PALS

Title: Pals
Young Australians in Sport and Adventure

Author: Joseph Bowes

Release Date: December 08, 2013 [eBook #44369]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PALS ***

Produced by Al Haines.

[image]

Cover art

[Frontispiece: With incredible difficulty Yellow Billy managed to pass his whip thong twice round the brute's

neck—*See p.* 188. **(missing from book)]**

PALS
YOUNG AUSTRALIANS IN SPORT AND ADVENTURE

BY
JOSEPH BOWES

WITH EIGHT FULL-PAGE COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN MACFARLANE

LONDON: JAMES GLASS
28 NEWGATE STREET
1910

CONTENTS

CHAP.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The star-crowned height,
The wind-swept plain, the dim blue peak,
The cold white light,
The solitude spread near and far
Around the camp-fire's tiny star,
The horse-bell's melody remote,
The curlew's melancholy note,
Across the night.

GEORGE ESSEX EVANS

PALS

CHAPTER I
BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

"Happy season of virtuous youth, when shame is still an impassable barrier, and the sacred air cities of hope have not shrunk into the mean clay hamlets of reality; and man by his nature is yet infinite and free."—CARLYLE.

"Comin' over to-night, Tom?"

"By jings! I'd like to, Joe, but dad said this morning he was going to shell corn to-night. You know what that means. What's on?"

"Oh! Sandy's stayin' in for the night; so I thought of gettin' Jimmy Flynn an' Yellow Billy so's we could have bushrangers, an' stick up the coach by moonlight. If they can't come, Sandy an' I'll go 'possumin' in the slaughter-house paddock."

"I say! what a jolly lark the bushranging'd be. How'd you manage it, Joe?"

"We've planned that out all right. We'd get Jimmy Flynn's billy-goat cart an' the billies. He'd be mailman, an' it'd be gold-escort day. Yellow Billy'd be the trooper; he's got a pistol, you know. He'd ride the roan steer he's broken in.

Then you, Sandy, an' I'd be Ben Bolt's gang. We'd do a plant in a lonely spot along the road an' surprise 'em. I'd tackle Billy, you'd look after Jimmy, Sandy 'd collar the mailbags and gold boxes, and then scoot with the loot. I think it'd be better to shoot Billy, so's to make it a bit more real; that's what Ben Bolt'd do."

"But, Joe, where'd we get the guns?"

"I'd get father's. You'd have to make believe with a nulla-nulla. We could stick a boomerang in our belts, it'd look like pistols in the dark."

"But I say, Joe, ole chap, you wouldn't really shoot Billy?" said Tom in a tone that savoured both of fear and scepticism.

"You're a precious muff, Hawkins! I was just kidding you. No, you stupid, it's all gammon. The noise the powder 'll make 'll scare the seven senses outer Billy."

"By golly! it'll be crummie enough. Put it off till to-morrow, Joe, an' I'll come."

"Can't be done, my boy. Sandy'll not be here, for one thing. Besides, I have to pull father down to Yallaroi Bend to-morrow. It's his service night there. Sorry you can't come, Tom. We'll have to do our best without you."

"Oh Moses! to think that I can't join!" groaned Tom. "Look here, Joe, I—I'll do a sneak. I'll be here somehow, you may bet your Sunday breeks," continued the eager lad, as he stepped into the little "flat-bottom" boat which had brought him over.

"Joe!" he shouted when he had rowed some distance from the shore. "I'll give a cooee if I can get, an' two cooees if the way's blocked. So don't start till you hear."

"Right-o!"

The place where these boys lived, moved, and had their being was a district famed for its fertility, on one of the northern rivers in New South Wales.

The river itself had many of the elements of nobility and beauty as, taking its rise in the snowy heights of the New England ranges, it clove its way eastward, finally debouching into the blue waters of the Pacific. The river-flats formed magnificent stretches of arable lands; too rich, indeed, for such cereals as wheat and oats, for their rank growth rendered them liable to the fatal rust.

Here, however, was the home of the maize, the pumpkin, the sweet potato, the orange, the lemon, the plantain. Here too, the natural sequence, in a way, of the prolific corn and the multitudinous pumpkin, were reared and flourished the unromantic pig.

Fed on pumpkins, with skim milk for beverage, topped off with corn, the Australian grunter—whether as delicious, crisp bacon, or posing as aristocratic ham—produces flesh with a flavour fit to set before a king.

Away from the river-flats the land becomes undulating and ridgy, and well

grassed for cattle runs. In the scrub belts, running back from the river and its affluents into the hilly country, are to be found valuable timbers, hard and soft; especially that forest noble, the red cedar.

Cattle runs of large extent exist in the back-blocks, formed in the early days by that class of men to whom Australia owes so much; the men who to-day are vilified by those not worthy to black their boots: the hardy, adventurous, courageous, indomitable pioneer, who more often than not laid down his life and his fortune in the interest of Colonial expansion and occupation.

At intervals along the river-banks are small settlements, dignified by the name of townships. Tareela, the principal village, skirted both sides of the river, and was connected by a ferry. Here were located the Government offices for the district, together with the stores, hotels, school, etc.

Joe Blain, the minister's son, was the leader of the village lads. He had two pals, who were inseparable from him: Sandy M'Intyre, the squatter's son, whose father owned Bullaroi, a cattle station situated a few miles from the town, and Tom Hawkins, a farmer's son, the youngest of the trio. These boys gave tone and direction to the fun and frolic of the settlement. Of them it is sufficient to say at present that they were not pedestal lads.

At this time a noted bushranger and his mate were raiding the settlements. All police pursuit was futile, owing to the resourcefulness of the 'rangers. They had a keen knowledge of the open country and the mountain ranges. Furthermore, they were generally mounted on blood horses, usually "borrowed" from the surrounding station studs.

These men had many sympathisers among the lawlessly inclined, and, strange to say, among law-abiding settlers. The "bush-telegraph" was an institution in those days. Certain friends of the 'rangers kept them posted up in the movements of the police, sometimes by word of mouth, at others by writings on paper or bark, which were deposited in rock crevices or in tree hollows, known only to the initiated. Sometimes a young lad, or even a girl, would ride scores of miles across country to give them warning.

The police were not wanting in bush lore or courage, and in the end invariably ran their quarry to earth. But an outlaw often had a long career in crime, owing to the aid given, ere he was trapped. Thanks to closer settlement, the advance of education, and the general use of the electric telegraph, bushranging has become a matter of history. The species is now to be found only in the stage

melodrama, the itinerating waxwork show, or embalmed in literature.

CHAPTER II
"THE BUSHRANGERS

"*Poins*: Tut! our horses they shall not see. I'll tie them in the wood; our visors we will change after we leave them; and, sirrah, I have cases of buckram for the nonce to immask our noted outward garments.

"*Prince*: But I doubt they will be too hard for us."

SHAKESPEARE, Henry IV.

After leaving Tom Hawkins, or, to put it more correctly, after Tom had paddled away in his punt, Joe Blain proceeded to look up Jimmy Flynn, the blacksmith's apprentice, and Yellow Billy, a half-caste youth, whose father followed the occupation of a timber-getter in the ranges. Yellow Billy was generally employed as yard boy at the Travellers' Best Inn, and a rough time he often had, especially when the timber-getters were dissolving their hard-earned gold in alcohol.

One of Billy's duties was to milk the cows and tend the calves. Among the latter was a yearling steer, which he broke in and rode on the quiet. Many an hour's frolic the boys had in the moonlight in riding the steer. This animal had a good slice of the rogue in its composition, with a propensity for buck-jumping. When in a certain mood it would be as stubborn as a donkey and as savage as a mule.

After standing, say for some minutes, never budging, in spite of thwackings and tail-twistings, it would suddenly take to buck-jumping. Oh, my, couldn't it buck! Woe betide the unlucky rider when it was in this mood. Torn from his hold—a rope round its brisket—one moment behold him sprawling over its back, the next whirling through space, finally deposited with more force than elegance on the turf. All this, however, was great fun for the boys, who encouraged the brute in its bucking moods, each mounting in turns, to lie prone sooner or later on mother earth, amid the uproarious laughter of his fellows.

Billy was the exception. He was a born rider. Unable to shift him from its back, the brute became quite docile in his hands, and kept its tricks for the others.

Jimmy and Billy were ready and willing to fill their parts in the bill. The

former, at "knock off," went out to the town common to round his goats, and Billy promised to be ready, "steered," so to speak, by the time appointed.

The road fixed upon was the track that led out from the township to a large sawmill, distant about six miles. It was a solitary road, passing through a scrub-belt, crossing several minor creeks, threading its way over a rocky ridge, winding through a rather wild defile, and ending at the mill; the sort of place, indeed, to present numerous opportunities for the criminal enterprise on hand. A spot where one could get "nice and creepy," as Joe said to Yellow Billy, much to that young man's disquiet.

The plan of campaign was simple enough. Joe, Tom, and Sandy were to set out as soon as possible after sundown and choose their spot for attack; while Jimmy was to drive the Royal Billy-goat Mailcart, with Trooper Yellow Billy a little in advance, as per custom.

The embryo bushrangers, unfortunately, had only one horse between them; the one Sandy rode to school. Mr. Blain's horse, on which the boys counted, was being used by the minister to take him to a moonlight service some distance out from the river. It was settled, therefore, that the three boys should bestride Sandy's stout cob, which was well able to carry these juvenile desperadoes.

"Mother!" shouted Joe, as he strode into the house in the late afternoon, from the wood-pile, where he had been chopping the next day's supply, "we're going to have grand fun to-night."

"What sort of fun, my son?"

"Bushranging along the sawmill road. Can I go mother? We've got such a grand plot."

"Well, I don't mind; but don't be out late."

"S'pose I can have the gun?"

"The g-u-n!"

"Yes, mother. No need to fear. It's all play."

"Well, don't load it."

"Only with powder to make a bang."

"I don't like the idea, my boy. Gun accidents often happen in play. You remember Jim Andrews——"

"Oh yes, mother, but that's different! It was loaded."

In the end, owing to the boy's importunity, Mrs. Blain reluctantly consented.

Early tea being duly dispatched, the boys made the necessary preparations for their dark deed. Joe produced a pair of knee-boots, the some time property of his father. He made them fit by sticking rags into the toes. He thrust his trousers' legs into the boot-tops, and wound a red scarf round his waist, through which he stuck a boomerang and nulla-nulla. A 'possum-skin cap adorned his head. His

final act was to fasten on a corn-tassel moustache, and to strap his gun across his back. The broad effect of the costume was to make this youthful outlaw a cross, as it were, between Robinson Crusoe and a Greek brigand.

Indeed he quite terrified his two sisters, as he suddenly entered the sitting-room to the accompaniment of a blood-curdling yell. This the girls match with a shriek that wakes up the sleeping baby, bringing the mother in with a rush.

For a moment Mrs. Blain, seeing Joe in the half-light, thought some ruffian had entered.

"It's very thoughtless and wrong of you, Joe, to frighten your sisters. I—I—I'm quite angry with you——"

"Very sorry, mater," said Joe, with a serio-comic air. "I only meant to give them a start."

The girls, however, began to laugh, Joe looked such an oddity. They turned the tables on him by quizzing him most unmercifully. At last our young hero was very glad to beat a retreat to the backyard, where he found Sandy busy in saddling the horse.

