dish of water, and made a noise like a pump. Uncle turned round and kicked it in the ribs. The brute backed and threw up its head and struck it hard against the verandah roof, and the whole structure fell down on top of Uncle and the dogs.

There was great excitement then! Some of the guests rushed to congratulate the happy couple, and some of them ran out to extricate Uncle. Uncle was unconscious for a few minutes, and when he came to he coughed violently. He coughed up cobwebs and dust and scraps of bark. The horse walked a few yards away and took a fit of coughing too. It coughed up the soap.

When the “breakfast” was over, Dick and his bride left. The guests chased them out the slip-rails with old boots and bags and things. After that I don't know how they got on. We left too.

THE END.