Joe's confederate had roughened himself as much as circumstances permitted. In lieu of a skin cap he tied a big handkerchief round his hat, and stuck a couple of turkey-tail feathers through it. He had manufactured a brace of pistols out of short lengths of bamboo, with corn-cobs, stuck in bored holes at an angle, to form the stocks. These, with a boomerang and nulla-nulla slung at either side, and a short spear fixed in his belt at the back and standing over his head, made him in appearance more like a red Indian than a Colonial free-booter.

"All ready, Hawkeye?"

"Yes, ole pal. The mustang is waiting, and the brave will vault into the saddle at Thundercloud's word of command," answered Hawkeye in bastard Cooperese. Fenimore of that ilk was Sandy's favourite author.

"Hast thou heard the signal of Red Murphy?" said Joe, falling into the strain of speech.

"No, Thundercloud. No sound from our brither of the hither shore hath been borne on the wings of the wind across the——"

"Oh, stow that rot, Sand—Hawkeye! I wonder?——"

"Yon's the cry of the chiel," broke in the would-be brave, as at that moment the cooee of Tom Hawkins, alias Red Murphy, rose in the still air, faint from the distance, but distinct.

"A single cooee! Rippin! he's comin'. Let's mount and wait at the landing."

Hardly had the boys reached the river-bank ere Red Murphy appeared, attired much as the others, with the addition of an old blunderbuss belonging to his father.

"It's all right, boys! Hurroar! Dad broke the handle of the corn-sheller this

evening, and sent me over with it to the blacksmith's. I'm to wait till it's mended. Wait a jiff an' I'll be with you," cried he, as he ran to the smithy, returning as fast as his legs could bring him, with the news that the broken handle could not be repaired under three hours owing to other urgent work.

Joe rapidly detailed the plan, informing Tom, at the same time, that his name and character were to be that of Red Murphy, one of the blood-thirstiest and most rapacious cut-throats in the Colonies.

CHAPTER III
A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER

"*Falstaff*: I am a rogue if I were not at half-sword with a dozen of them two hours together. I have 'scaped by miracle. I am eight times thrust through the doublet; four through the hose; my buckler cut through; my sword hacked like a handsaw *ecce signum*. I never dealt better since I was a man; all would not do."—SHAKESPEARE, *Henry IV*.

Joe had barely made his explanations before the rumbling of the approaching cart was heard. It was the Royal Mail starting on its adventurous trip.

"Time to be off, pals!" cried the leader. "Now then, Hawkeye, whip 'em up."

Off started the trio, Thundercloud, Hawkeye, and Red Murphy; each delivering a blood-curdling yell which rang up and down the street, as they passed through it at a smart canter. It had never fallen to the lot of horse, before, to bear upon its back at the same time three such ferocious outlaws, bent on so diabolical an errand. Behind them, and at a slower pace, came the Royal Mail goatcart, drawn by four strong billies, skilfully driven by coachman Jimmy, and attended by Trooper Billy astride his cud-chewing steed.

After leaving the township the road skirted the river for a mile or so, then, crossing a plank bridge, bore away to the hills. The silver moon shone from the clear sky through the pure air, making the tree shadows as they lay across the road to resemble fallen timber. The nocturnal 'possum, having ventured to the ground to feed upon the tender grass, scudded up the trees, frightened by the rumbling vehicle and the baaing steeds. The thud of paddy-melon[#] and wallaby could be distinctly heard, as they smote the earth in their jumping movements; while from the heights of some lofty tree the mopoke[#] tolled his mournful cry.

[#] "Paddy-melon," a small marsupial or pouch-bearing mammal.

[#] "Mopoke," the Australian crested goat-sucker.

The coach had now passed the three-mile creek, and still there was no sound of disturbing element. The coachman and trooper, having intelligence to the effect that the 'rangers were "out," and had threatened to "stick" up the gold-escort, were on the *qui vive*. They surmised that the attack would come in the scrub-belt, and about the spot where the creek intersected. Here the tall, overhanging trees, interlaced as they were with a thick vinous growth, effectually barred the moon's rays.

It was the ideal spot for ambush, and the hearts of the boys beat faster, and a nervous apprehension amounting to fear seized them, as they passed among the shadows. Everything had a distorted appearance, and again and again they trembled, as it were, on the verge of attack. They had chatted freely until the darkness of the scrub closed in upon them. Under its oppression, and by reason of the dread uncertainty, what had before seemed to be only a prime lark now presented itself as a grim reality.

They drove on slowly now, conversing only in whispers, for the night silences, the deepening shadows, and the unseen before them, all contributed to the mental mood which affected the boys. The creek banks and bed, save for a solitary moon-ray which silvered the rippling water, were enwrapped in thick darkness. Pulling up at the brink, the boys held a short conversation.

"Goin' ter cross, Jimmy?"

"I—I—s'pose so, Billy. Measly black ahead, ain't it?"

"You're not frightened, are you?"

"Wot! me? No fear! Y'are yourself!"

"I like that! Wot's to be frightened of?"

Yet the boys, if truth be told, were a good deal alarmed by the unwonted darkness and stillness.

"Well, s'pose we'd better be gettin' on. Don't care how soon we git outer this hole. You cross ahead, Billy, an' do a bit o' scoutin'. I'll wait here till you git up the bank on the other side."

Yellow Billy didn't like the prospect, and would have proposed turning back, but was afraid of being called a coward. Therefore, despite an apprehension of the darkness, accentuated by his aboriginal strain, and very much against his will, the half-caste plunged down the creek bed, and mounted the other side without let or hindrance, greatly to his surprise and relief.

But where are the 'rangers?

Of them the darkness gave no token and the silence is unbroken. Jimmy

had some difficulty in getting his leaders to tackle the creek. It was only after he left the cart, seized their heads, and half-dragged them into the water that he effected his purpose. The scrub thinned out shortly after passing the creek, and the spirits of the boys rose with the increasing moonlight.

"They missed a grand charnce at the crick, Billy!"

"By dad, they did that! I wonder where they are. P'raps they've given us the slip."

The road took a sudden turn just here, leading over a rocky ridge. At a farther sharp turn, under the lee of a bank, a big log lay across the road.

"Hello, here's a go, Jimmy! You'll have to drive round. No! you can't do that. Wait a moment an' I'll——"

"Bail up!"

The cry, crisp and startling, rang out, as three figures darted from the shadow of a huge tree which stood near. Thundercloud, the leader of the band of bushrangers, pointed his gun at the driver. Hawkeye made a dash at the trooper, while Red Murphy seized hold of the leading billies.

"Hands up!" cried Thundercloud in the highest style of bushranging. "Your money or your life!"

Trooper Billy was not disposed to yield without a struggle, and at the first cry he whipped out his pistol, firing at his aggressor point blank, missing the leader but hitting his confederate, Hawkeye, who tumbled down with a loud squeal, as unlike an Indian war-whoop as it is possible to imagine. Simultaneously, Thundercloud discharged his gun at Jimmy the coachman, who, instead of putting his hands up at the challenge, began to lash the billies, and had just turned them off the log, when—pop, crash! went the two weapons.

And now the unforeseen occurred. The steer and the billies bolted! Down the ridge and along the road they dashed at breakneck speed; the steer roaring and kicking, the four strong billies baaing, and neither driver nor rider could control the brutes. Away they scurried along the rough bush-track, the cart bumping and rocking over the ruts; every jump of the trap bringing a fresh bleat from the fear-stricken goats.

After racing along for nearly a mile and finding his steed unmanageable, getting frightened too, Yellow Billy slipped over the stern, and by good luck dropped upon his feet. It was different with Jimmy, who gallantly hung on to the billies. The creek was what he most feared, and it was very close now. He had, however, got a pull on the beasts, and they were slackening a little, but, as ill-luck would have it, on going down a gully one of the wheels caught a tree root, and in a jiffy capsized the cart, sending the driver head over heels into a clump of bracken.

The incident gave fresh impetus to the runaways, who rushed on baaing;

dashing at length down the steep incline of the creek, the cart righted itself as it tumbled adown the gradient. They tore over the stream and up the bank, finally leaving the track, and getting boxed up in the scrub.

After lying in a stunned condition for a few minutes, Jimmy scrambled up. But the moment he put his weight on his right foot he let out a yell, caused by the terrific pain that shot through his ankle. It was unbearable, and he tumbled down in an almost fainting condition.

Meanwhile the outlaws stood aghast at the unexpected and startling turn of events. Thundercloud was the first to recover his speech.

"Great Cæsar! who would have dreamt of a bolt? Just listen to the brutes!" as the animals tore along, baaing and roaring in a way possible only to frightened billies and calves.

"I—I—didn't know he'd loaded his pistol. I—I—I thought for sure I was a goon coon," gasped Hawkeye, who, after lying for a minute under the impression that he was mortally wounded, got up, rubbing his face and head, half terrified as his hands became wet with flowing blood, and only reassured after Joe had declared that the blood was from his nose. As a matter of fact, he had sustained a smart blow upon his prominent feature with the pistol wad; his cheeks, also, were scorched with the powder flare.

Red Murphy, who had just grasped the billies' heads when the guns were fired, was thrown down in their mad rush, and had his shins severely barked on the rocky ground.

"Drat the brutes! Oh, I say, here's a go! Listen to the beggars! Ain't they footin' it?"

"To horse! to horse, pals!" cried Thundercloud, making hasty strides to a patch of scrub where they had tied up the horse. In a few seconds the three were mounted and away with a swinging canter, adding their yells to the cries of the beasts. They were soon up to the spot where Jimmy had come to grief, when, thundering down the gully, the horse made a shy at the prostrate coachman, shooting off Thundercloud and Red Murphy. They scrambled up quickly, none the worse for their spill. Hawkeye immediately reined in his steed and rejoined his dismounted companions.

The boys were greatly concerned to find Jimmy in this condition. The affair began to assume a serious aspect. They were no longer outlaws and police: they were pals, and Jimmy was suffering intense pain from his sprained ankle. After a short consultation the boy was placed on the horse, which was led by Sandy. The others followed behind, making a somewhat mournful spectacle. In due course they reached the goatcart, now in possession of Yellow Billy, who had disentangled the team and was waiting for the others to come along. The steer meanwhile continued his career at headlong speed, until he pulled up at

the milking yards in an exhausted condition. Mrs. Blain, as the hours sped by, began to get concerned at the non-return of the boys. Concern deepened into anxiety. She became a prey to evil imaginings, as do all our dear mothers. They are lost! ... Some dreadful accident has happened! ... That gun! ... Their legs, arms, necks, are broken! And so on and on, running over the whole gamut of catastrophy.

She goes out to scan the streets, and listens with strained ears for some enheartening sound of footsteps. Lights are out in the village. Even the dogs are sleeping. No shuffle of advancing feet; no rattle of wheels as they grind in the ruts: no sound, indeed, is borne upon the night wind save the mystic noises of the flowing river, which fill the air with a deep undertone. Above this, at intervals, come the splashing sounds of the jumping fish; the smooth splash of the falling mullet, the tail flutter of the rising perch. The wood-duck's soft quack-quack, and the red-bill's chuckle, are to be heard as they move among the sedges. No landward sound!

Stay! a dark shadow swiftly steals along the earth like a spirit of evil omen, and passes through the house, across the street, as it strikes the walls. While from above comes a wail as that of a lost soul.

The poor woman quivers and shivers at the unwonted sight and sound. She knows not that the apparition is the shadow of a black swan, which is sailing high up in the heavens; it crosses the moon, and utters its melancholy note as it wings its flight to the feeding grounds. The mother is now on the outskirts of the town, under the shadows of the trees. Every leaf is a tongue; every tongue whispers—Something! which dries the throat and fills the ears with heart-thumps. "Why did I? ... That gun! ... What will father? ... Why don't they come? ... Which track? ... Hark! Yes, 'tis the galloping hoofs ... Oh, God! it is the steer! ... Riderless! ... This way, then.... On, on, on! ... At last! ..."

"Cheer up, mother ... no harm done ... Jimmy had a bit of a buster an' sprained his ankle.... Scold us, mother, but—don't cry!"

The hour is verging on midnight as five weary lads, four billies, one horse, and one thankful woman straggled into the silent township. All romance, for the moment, had gone out of bushranging.

CHAPTER IV
THE GREAT MATCH

"God bless the grilling days of cricket!
They're gone but I shall bless them ever,
For good it is to guard a wicket
By sudden wrist and big endeavour."
NORMAN GALE.

"There's a breathless hush in the close to night,
Ten to make and the match to win,
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in."
HENRY NEWBOLT.

"Hawkins, stand out!"

"Please, sir, I wasn't doin' nothin'!"

"No, you wasn't doin' nothin', but you have been talking all morning, you tiresome boy! Write out 'disobedient' three hundred times after school."

The fact is, Tom was relating the bushranging episode to a schoolmate, and, like Tom Sawyer, he "laid over" considerably in his recital. While in the act of enlarging he was brought to book in this peremptory fashion by the master, and had to do penance with as little relish as most boys.

"Sorry you can't come out and play, Tom," said Joe Blain, poking his head into the empty schoolhouse after dismissal.

"It's a beastly shame! What are you fellows up to?"

"Goin' to practise for the Dingdongla match. After that we'll have a swim."

"Oh, rot it!" grunted the chagrined prisoner.

"Say, Tom, don't forget to come along to-night an' help pick the team."

"I'll be there, never fret."

"Well, so-long. Wire in, and keep your pecker up."

Dingdongla was an up-river settlement; Tareela a down-river town. The latter named was the older and more substantial place, being the headquarters of the shipping. As a consequence it was instinct with the superior air generally to be met with in places of metropolitan pretensions. In schools, too, the down-river town had the advantage. Its school building was of sawn timber, with a shingle roof. Furthermore, it possessed two teachers, and pine desks. While, on the other hand, the up-river academy was constructed of roughly adzed slabs and a bark roof.

For the Dingdonglas to be thrashed in cricket by the Tareelians was not considered to be a disgrace. *Per contra*, their victory was a splendid achievement, and a great humiliation to their opponents. The latter was fairly beaten by the

former last season, and naught would restore their prestige save the administration of an unmitigated licking. So, at least, thought the match Committee, as they conned names, and analysed the merits of the candidates on the name list.

Needless to say, Joe, Tom, and Sandy headed the list of certainties. Yellow Billy came next; for though a very irregular attendant at school, he was a tremendous swiper when he got his eye in. Billy had dragged more than one match out of the fire.

Saturday morning broke fair. Shortly after an early breakfast a cavalcade of about twenty youthful horsemen, followed by two teachers in a gig, were scampering along the bush road to Dingdongla, distant about nine miles up the river. Oh, the merry, merry days of youth! Those are the days of the superlative mood.

It was a merry, roaring, romping, racing crowd of youngsters that tore along the bush track. They jumped fallen timber and gullies; chased the flying marsupial; and spurted in couples for short lengths. There were minor accidents, 'tis true. Pincher Putnan's horse, in a fit of pig-jumping, broke a girth, sending Pincher and saddle to mother earth. Yellow Billy's half-broken brumby fairly bolted in a race, cleared off the road, and rushed through a belt of timber at breakneck speed, towards his native haunts in the Nulla ranges. It was only the superb horsemanship of the half-caste that saved him from being dashed against the trees in the headlong flight.

In due time Dingdongla is reached. The horses are turned out in a maize stubble paddock, where is a fine picking, and the boys stroll on to the ground to have a look at the pitch.

"Whatyer think of the pitch, Joe?"

"You'll have to keep your eye skinned for shooters Rody. The ball'll keep very low. Must keep a straight bat and forward play."

The stumps, like much of the material, were home-made. The Dingdonglas had only one "spring handle"; the others were chopped out of beech boards. The Tareelians were not much better off for material. They, it is true, had two "spring handles,"—more or less battered,—and could boast a pair of wicket gloves, but for the rest were like their opponents, sans leggings and gloves. That, however, was a small item; for every boy who possessed boots doffed them, rolling his trouser legs to the knees and his shirt sleeves to the elbows.

"Got all your men, Wilson?" said Joe to the Dingdonglas' captain.

"Yes, they're all here. May as well toss for innin's, Joe."

"Right you are," responds Joe, ejecting a jet of saliva on a piece of flat wood. "Shall I toss, or you?"

"You toss, Joe."

"Call you!" cried Blain, tossing the board with a twirl skywards. "Wet or dry?"

"Wet!" called Wilson, as the wood spun in the air.

"Dry!" exclaimed Joe, as it lay on the ground with its dry side uppermost. "We've won, and go in."

"Tom," said he a moment later, "you and Yellow Billy go in first, an' you take the strike."

The batsmen were soon in their places, and the Dingdongs in the field. The innings opened fairly well for the Tareelians. Yellow Billy got quickly to work, and laid on the wood to some purpose; Tom playing carefully the while.

Facing the Dingdonglas' swift bowler, after a smart short-hit run Billy sent a well-pitched ball for four, a rattling, straight-hit drive. But in trying to repeat the stroke off the next ball he misjudged, and, skying the sphere, was easily caught.

"One wicket for twenty!" of which the half-caste contributed fifteen.

After this the troubles of the batsmen set in. The Dingdongs were strong in bowling talent, and possessed a local Spofforth, whose lightning deliveries shot and kicked in a marvellous fashion. Joe, going in fifth man, stayed the "rot" for a while, but was foolishly run out by his mate.

The Tareelians were all out in an hour for the small total of forty-seven. If the down-river boys were despondent over this score, the up-rivers were correspondingly jubilant. Going to the wickets with plenty of confidence, they rattled up ninety-nine before the last wicket fell; the captain carrying out his bat for a well-earned forty-two.

Adjournment for lunch was now made. We call it lunch by courtesy. It was a big bush feed. This repast was served in the schoolhouse, the rough desks being converted into tables, which were literally covered with good things.

The Dingdonglas' mothers were determined that, whoever won, the boys of both sides should have a rippin' feed. A stuffed sucking-pig, whose savoury odour filled the room, lay at one end. Roast wild duck and a cold pigeon-pie balanced it at the other. An immense round of spiced beef, standing in the centre of the long table, seemed to say: "You may cut and come again." Potatoes and pumpkins smoked in big tin bowls, and all the available space was filled with cakes, puddings, and pies. Needless to say, the onslaught was terrific. They were all sloggers at tuck. Meats, puddings, cakes, tea, and ginger-beer disappeared like magic.

All good things mundane, however, come to an end; especially when the good thing happens to be a dinner. And now, after divers whisperings and nudgings, up stood Captain Joe, amid the cheers of his side.

Joe was silent a moment, nervously looking up and down the board, and heartily wishing himself at the bottom of the deep blue sea. "Mr. Chairman" (ad-

dressing the local schoolmaster), "I—we—that is—us fellows from Tareela asked me to tell you—I mean to say, that—that—that—a—it gives us much pleasure—er—er—oh, hang it all!—I—I mean—er—this is the jolliest blow in the way of tuck we've ever had." Joe subsided to the rattle of the knives on the bare board. As soon as the noise ceased, Tom Hawkins jumped up and called: "Three cheers for the Dingdonglas!" which were heartily given.

Half an hour's lounge, and the battle began afresh.

"We've got fifty-two to wipe out before we start even, boys. We can do it, and score plenty more to win the game, if we keep our heads. Anyway, we must have a big try. Billy an' I'll go in first; Tom next, and then Pincher. The order of the rest of you depends on the way things turn out."

"Look here, Billy," continued the captain, as the two batsmen walked to the wickets. "They've got two slashing bowlers, but if we can manage to knock 'em out they've no one else of much account. Get your eye well in before you do any slogging."

"All right, Joe! Do me best."

"Your best means steady play and a big score. I'll take the strike."

If Joe was nervous in public speech it was not observable in action. He played Ginger Smith's fast deliveries with confidence, punishing the loose balls and blocking the straight ones. Billy, too, was playing with unwonted caution, and the score, though slowly, was surely mounting up; until after half an hour's play it stood at twenty-five, with no wickets down. There were no boundaries, and every hit was run out.

"Oh, glory, what a swipe!"

Yellow Billy had got hold of one of Ginger's leg balls with a mighty lunge. The ball seemed as if it would go on for ever, and finally rolled into a gutter. They ran six for it.

There was great cheering among the Tareelians. Mr. Simpson, who umpired, forgot for a moment his impartial office. Flinging his hat into the air, he cried, "Bravo, Billy!"

"Thirty-one an' none out. Only twenty-one to get level!"

The boys were now scoring faster; singles, twos, threes were coming with great rapidity. Joe made his first four, a sweet, square cut.

"Forty-nine an' no wickets down!"

Joe faced the new bowler. The local demon had begun to bowl wildly, and was relieved.

"They'll never bowl them!" cried young Ben Wilde, as Joe took block for the new-comer—a lad with a reputation for slow left-hand twisters. The first ball was pitched on the leg stump; just the ball for Joe's favourite leg glance.

It went for two.

”Only one to make us even!” shouted Tom to his captain. The second ball was pitched in exactly the same spot, and Joe proceeded to treat it in the same fashion. The sphere, however, had a little more twist on it than its predecessor, and, breaking on to the left bail, flicked it off.

There was a great chorus of disappointment among the Tareelians, and hearty cheers from their opponents, as the captain’s wicket fell. His twenty-one, got by true cricket, was worth twice that number by reason of the spirit of confidence he had infused.

Billy and Tom carried the score to seventy-three, when the latter was caught for ten. Pincher fell a victim to a very simple ball from an under-hand lob bowler, after making seven. Sandy gave the bowlers some trouble, and got into double figures before he retired. All this while Billy was scoring well, and, when Sandy’s wicket fell, had made fifty runs. All the boys scored less or more; and when the innings closed had compiled a total of one hundred and thirty-seven, of which Billy made seventy-one and not out. This was a grand achievement, and the half-caste was carried off the ground amid great applause.

This left the Dingdongs eighty-six runs to win, which they failed to do by seventeen runs, Sleepy Sam stumping no less than three off young Ben’s slow lobs.

There was great cheering as the victorious cricketers rode in the dusk of the evening through the main street of Tareela, after a grand day’s fun.

CHAPTER V
THE BIG FLOOD

”The day is cold and dark and dreary;
It rains, and the wind is never weary;
The vine still clings to the mouldering wall;
But at every gust the dead leaves fall,
And the day is dark and dreary.”
LONGFELLOW.

Drip, drip, drip!
Croak, croak, c-r-o-a-k!

Quack-quack, quack-quack!

"Heigho!" grunted Tom Hawkins, as he turned over sleepily in bed. "Is it ever goin' to stop rainin'?"

For some days a steady rain had been falling, soaking the ground. Every gully was a rivulet, and every depression a lake.

"Tom!" cried a feminine voice from an interior room. "Get up!"

"Bother those frogs an' ducks!" muttered the lad, full of sleep in the grey of the early morning. "Like ter choke 'em! waking fler——"

"Tom!" cried a masculine voice, as a hand rattled the door of the lad's bedroom, and a boot gave a drum-like accompaniment on the lower panel. "Git up this minit an' run the cows in, or I'll——"

But Tom had jumped out of bed as nimbly as one of the frogs, between whose croak and his father's bass voice he seemed unable, in his sleepy condition, to discriminate.

"All right, father! I'm dressing," shouted Tom, as the word "dowsing" fell on his ear. There had been times in master Tom's past when a sudden application of cold water was deemed necessary to expedite his slow movements.

"Dad's too mighty smart! Thought I'd nick him with that button," growled Tom, as he stuck his legs into his pants; said button being an iron tee snip, fastened so as to act as a bolt.

"Jemima! ain't it dark! Must be very early," muttered the reluctant boy, as he strove to lace his boots. "Drat it! Shan't wear 'em; too wet."

"My crikey!" cried he as he stood outside. "Must have been rainin' cats an' dogs, an' lakes an' seas."

His moleskins were rolled up to his thighs, while a cornsack, hooded at the bottom, and stuck on to his head like a nun's veil, gave him fair protection from the driving showers.

"I wonder if it's goin' to be a flood?" The thought was not unpleasant to the lad. It produced, indeed, a certain exaltation of spirits, forcibly expressed in Tom's vernacular by, "Ge-willikins! but won't we have fun!"

Heavily laden clouds, in interminable succession, were drifting from the sea, forming, as they swung overhead in batches, an endless series of smart showers. It had been an exceptionally wet week, and for the preceding twenty-four hours had rained without ceasing.

The cows depastured in a paddock that ran back from a creek to the timbered country. The creek itself was bank high and running strongly. It was only by climbing along the branches of a dead limb, which spanned the water, that Tom managed to reach the kine.

It was no small task to get them to face the stream. Small as was the creek in width, it was deep enough to make a swim, and the roaring, turbid, and muddy

stream frightened the creatures. But for the fact that the calves were in a pen at the milking yard all Tom's efforts would have been futile. Their mooing and baaing, however, made a loud appeal to the maternal breast. Finally, when the old red poley, the mother of twins, made a plunge, the rest followed.

During the morning the river rose steadily, and large quantities of driftwood passed down the stream. With the rubbish was a good deal of heavy timber, and—what Tom had predicted—pumpkins. This was an indication that the river up-stream had overflowed its banks in places, and was sweeping the low-lying farm lands. Tom spent the morning in fishing out the floating vegetables that came within reach of his hooked pole. Meanwhile the rain continued, and looked as though it might last for forty days and nights.

"I'll pull over to the township this afternoon," remarked Mr. Hawkins at the midday meal. "I'm anxious about this rise. Looks as if we're goin' to have an old man flood. Might get some information about the state of things up-river. If I leave it till to-morrow 'twill be a tough job gettin' acrost, as the timber's comin' down pretty thick now, an'll be worse by an' by."

"Be sure'n bring tea and flour back with you. No knowing how long the rise'll last."

"Can I go with you, father?"

"Yes; I'll require you to steer. It'll be a pretty stiff job, I reckon."

The crossing was not without peril. The current ran fierce and strong. The landing-place on the other side was protected, in a measure, by a headland up-stream. Out from the influence of that, however, the boatmen felt the full force of the current. The water seethed and foamed. The violence of its rush created great whirlpools, which accentuated the difficulty of keeping the boat's head up-stream. Logs and driftwood patches had to be dodged, and, what with fighting the current and outflanking the timber, by the time the river was crossed the boat had drifted quite half a mile down-stream. On gaining the other side they found a shore eddy, in which they were able to paddle up-stream with ease, until they came to a point of land about two hundred yards below the town wharf. As they lost the eddy here, and would have to encounter the full force of the flood when round the point, Mr. Hawkins wisely determined to tie up the boat in the slack water.

When Hawkins arrived at the store, where many of the townsfolk had congregated, he was informed that news had been brought down by the mailman that morning to the effect that heavy rains were falling at the head of the river, and that when the New England waters came down in full force the river might rise to the "high flood" marks.

Cooees could now be heard from the settlers in the low-lying portions, adjacent to the township. They proceeded from those who had neglected to move

before being surrounded, and who were without boats. The police were busily engaged in rescuing families by boat. Many townsfolk were engaged on the same merciful errand.

All through the day the waters, fed by the flooded creeks, continued to rise, and as evening approached anxiety deepened. Things were so serious that Mr. Hawkins, whose farm, be it said, was situated on comparatively low-lying lands, acting upon the advice of his friends, returned home almost at once. After hoisting the most valuable of his possessions to the rafters, and securing them there, he returned to the township with his family; gaining it as dusk was deepening into dark. The family was distributed among neighbours, Tom and one of his sisters being quartered at Mr. Blain's.

A group of men and boys throughout the day had lined the bank of the river, in the vicinity of the Government wharf, which was submerged. They were engaged in gauging its rate of advance by pine laths scaled to inches.

Towards evening the wind, veering from east to south-east, increased in violence. Laden with torrential showers, it smote the earth in great gusts, streaming through roofs and walls, and taxing the ingenuity of housekeepers to find dry spots for beds.

The wind and flood waters, travelling in opposite directions, conflicted with great violence. The roaring, boastful wind, as it lashed the racing, defiant waters into angry waves, and the universe-filling sounds of the seething, surging flood-waters, as they wrestled with and overbore all opposing forces, made storm music, compared with which the artifices of man touch the infinitely puny. Darkness and the blinding rain had driven most of the river watchers indoors. A few, however, braved the elements, among them the minister and the lads.

Whatever effect the flood may have had on others, the dominant feeling in Mr. Blain's mind was that of solicitude. As the rain continued, deep concern merged into alarm. There were few on the river who knew as intimately as he the general havoc of a flood. The executive head of the Flood-relief Committee for many years, he had been the chief instrument in administering doles to flood victims. In many cases the utmost relief was as a drop of succour in the ocean of need.

"If the rise continues for another twenty-four hours, as it is doing now, it will beat the 'sixty-four flood, and, if so, God help our down-river friends," remarked the minister after examining Joe's gauge by the aid of a lantern.

The '64 flood was the highest known to white men up to the present. The settlers still retained a vivid recollection of its disastrous effects. Luckily, the township covered a piece of high ground, and though the low parts were covered in a moderate flood, the higher portions were some feet above the highest flood-mark. It was in the farming settlements that danger lurked.

"If this yere flood beats 'sixty-four, it'll be as you say, Parson; good-bye to many up-river an' down-river folk."

Mr. Blain's words had impressed both men and boys. Suddenly Joe, who was in the midst of the group, sang out lustily—

"Hurrah! wind's changed!"

"What's that?" shouted back Mr. Blain excitedly.

"Don't you feel it?" cried the boy, as he swung his arms windmill fashion.

"Yes; thank God! The lad's right," continued he. "The wind's chopping. Don't you feel it, men? Ah! there's a decided puff from the north-east."

"Take my word for it," said the ferryman, an old sailor, "the wind'll be blowing west afore morning."

"Pray God it may!" ejaculated the minister, and many a silent prayer was uttered.

"Now, boys, let us return home. We can do no good standing here. We'll come back in an hour or so."

"Listen!" exclaimed Tom, as the boys splashed through the water on their way home. Laying his hand on Joe's shoulder, he cried, "Do you hear that?"

"Don't hear anything but the roar of the river," replied Joe, as he stood in a listening attitude. "What was it?"

"Hark! there it is again. A cooee. Seems to come from up the river, near the Bend. Some un's in trouble."

"Now, boys, make haste and get in out of the rain," cried Mr. Blain, who had hurried along.

"Some one's crying out for help at the Bend," shouted Joe.

The minister paused on hearing this. A moment later the cry came out of the night: faint, because of the distance and the turmoil of sounds, yet clear and convincing.

"Great God! some poor soul in dire straits, and no help possible before morning!"

It would have been worse than madness to attempt any rescue till daylight. To traverse the flood, even in daytime, anywhere near the Bend, were a hazardous experiment, owing to the enormous vortices caused by the current striking a high bluff on the near side, at the elbow. The waters whirled like a merry-go-round under full steam, and boiled with an upward heave, in a fashion similar to the mud springs of Tiketere. None but the stoutest boat and most experienced rowers could dodge these seething cauldrons, which caught into their cold and cruel embrace trees, fencing, stock; anything material, in fact. The heaviest logs and tree-lengths were as wisps of straw under the influence of the mighty suction. To attempt the traverse at night were as foolhardy and impossible as that of shooting Niagara in an open boat.

A little group stood with the Blains, listening to the weird cry.

"Who d'yer think it c'd be, sir?" said one of the men, turning to the minister.

"Not any of the Bend families. We had word this afternoon saying that they had retreated to the high land before the waters reached them. God help the poor soul, whoever it is, for vain is the help of man!"

Throughout the live-long night the cry went up at intervals, like that of the minute-gun of a distressed vessel. Shortly before daybreak it ceased.

No man or woman in the township slept that night. A strict watch was kept on the river, so as to be ready for any emergency. The waters continued to advance, but at a much slower rate. Men and women cudgelled their brains to individualise the wailing cry. Most were agreed that it was a woman's cry, though some held it to be that of a child. Sometimes the voice was ghoulish, and made the flesh to creep and the heart to flutter. Then an intensely human note would prevail, full of anguish and terror, and women wept and stopped their ears, while strong men choked in the throat.

They would go out at intervals and send back a heartening cry; it was all that could be done. There were many others throughout that fearful night who were engulfed in the flood, in various parts of the river, and, swan-like, wailed their death-song in the wild waste.

Shortly after midnight the rain ceased, and the wind, which had been chopping and changing for the past few hours, settled finally in the west. This proved a conspicuous advantage. It no longer checked the flood-waters as when in the east, and there was now good hope that they would recede ere long, as the rise was almost imperceptible.

[image]

"Suddenly the Forest Monarch topples, lurches, staggers and falls with mighty crash."—See p. 43.

When day had dawned a wild, weird scene was revealed. The town had become an island. On all sides the flood-waters stretched out, covering gardens and farms, and completely blotting out the fair landscape. On the riverside the turgid stream tore along in its hurry, bearing on its dirty, foam-crested bosom, as its spoils, the household gods, farm stock, and produce of many a settler. Horses, cattle, pigs, goats, dogs, fowls: these, swept off by the encroaching waters, and carried over fences into the stream, struggled, vainly for the most part, in the rapid, death-dealing current. Haystacks, barns, wood-frame buildings intact, floated in the torrential waters, sooner or later crashing into the great trees

that bore down-stream, making utter shipwreck.

CHAPTER VI
ON THE FACE OF THE WATERS

"The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their waves."—Ps. xciii. 3.

"Where's the dad, girls?" shouted Joe Blain early in the morning, after the events recorded in the previous chapter, dashing into the room as he yelled.

"Here!" came a voice from the back verandah. Running to the spot indicated by the monosyllable, the lad in breathless accents delivered himself to his paternal relative in this fashion—

"Please, dad, can Tom, Billy, Jimmy, and I have the boat to paddle out on the back-water?"

"Um—er—well, as long as you keep in the slack water I suppose you may; but be very careful, my boy."

"Yes, dad; we'll be careful enough. It's all slack water you know, 'cept where the river water comes in; but that's a long way up, an' we'll be paddlin' mostly about this end of the slack."

An explanation is needed here in order that the reader may intelligently follow the course of events (some of them dramatic enough, and even tragic) which transpired in the course of this eventful cruise.

It has already been stated that the flood waters so surrounded Tareela as to convert the township into an island. It was so practically. Accurately speaking it formed a peninsula, with the narrowest of necks. On the river side there was a broad expanse of boiling, foaming, hurrying waters, narrowing here and there, where the banks rose above their usual height, but stretching far and wide where the river-flats intervened; sometimes touching the horizon, as it were. On the other side lay a body of water, as far removed from motion as the tumultuous stream was instinct with it. There it lay, a wide extent of placid, coffee-coloured water, broken at its surface by fence tops, belts of trees, and partially submerged houses. This great stretch was almost currentless, and the débris that floated on its bosom appeared stationary; though, as a matter of fact, there was a slight

outward drift.

The secret of its placidity lay in the fact that the river waters, when they reached a certain height, backed up a blind gully that ran almost parallel with the stream for some distance, then swerved from the river, and widened out till it became a depression of considerable magnitude. This, in turn, merged into a swamp, contiguous to the township on its western side. Low-lying and occupied lands surrounded the swamp for some distance. The town end of these flats, which the river water backing up through the gully had submerged, making a long reach of stagnant waters, formed the area of the boys' row.

The minister's boat was a light yet staunchly built vessel, and belonged to the skiff variety. Her capabilities were to be put to the utmost test. Several of the town boats were moving on the face of the still waters, their occupants busily engaged in capturing the flotsam. The owners of houses, in particular, were anxiously conning their submerged property, or gathering together floating domestic articles. In this way a good deal of house property was recovered.

The boys found enjoyment in the novelty of the cruise. They pulled two oars, taking turns at the rowing. Of the non-rowers, one acted as steersman and the other as bowman for the capture of the flood spoils. Several melons and pumpkins were picked up, but they were not troubling about these. For one reason, they did not want to be encumbered with spoil of that kind, and for another they were keen on pulling about the flooded houses. Their chief and most interesting rescue was a cat and two kittens, which had found an ark of refuge on a barn door.

"I say, boys, we'll have a go at these oranges," said Joe, who was steering, as they were passing a small orangery which was half submerged. This proposal received hearty and unanimous assent. Accordingly Joe selected the most promising tree, and deftly ran alongside its outer branches.

"Look out for snakes!" cried he.

There was abundant cause for warning, for each tree contained a number of serpents, some of which are very deadly. These reptiles were flooded out of their holes in the ground, and from hollow logs and stumps, and made for the trees or any floating timber that offered refuge. Fortunately the snakes were more or less benumbed with the cold, consequently they were the reverse of lively. Had it been otherwise, to have made fast to the tree would have been foolhardy to a degree.

Agreeably to Joe's warning, every eye was skinned and on the look out. Indeed, the tree was fairly swarming with snakes of many sorts and sizes; though for the most part they consisted of "tree" and "carpet" varieties; one of the latter, lying across the top, being fully ten feet in length. These two mentioned varieties are not venomous. The farmers, for the most part, look with a friendly eye upon

the carpet species; so called by reason of its tawny and black markings. The carpet snake in summer time is the best of all mousers and ratters. It winds its sinuous way into places impossible to even puss or terrier; and is always a welcome visitor to settlers' barns. There it becomes a pet, and will live on terms of friendship with its primal foe.

There were snakes of a very different order in the orange tree. Among them the "tiger," most aggressive and poisonous of all the genus. There were also specimens of the black and the brown snakes. All these are cobras, and therefore very deadly.

The snakes, as related, were all more or less torpid with cold, and not pugnaciously inclined. The boys, however, were very careful not to disturb them. There was plenty of golden fruit upon the tree, and it was in prime condition. The fruit was neatly cut off the stems by strokes of the paddle blade. When a sufficient quantity was thus plucked, and lay bobbing in the water, they were poked out from the tree by the same means, and secured. The boat lay off a little distance from the tree while the crew indulged in a feed of the luscious fruit. A visit was then paid to a plantain grove, and a quantity, both of green and ripe fruit, was secured.

"Where away now, Joe?" said Tom Hawkins, who was crouched in the bow.

"I vote," replied the one addressed, who in this, as in everything else, was leader of the band,—"I vote we pull up opposite Commodore Hill and have a look at the river." The boy forgot for the moment the promise made to his father to keep mainly about the town end of the back-water.

Commodore Hill was well up the river, and on the other side. The flooded gully by which the water obtained entrance, it has been explained, ran parallel with the river for some distance; in some places being not more than a few yards therefrom. The boys were curious to see the river stretch above the Bend; also to note the numbers of flooded-out settlers who might be camped in that vicinity. Accordingly the boat's bow is turned, and her course shaped in that direction. By this time the river had fallen several feet, and, as a consequence, there was an outward drift of the slack waters, making a gentle current.

"'Member, Joe, what your dad said about takin' the boat into the stream."

"Think I've forgot, stupid!"

"Thought I'd remind you, anyhow," replied the bowman. As a matter of fact, Tom had an uneasy feeling that his mate would not be content when they got to the mouth to remain there without having a dash at the stream.

"Listen to me; I ain't goin' to run any risks. We won't go to the mouth entrance. What we'll do is this: work up to the swamp end, have a look round, and come back again."

With this defined object in view the boat continued its voyage, helped by

the current, which, the farther up they proceeded, became stronger, as was to be expected.

But one thing had happened of which the boys were in entire ignorance. And this particular happening was to produce startling and unexpected effects. At a certain spot in the gully, and at a point where it began to deviate from the general stream, there was a branch gully, which bore inwards to within a few yards of the river's brink. When the water was at its highest in the river, that in the lagoon was much higher at this point, inasmuch as the back-water was at the same level as at the entrance, some two miles higher up; the difference in height being the river's fall in that distance. Roughly speaking, the water there was about ten feet higher than that in the river.

The rush of the stream on the river side had caused the bank to give way about this point during the night, and the lagoon, or back-waters, forced themselves into the river through the new channel, which widened considerably as a consequence. On nearing this place the boys became conscious of a quickening of the current.

"My golly, Joe! this big current," said Yellow Billy, who, with Jimmy, was at the oars. "Must be goin' twenty mile."

"Twenty mile! you goose. We're goin' six or seven and that's mighty fast."

"I say, Joe," called Jimmy a second later, the boys having ceased rowing, for there was no further need, "bes' run her ashore, or we'll be carried out. By gosh, she's tearing away!"

"All right, mates, keep cool. There's the old mahogany ahead, we'll tie up there; we'll be there in a minute."

Yes, the boys would need all their coolness, for Joe was reckoning without up-to-date knowledge, and that made all the difference in the world. Rounding a clump of trees at this moment, or ever they were aware the boat fairly sucked into the channel of furiously rushing and tumultuously heaping waters that were finding their level by the newly made short-cut.

"Oh! oh! I—I say!" shouted Tom. "We're being swept into the river! Back water!"

Joe, quicker than the others, had hit the situation, and turned the boat's nose to a clump of bushes, but before the rowers could pick up their oars to help him the boat had swept past. Tom, it is true, made a frantic grasp at the bough, but the way on the boat was so strong that the branch, when the full force of the current bore on her at her momentary check, snapped like a pipe-stem, and the little craft was fair in the turgid stream, which had now the velocity of a water-race. The incident of the half-arrest, however, had turned her head up-stream, which was a providential thing. The river break-away was at most three hundred yards away. To turn the boat into the perpendicular sides of the channel was to

court destruction; for, be it said, the maddened waters had excavated the banks until they rose sheer from the water's edge.

The necessities of the case came like an inspiration to Joe. The boat was drifting, as we have said, stern first, the advantage of which will be seen. Save Joe, whom the sense of responsibility braced to immediate action, the boys were speechless with consternation. One look at their blanched faces was sufficient. They were certainly alive to the dangers of the situation.

"Pull, boys! pull with all your might! We'll keep her head up. This'll check her speed a bit. It'll give her steerage way too, and save her gettin' broadside on."

The pullers put every ounce of strength into their strokes, and this was very helpful. The final rush into the cross-current was a most critical moment, and might easily have resulted in disaster. This was averted only by Joe's coolness and dexterity.

"Oars out!" cried he as the boat swept into the angry and turbulent river. Save for shipping some water, and drenching the crew with spray, the little craft weathered the river plunge. An involuntary "Oh!" came from the boys as the boat shot the rapids and soused into the river. Immediately she came under the influence of two currents; that going outward from the chute, and the swift down-river stream.

This effect was to take them instantly well out toward the centre of the flood, with a strong drift which carried the boat into the vicinity of the Bend. The river bend gave the current a direction which set across to the other side. This diagonal movement was accelerated by the chute waters, which retained their impetus, in a measure, for a considerable distance.

Downward then, and cross-wise to the northern bank, the frail craft sped, the sport and play of the watery element. Dangers stood, or rather, drifted thick around the adventurers. Picture for a moment a tiny vessel, some fifteen feet over all, whose timbers are of the proverbial egg-shell thickness, shot into an angry, bubbling cauldron, whose tumultuous waters heaved and swirled, hissed and roared, in inarticulate sound and motion.

That, in itself, were an experience of sufficient magnitude to quicken the blood, test the nerves, and try the courage of the hardiest waterman. Add to the perils of that situation a thousand floating dangers, any one of which might crush that tiny, drifting cockle-shell out of existence, and you have the position which

faced and surrounded the affrighted lads on the demon-ridden waters.

CHAPTER VII
THE DEATH OF THE FOREST MONARCH

"There's the white-box and pine on the ridges afar,
Where the iron-bark, blue-gum, and peppermint are;
There's many another, but dearest to me,
And king of them all is the stringy-bark tree."
HENRY LAWSON.

As several years had intervened between the present and the last flood of considerable dimension, every creek, gully, and river-flat of the upper reaches were contributing their quota of fallen timber, which in the interval had encumbered the earth. In addition, the flood-waters had torn many a giant eucalyptus, roots and all, from its earthhold, and had borne it on its heaving and rebellious bosom, a mere plaything of its vengeful humour.

Up to the present a monarch of the forest, whose rugged bole bears indubitable evidence of its antiquity, stands skywards with its head in the clouds. The Philistines are upon it. Its innumerable roots, lateral and vertical, hold with frantic clutch to mother earth, as it grimly wrestles with its Gargantuan foe. But the earth, which for years innumerable has mothered the forest lord, furnishing his daily portion of meat and drink, nourishing and cherishing him till he bulks in girth and height as Saul among the prophets, proving faithful in every tussle with wind and flood heretofore, now turns traitor. The soil dissolves in the swirling waters as they ravish the earth. Above and underneath the roots it melts, and is carried away in the thickening stream. The hold of the old monarch is weakening. His limbs are trembling. His strong body, that has withstood the pressure of a thousand fights with the hereditary foe, vibrates and sways now, as his remorseless antagonist grips him in cruel embrace.

His old comrades higher up, who have fallen earlier in this battle of giants, come drifting along, battered and torn; veritable shipwrecks, dismantled and broken. One floating leviathan, flood-driven, sweeps onward full upon his writhing form ... a violent shock and shudder that runs from root to topmost leaf ... a last

wrestle, strong, heroic, and pitiful! ... Then, betrayed and spent, under the last straw, as it were, of the fateful impact of his wrecked mate—now converted into a battering-ram—the grand old hero-king yields. His foe has sought and found, like one in the olden time, his vulnerability in his heel. Overborne at last, but not yet broken, he shakes his lofty head in the quiver of mortal spasm. Suddenly he topples, lurches, staggers, and falls with a mighty crash, which is, indeed, a resounding death-cry. Striking the enemy with a last, concentrated, savage blow, he splits her bosom, and sends great spurts of her muddy blood, spray-like, a hundred feet in air. But the wound heals as speedily as delivered, and from thence he passes quickly, in company with his defeated brothers, an inert mass of strewn wreckage, to form, farther down upon the skurrying waters, a floating barricade of death-dealing timbers. And so on and on, till the blue sea is reached, where it is heaved to and fro, a rudderless hulk upon the bosom of the ocean; until it is stranded at last as flotsam and jetsam upon the beach.

By skilful manipulation of oars and rudder the boys managed to evade the timber masses. The numerous whirlpools constituted a great danger. Once or twice they were almost sucked under as they circled in a vortex. Their position was extremely perilous. The greatest danger lay from contact with the isolated logs and tree-trunks that sped down with great velocity, appearing and disappearing in the vicious eddies, rotating with the swirling stream, and popping up porpoise-like in unexpected quarters. On one occasion, in dodging a mass of driftwood, they ran right on to a big tree. Fortunately the tree was sinking at the time of impact under the influence of an under-current, and, at Joe's sharp command, the rowers rushed the boat across the submerged tree-bole. Scarcely had they crossed the line ere the submarine monster rolled upward, till at least half its length was out of the water. It was a narrow squeak. To have been caught on its rising movement would have meant utter shipwreck.

It has been stated that owing to the river bend, and from other causes, the current set diagonally across to the other side. Drawing thus towards the farther shore, the boat's crew neared a timbered point, below which the water expanded over the low-lying country for miles. So far only the thickly fringed timber belts could be seen. It was questionable if they could find any dry earth. In all likelihood, however, even should there not be any landing-place, they would find protection from the current behind the thick wood. As they got close in to the scrubby portion the boys saw, to their great disappointment, that the land was still submerged. They had hoped to find a patch of earth. All they can do now is to shelter behind the timber.

"Pull, boys, pull hard!" cried Joe, the while he turned the boat's nose to-

wards a rear clump. His quick eye discerned an eddy formed by a point higher up. Rowing into this, the boat was eased in its downward track, and after getting well in behind the clump they were able to make headway against the stream, finally fastening to a big she-oak almost in still water. Here they were out of the tract of the current and the perils of the driftwood.

What a relief to the half-dazed and frightened boys!

Captain Joe, be it said, though fearful enough while in the roaring waters, kept all his wits about him. Often as his heart jumped into his mouth he as quickly swallowed it again. More than once his resourcefulness saved the boat from certain disaster.

"Thank God!" exclaimed he, as Tom tied the painter to a strong limb, and the boat rode easy.

"It was a touch and go, lads. Don't cry, Jimmy!" as that lad, yielding to a feeling of reaction, burst into tears. Tom was not much better, and furtively wiped his eyes under the pretence of blowing his nose. In a few minutes the boys were themselves again. The roar and rush of the waters filled their oars and souls as they lay at anchor. So deafening were the sounds that it was only by shouting they could hear one another.

Stretching inland, and reaching to the distant hills, nothing was to be seen but a waste of waters, with here and there a bushy hillock, a miniature island. What remained of the settlers' houses looked like so many Noah's arks. Moving figures could be seen on one which lay a long way off. They were the unfortunate owners, who, by delaying their retreat until too late, were driven on to the very ridge pole for safety. Fortunately they were in still water; so at least it seemed from the distance; consequently their position was not alarming. Tree marks showed the river to be falling at a fairly rapid rate.

"Now then, boys, let's hold a council of war!"

"Wot's that, Joe?"

"It's what they say in soldiering when the generals get into a fix," chipped in Tom.

"Oh, gollies! let us get home as quick as possible. If we don't they'll think we're drownded an'——"

"Look here, Jimmy, stow that rot! If we start talking in that fashion, we'll get unnerved. Billy, you first! Tell us what you think about the situation."

"Long's we're here we're safe. There's a 'possum in the spout above us. I'll climb up and get 'im for tucka."

"We can't cook 'possum in the boat, Billy. No dry wood; no matches. You're right enough about safety, though. These trees have borne the brunt of the flood stream at its highest, and things are getting easier. Jimmy, what do you think of it?"

"I—I—I dunno. Oh, my poor m-other!" cried Jimmy, whose emotions again overpowered him.

"Didn't I tell you to stow that water-cart business? Dry up, or I'll jolly well tan your hide for you, you soft milksop!"

Joe's severity was partly assumed. He was fighting himself about home thoughts. He knew the folly of giving way at this crisis to such a natural sentiment.

"You, Tom! You've a notion, I'm sure," said Joe to his chum.

"My opinion, chaps, is that we ought to be very thankful for bein' where we are, an' stay here a bit anyways. It'd be madness to attempt to recross the river. What's to prevent us pullin' over there?" pointing to a hillock nearly a mile away inland.

"Tom's right, boys. We must make up our minds, hard as it is, to camp on this side to-day. It'd be easy enough to do as Tom says, row over to that island. Supposin', though, the water went down a lot during the night; we might have to drag the boat over a lot of mud to get to the river-bank to-morrow. Bes' stay where we——"

"S-s-h! Listen a moment, Joe," interjected Tom from the bow of the boat. "What noise's that?"

"Don't hear anythin' 'cept the river. What sort o' noise, Tom?"

"I heered it, Joe," said Yellow Billy. "Bear cryin', I bin thinkin'. Heer it now."

All the boys could hear the sounds now, faint enough, yet distinct above the flood roar.

"Bear, I 'speck! Have a good look round, boys."

All eyes were bent in the direction of the sound. They scanned the trees for that strange, pouch-bearing—half bear, half sloth—animal called the native bear. Strictly speaking, it is neither bear nor sloth, being a perfectly harmless, tailless marsupial of the koala genus. Its cry is intensely, and often pathetically, human.

For some time the search was unrewarded; while ever and anon a cry, strangely like an infant's wail, came to the ears of the searchers.

"P'r'aps, after all, it's only the wind in the river oaks; or is it a——"

"Look, boys! look, look!" cried Tom excitedly. "What's that over at the edge of the timber, up there in a fork?"

"Whereaway, Tom?"

"See the clump beyond the back-water, out in the stream?"

"M—y-e-s, I see. Why, yes, my word! I do believe it's a——"

CHAPTER VIII
WHAT THE TREE HELD

"Thereafter grew the wind; and chafing deaths
In distant waters, sent a troubled cry
Across the slumbrous forest; and the chill
Of coming rain was on the sleeper's brow."
HENRY KENDALL.

"James!" exclaimed Mrs. Blain to her husband during this eventful morning, "it's dinner-time and those lads are not back. I hope nothing has happened."

"What do you expect could have happened, you dear old fidget? I'm going to the post, however, and I'll have a look round."

Could Mr. Blain have beheld the lads at this particular time, the calm of his deep nature would have been broken up in a fashion rare to his experience; for at this moment the boat and its occupants are being borne on the rapids, presently to be flung upon the riotous and foam-crested waves of the river.

In moving along the street the minister met several persons who had been out on the back-water during the morning. All had seen the boys at one time or another. One of the latest in, who had been farther up than most of the others, had passed the boys on his return not long before. They were then heading up the swamp way.

"Don't fear, Mr. Blain, the boys know how to take care of themselves. Dinner's calling 'em loudly enough by this time, I wager ye."

Dinner-time came and went, but no boys. As the afternoon wore on the mother's fears deepened until they became well-nigh unendurable. The minister, rowed by two of the neighbours, set out to find the truants and fetch them back.

"Don't lose faith, dear! They're up to some prank, the thoughtless scamps! I'll fetch them home none the worse, to laugh at your fears."

Following Tom's index-finger, the boys fastened their eyes upon a clump of river

oaks that stood on the edge of the woods.

High up in a fork of one of the largest trees, they could see what looked at first like a huge bundle of clothes fluttering in the wind. After a short while the bundle seemed to take a somewhat definite shape.

"What in the name of goodness is it all? Seems like a lot of old clothes jammed in the tree forks. Are you sure that the squall, or squeak, or squeal, or whatever it was, came from that direction?"

"Yes, I think so," replied Tom. "Listen, there it's again!" A thin, treble cry rose faintly above the din of the flood waters.

"See a woman's foot!"

The speaker was the half-caste, whose eyesight, owing to his half-wild nature, was much keener than his fellows'.

"A woman's foot, Billy! What do you mean? You don't mean to say really, that——!"

"See hand too! Look along bark. See fingers!"

Thus directed, the three boys looked, and saw, though but indistinctly, what appeared to be a hand grasping the tree-trunk, a foot, also, was revealed at intervals by the fluttering garment.

After a short, staring silence, a flood of mental light broke upon Joe. "I see now. Why, it's the poor soul we heard cooeeing last night!"

Yes, there had been plenty of speculation in the village as to who it could be, and exactly where the voice came from. None of those who heard the piteous wail that was borne across the floods in the black and wild darkness of that night would forget it for many a long day to come.

The mystery is now solved. The boys are horror-stricken at the sight and its sequent thought. They are now convinced that a woman is fixed in the tree. Without reasoning the matter out, they identify her as the one whose cry over night produced such a sensation in the township, and to locate which the police boat with a strong crew had started out at daybreak, but without success.

Is she alive or dead? The strange cry did not seem to be that of a woman. There was something so eerie, so shocking in the thought, that the lads were fear-possessed for some moments. Joe, as usual, recovered himself first.

"It's a woman sure enough! It's a human being, at any rate. An', boys, we've got to rescue her if she is alive. The cry can only come from her, I'm sure, so that there must be some life left still. How to do it I can't just see at this moment. We must think a bit."

Think a bit they did. Camped as they were at the lower end of the timber, it would be a matter of comparative ease to work up through the trees in the slack water, till they arrived opposite to the clump that stood out in the stream. There the real difficulties would begin. The rush of waters was still so strong, and the

space for the play of the boat so small, that it became evident the rescue would be accompanied by some alarming risks.

One of two things must be done: either wait until the waters receded sufficiently to enable the rescuers to wade to the clump, or make an immediate dash.

"How long d'you think it'd be before we could wade across, Joe?"

"Dunno, Billy. Beckon there's eight or nine foot of water out there. Might be less. At any rate it'd be hours."

"Hours!" cried Tom. "An' s'posin' that poor creature's still alive?"

"That settles it!" exclaimed Joe, rising in his seat in excitement. "Boys, what's to be done must be done quickly."

Seemingly all were agreed. At least no objection was offered to this proposal, or, rather, mandate. So it was resolved, after some cogitation, to pull the boat through the timber to a point some distance higher up than the isolated clump. From thence the course would be outwards until the river current was met; an estimated distance of a hundred yards. The boat was to be headed against the current when in the stream influence. A vigorous row would be necessary to neutralise the current, to be modified so as to allow the craft to drift slowly down-stream. Then, when opposite the clump, a dash for the tree whereon the unfortunate woman was lying was to be made.

Inasmuch as this tree was almost in the centre of the group, and the stream still ran with violence, it was easy to see that without skilful management, and some luck, the boat might be stove in against a tree-bole; or, worse still, might be impaled upon a submerged snag. Any accident, such as missing way at a critical moment, or the snapping of an oar blade, might be fraught with the most disastrous consequences.

During the short conference Jimmy Flynn had kept silence. Towards the end, as Joe set forth the attendant dangers, he became considerably perturbed. After sundry wrigglings and contortions, rubbing of hands and licking of lips, these visual twistings found voice.

"I say, Joe! don't—er—yer think that—er—we'd better wait a bit?"

"Why?" chorused the boys.

"Oh—I—I dunno. Well—er—p'raps some other boat'll come over from the township d'reckly an'—an'——"

"And s'pose no boat comes along?"

"Well, then, I—I—er—vote—that we—er——"

"By jing! Jimmy," interposed Tom, with a jeer, "who'd 'a' thought you'd 'a' showed the white feather!"

"White feather yourself, Hawkins!" returned the fearful but now angry boy.

"Jimmy!" broke in Yellow Billy unexpectedly, for as a rule the half-caste was taciturn—the taciturnity of modesty in his case. Billy, while carrying some

of the defects of aboriginal descent, was a kind-hearted and easily contented lad. "Jimmy!" said he, in a soft, quiet tone, "s'pose your mother was over there?"

Jimmy Flynn, who was sitting with a sullen, hang-dog expression, quivered as though he had received an electric shock. There was within him a consciousness of the truth of Tom's term. He was a coward, and the very notion of it angered him, and at the same time made him resentful. He shrank from the undertaking. None of the boys were in love with it, for that matter. Jimmy only, among the four, allowed his fear to overmaster him.

These few words of Billy, uttered in a quiet, even tone, went straight to the boy's heart. His sullen brows lifted. The angry resentment which had disfigured his face vanished. Straightening his bent figure, he seized the oar lying by his side. Then, squaring his shoulders, as he inclined forward to grip the water, he said quietly, "Let her go."

Immediately on releasing the boat Joe steered her in a semicircular course, keeping out back where the standing timber was thinnest. The boys pulled slowly, for there was always the danger of snags. They were in fairly slack water, and so had no need to exert themselves; besides which, it were wise to husband their strength for the supreme moment.

Tom and Jimmy, both expert oarsmen, were the rowers. Yellow Billy was stationed in the bow, with instructions to keep a keen look out for snags. He was armed with a stout pole in order that he might fend the boat on any critical occasion, or when the rudder might be inoperative. It formed a very useful instrument in Billy's practised hands, and enabled him to ward off the craft from many dangers that did not appear until the boat was almost upon them. As it was there were several ominous scrapes, as the boat rasped over submerged branches. Fortunately they reached the point determined upon without any accident.

They paused here a moment before leaving the slack water for the swiftly running stream.

"Now, boys," said Joe, after a brief survey, "sit steady, and pull for all you're worth. Mind you, no flurry. Keep an even stroke. Got the painter coiled, Billy?"

"All right, Joe."

"Pull then, boys, and stick to it like grim death to a diseased nigger."

The boat having got good way on, Joe headed her out a little, when she immediately encountered the current.

"Lay to it, my lads, lay to it!"

The boys "lay to" with such vigour that the rapid current was counterbalanced, and she hung in the stream, neither making headway nor drifting.

"Easy a little, my hearties! We must let her drift down gradually. Mustn't let her get out of hand, though."

In swinging the boat into the channel Joe kept her nose up-stream, and as

near the slack water as possible. The boys easing a trifle at Joe's command, the current became the stronger of the two forces, and the little craft drifted slowly. Blain eagerly scanned the clump for an opening. This cluster, it may be remarked, was about two hundred yards long and fifty or so wide. In some parts the timber was thickly scattered, in others the trees were bunched together.

The boat is now about fifty yards above the tree containing the supposed woman.

"That's right, chaps, keep up as you're doin'! We must drift very slowly lest we miss the chance of popping in. It's too thick to venture in here. It's thinnin' out, though," exclaimed Joe, as the boat neared the point abreast the tree.

"Here's an opening, I do believe. Be ready, Billy! Pull, lads! pull, pull! Look out all!"

The boat lay anglewise, so that the current worked upon her quarter. Seeing a fair opening, Joe urged the rowers to do their utmost. So hard did they pull that the current, playing upon her quarter as she hung a few minutes stationary, forced her through the gap and towards the tree. The manoeuvre was splendidly executed. The boat was now within five yards or so of the tree, the boys putting every ounce of strength into their strokes. A minute or less now and they will either be fast to the tree or drifting down on to a solid block of timber just below.

Yellow Billy, who had crouched in the bow, now rose up quietly, rope in hand, ready to act promptly in the decisive moment. By good fortune a limb projected about five feet above the water, and branched out some distance from the tree. Joe worked the boat straight up-stream, and then called on the rowers to ease the barest trifle. The craft swung very slowly down, until she was fairly under the limb.

"Sling the painter over the branch an' make fast, Billy!" cried Joe, as the stern drifted under. "Pull now, you beggars, a last spurt!"

Billy whipped the rope round the limb, and made fast in a flash; the rowers, by a few desperate strokes, keeping the boat stationary.

"Hold her there a second. Let the loop lie loose an' edge it to the trunk, Billy!"

Joe thus worked the boat over until she was just at the rear of the tree.

"Ease her off gently now, boys. Steady still! A wrench might snap the painter."

The boys accordingly eased off gradually, and finally stopped.

"Two of you come aft, it'll ease the strain."

This done, the boat, which by burying her nose deep in the water was straining heavily on the rope, trimmed herself, and offered but the minimum resistance to the racing waters.

The tree-bole, which presented a somewhat broad surface, divided the wa-

ters, creating a narrow zone of neutral water in its wake. In this eddying area the boat rode securely, making it an easy matter for the bowman to keep her nose up against the tree.

And now each boy bent an upward glance to the fork.

CHAPTER IX
THE RESCUE

"Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods."
TENNYSON'S *Ulysses.*

Fortunately the she-oak was one of the largest of its kind, and forked out into four branches twenty feet or so from the ground. This formed a rough cage, in which one could be held very securely if not comfortably.

In this fork, partially covered with a blanket, was huddled the form of a human creature, presumably a woman; one hand stretched along the trunk as in a painful grip, the legs hanging loosely. There was no movement of limb or body. What if she were dead?

A sudden chill accompanied this thought. The situation was decidedly uncanny, and bred awesome, not to say fearsome, feelings.

Four boys in a boat! Out on the flood-wastes, and in a particularly perilous position! The insistent noises of the rushing tide; the hollow moan of the wind in the foliage of the she-oaks; shut out from all help; missed now at home, and *that thing above*!

All these combined to create a creeping chill in each boy, which in a manner half-paralysed them.

Joe, as usual, recovered more quickly than the others. Gazing at the object above awhile, and then examining the trunk of the tree with his eyes, he broke the spell of silence.

"Take my place, Tom. Some un's got to go at once to that poor soul aloft. Pray God we're in time to save her. Keep her up tight against the trunk, Jimmy,

an' I'll swing on to the limb."

Suiting his action to the word, Joe clambered on to the limb, and from thence proceeded to climb the tree.

The woman was fixed at the junction of the forks, and her feet and legs hung loosely down on each side of a minor fork. One arm, as before described, was wound round the main limb, while the other firmly grasped her breast. Her head was supported in the V of a branch.

On mounting to the spot, Joe raised himself higher by grasping two of the tree-forks, and, twisting his legs round the trunk, steadied himself while he gazed into the face of the dead. It was the first time in his life that he had looked upon death. The set expression that met his gaze, so full of anguish, so pitifully pleading, fairly shocked him out of his self-possession. Little wonder at his turning sick and faint. He clutched the branch frantically as he swayed a moment, and beads of cold sweat stood thick upon his forehead. Indeed, so near fainting was he that his sight began to fade, and the whole world receded from him. Strange noises buzzed in his ears. Bringing all the reserve forces of his will to the front, he was beginning to gain the ascendency over his weakness, when a strange cry startled him into full consciousness.

"Why! she's not dead after all, thank God!" The thought of life made all the difference to Joe. In a moment his vision is as clear as ever, and his spirits rise high at the sounds of life. "Yes, see!" whispered the lad, "there's a movement of the breast. Hurrah, boys!"

cried he to his comrades, looking down and waving with one hand at the same time. "She's not dead after all!"

The boys at this set up a hearty shout indicative of their relief and joy.

"Oh yes!" he muttered reassuringly to himself as he took the second look, "the poor creature's alive. Her eyes are half open. Her chest is heaving. Wake up, ma'am! Rescue is at hand. Me an' the boys in the boat below are goin' to take you down an' row you across to the township."

The woman made no response to this appeal and plan of salvation. "Is she really alive?" The eyes are half closed and seemingly peering; the form is rigid, the face immobile. There was naught of that expression in this countenance that Joe, from hearsay, was wont to associate with death—the peace that passeth understanding. Yet as the lad gazed at this apparently inanimate object there was a movement of the body. The blanket, bunched into many folds across the breast, stirred visibly.

Again that eerie, inarticulate cry!

Disengaging one hand from the tree, the boy stretched it forth to the woman's breast, which, covered as it was with the clothes, had all the seeming of life and movement.

Joe was in the very act of removing a fold of the blanket, when suddenly, and without the slightest warning, there rose up into the lad's face an angry, hissing, venomous snake, the deadliest of its kind. Its beady eyes glittered; its forked tongue shot in and out with inconceivable rapidity; its sibilant hiss was accompanied with a musky odour, sickening in the extreme; its head and body for half its length were erect, and bent forward from the neck, vibrating and swaying in a rhythmic movement. The reptile was within striking distance. In another second that almost invisible death-stroke will be dealt; invisible, that is, by reason of its lightning-like speed.

But this deadly intention is defeated by an involuntary movement on Joe's part. This young man, for the briefest of brief moments, clung to the tree with a rigid grasp; eyes staring in amazement and terror, with mouth wide open in automatic gape. Any attempt to defend himself were useless in the most absolute sense of that term. In another tick, before he can move a hand, these poison fangs will be deep buried in his horror-stricken face, so temptingly near. The only hope for the lad lay in doing a disappearing trick. And this happened. Had it been premeditated, however swiftly, the time taken to make up his mind, and to telegraph the resolution formed in the brain to the nerve cells and muscles, would have been sufficient for the lightning stroke to fall.

What really happened was this: the apparition of the red-bellied, black snake simply petrified Joe. An awful, blood-curdling, hair-raising, galvanic shock of abject terror, contradictory as it may seem, paralysed the lad. Simultaneously with that he is falling through space, an inert mass, to be soused into the water with a splash that sent the spray flying over the boat's crew.

At the moment of the splash, Joe's mind, will, and nerve were restored to their normal activity. The instinct of self-preservation, so strong in all healthy natures, especially boys', did for the lad in an infinitesimal fraction of time as much and as effectively as though he had taken, say, half an hour to plan his procedure.

He had, however, in escaping Scylla fallen into Charybdis. As soon as Joe reached the water he made for the boat. Fortunately he did not fall into it, or this story might never have been told. He fell into the stream, some two or three yards away from the skiff. Quickly as he was carried down-stream he managed by violent efforts to reach the boat at the stern. Tom clutched him frantically by the shirt collar, enabling the swimmer to get his hands on the gunwale. Joe, thus helped, clambered into the boat or ever the boat's crew had recovered from their consternation.

"Oh, Moses!" exclaimed, or rather gasped, he, "that—was—a go. Whew!"

"My goodness! How'd yer come to fall kersplosh like that?"

"Why!" pointing up. "See! there's the beast. See him crawling out there?"

The boys, looking up, descried the snake winding its sinuous way along a lateral bough that grew up above the forks. The disturbed and excited snake, having reached the limb, wound its course till it reached a clump of bushy branches on the limb's extremity. On this it coiled itself, save the head and neck, which stood erect in vigilant attitude.

"Oh, crikey! was that *there* on—in the body's—the woman's body?"

"Yes, Jimmy; right in the blanket on her breast. 'Twas that brute moving under the blanket that I thought was *her* breathing. Oh, my!" again exclaimed the youth, with a shudder, as he thought of the imminence of the danger which confronted him a moment before.

"Is—it—her—dead, Joe?" asked Tom after an interval of silence.

"No doubt of it, boys."

"Wonder if the snake bit her?"

"May have. Anyway the poor thing is dead all right."

"What's bes' thing to do now?"

"W-e-ll, I d-o-n't know——"

Again that shrill wailing cry!

"*Can't* be the woman!" said Joe excitedly. "Why, she's as dead as a herrin'!"

"I have it, boys!" shouted Tom, as he jumped up excitedly and cut a caper. "It's the darned ole cat!"

A look of great relief passed over each countenance at the thought.

Tom, meanwhile, lifted up the locker lid, disclosing the rescued cat, which, together with her two bairns, were stowed in the locker shortly after being saved from the flood. The animals were snuggled together on a cornsack, and looked the very picture of contentment. The kittens were dining baby fashion, and the mother's purr declared the very excess of maternal rapture.

On seeing the boys, pussy gave a low, affectionate miaow, and made a sympathetic movement of the tail, as if to say: "Thank you a thousand times, young gentlemen, for the good deed which we never, never shall forget." And then, motherlike, proceeded to "lick" her offspring.

"It's not the cat, Tom."

"Well, what on earth, water, or air is it?"

The mystery is insoluble. As the boys look down upon the happy and contented felines, they one and all reject Tom's confident affirmation of a moment before. If not the cat, what then?

Again the tiny, shrill cry arose, but not from the cat's mouth. It came from the tree above, and as the startled youths looked up they saw the overhanging end of the blanket agitated.

"Why, why—the poor thing must really be alive after all, chaps. There's something more up there than I've discovered; so here's up again!"

Acting on this impulse, Joe again ascended the tree. Those below watched intently, their feelings strained to the utmost tension. As soon as our hero got to his former position in the forks, he received another shock. It was sudden as the other, but not so disastrous. An inarticulate and involuntary cry brought fresh alarm to his pals, who all the while were staring up, too frightened to ask any questions. The boy, despite the second shock, still clung to the tree. The woman was dead beyond all doubt, but death is counterbalanced by life. A brief and astonished survey, and the boy leans over the limb and speaks quietly to those below—

"The woman's dead, boys, but *there's a baby here.* It's tied to her breast. It's alive!"

Just then, as if to demonstrate the truthfulness of the statement, the babe lifted up its voice once more in a feeble cry. The scene in that tree Joe never will forget; the like he will not see again though he rival Methuselah in age. The only thing he can yet see is a little hand and arm, which have wriggled from the covering. Moving cautiously along the branch to the converging point, leaning on one fork, and placing his feet against another so as to stiffen himself, the boy was able to use his two hands. He first, and not without an inward tremor, removed the dead hand which lay upon the blanket, the stiffened fingers still clutching the clothes and holding them to the breast. The last thought and the last act of the exhausted and dying woman was to succour and to defend her little one.

Straightening the arm so that it lay by her side, Joe opened the blanket from where the little hand stuck up. There, on the breast of the dead, she lay, a sweet-faced baby girl! The little one's face was puckered up, 'tis true, and there were tears upon her pale cheeks. The cries and tears were not the symbols of pain, they were those of hunger. Joe could plainly see that all the mother's thoughts were for the child. It was snugly folded in the blanket end; then tied to her waist by a handkerchief passed round the body. The remainder of the blanket was then arranged so as to thoroughly protect the child from the inclement weather.

Untying the handkerchief, the lad folded it in a peculiar fashion like as he had seen the black gins do. Carefully lifting the babe, he laid it in the widest part, made it secure to the body under the arms, and placed it on his back, bringing the ends of the wrapper together. round his neck.

This done, he prepared for the descent. It was easily accomplished, even with the incumbrance of the child. Landing safely in the boat, which was kept well up to the tree, Joe placed her in the stern on the locker seat, where the little one lay squirming and crying piteously.

The news of the baby variously affected the boys. Jimmy Flynn, whose baby sister had died a few months before, looked very tenderly upon this nameless

waif.

"Make a place on the floor for it, Joe," said he. "It'll lie there more comfortably, an' it'll be more like a cradle."

The advice was good. The coats, which the boys shed soon as they entered upon the expedition in the morning, made a soft bed for the little one. The wee mite was evidently about nine months old. For all its adventure and exposure it seemed to have suffered little, and now in its cry is only voicing the pleadings of its empty stomach. It was adequately, though very plainly dressed, and through all the rain of the preceding night had kept dry. Fortunately, too, the snake which had been curled up in one of the blanket folds had not come into actual contact with the child. There were only two things required to bring it to a condition of happy contentment: nursing and feeding.

Capable as this quartet of Australian lads were in many ways, in this they were novices. So it was with a look of ashamed helplessness that they gazed at the new passenger, as she lay in the bottom of the boat on her back, kicking her heels in the air at a great rate, and doubling her dimpled hands first into her eyes and then into her mouth. The cry went forth without ceasing, its only variation being the peculiar noise caused by an intermittent sucking of her diminutive fists.

By a happy thought of Jimmy the hunger difficulty was overcome. The boys had picked up a fine lot of oranges, as well as some dozens of plantains, in the back-water. After they had eaten a quantity they stowed the balance away in the bow locker, and completely forgot them in the exciting events which followed. Jimmy suddenly remembered the fruit. Selecting a fine specimen, he quickly peeled and quartered it. Then, seeding some of the quarters, he put one in baby's fist, guiding the same to her mouth. The sweet, juicy orange was simply nectar to the famished child. It sucked as only a hunger-bitten baby can. The boys were highly amused at the way in which she mouthed the skin, and the difficulty Jimmy encountered in unlocking her little fingers order to substitute a full for an empty quarter. It indeed a happy solution; an admirable recipe for tears and squalls. As long as baby had an orange quarter it was peaceful. After a little while Jimmy took the little one on his knee, giving furtive glances towards the others as he did so. The boys, however, under all the sad circumstances forebore to chaff. Substituting, at length, a ripe plantain for an orange section, the babe was taken to the seventh heaven of gastronomic bliss.

[image]

"The neighbours saw, far out on the wild, wreckage-strewn waters, a tiny boat with four slight figures."—See p. 69

And the while above them in the she-oak, whose thread-like leaves make mournful music to the wind, lies the mother who has sacrificed her life for that of the babe. There is no doubt of this. The poor woman must have been exposed to the winds and waves long before she reached the tree refuge. How she got there was never known. She had almost denuded herself to protect the babe. Little wonder that at some moment of that awful night vigil the vital spark should have quitted its terror-haunted tenement.

CHAPTER X
THE RETURN

"See the conquering hero comes!
Sound the trumpet, beat the drums."

After baby's hunger was satisfied the boys' attention was given to their immediate surroundings.

"What are we goin' to do about *her*?" asked Tom, pointing upward as he spoke.

"It's simply impossible for us to do anything. If she were alive we would take any risk. But as things are it is beyond our power to shift the body, it is jammed so tightly. The only thing left for us to do is to inform the police when we get to the other side."

"What'll we do now, Joe?"

"Get back to our former anchorage first. River's goin' down pretty fast, I reckon; and it'll be all dry about here before morning if it recedes at the same rate. The current is not nearly so strong as it was when we came over, and that will make it easier for us to get out of the clump. There's no need for us to go back by the same course. We can take a slant across to that red gum, and when we're there we're out of the stream."

The exit from the cluster of trees was very well managed, and in a few minutes from the time of casting adrift from the she-oak the boat was out of the clump and across the narrow stream into the slack water. They continued on to their former camping place, and hitched on to the tree.

This gallant attempt at rescue, though not accomplishing what was in the

minds of the boys, was not altogether a failure. Indeed, it was the reverse of that. Though but little time is consumed in reading the account of this episode, it covered a goodly portion of the day. By the time the boys had made fast to their former anchorage, the slanting sun-rays proclaimed the advance of eventide.

"Let's have a confab, chaps, on what's best to be done. I don't s'pose any of us is wanting to stick here all night. What d'you say, Tom?"

"I say pull over to the hillock on the other side of the slack. See! the water's retreated from the high ground. We could camp there, I dare say, easy enough, and get home early to-morrow morning. I don't think we ought to tackle the river to-night. I bet you it'd be a measly, tricky trip. So I vote to do as I said."

"What d'you say, Billy?"

"I say same as Tom. Plenty dry land over there. Might get matches in that house behind the hill. I'll pull 'possum outa spout, an' we'll roast 'im an' make bully feed."

Billy, as indeed were all the boys, was beginning to feel desperately hungry.

"What have you got to say, Jimmy?"

Jimmy Flynn, who had been gazing wistfully across the flood waters, turned round slowly as Joe put the question to him. "Oh, Joe! can't we get home to-night? The river isn't so bad as when we crost up at the Bend. There's not nearly so much timber goin' down now. 'Sides, it's easier crossing down here to what it was above. I give a straight vote for—home!"

"Bravo! Well done, Jimmy! You're a brick. It's just the word, an' we're the coves to do it. It's my vote too, my hearties. We've half an hour of sun left: say an hour before it's right dark. I reckon 'twill be about two mile an' a half from here to Tareela. It won't be near as difficult as up by the Bend. Yes, we'll do it, boys; an' the sooner the better. Then there's the blessed little baby, you know! Some of us would have to mind her in the night, an' what about your beauty sleep then? I reckon the kiddie would be too much for the whole boilin' of us. And I've a notion that too much fruit'll be worse for her than none at all. S'pose she gets the jim-jams! And, lastly, as father says when he's preaching, what about the old folks at home?"

There was no need to say anything further.

"I'm game, for one," said Tom.

"I'm game, for two," said Billy.

"I'm game, for three," said Jimmy.

"Put me down for the fourth," said Joe.

"Now, boys, that's settled. We'll tackle the river straight away; for better or for worse, as dad says in the marriage ceremony. And I say, chaps, let's ask God to help us."

Though there was no audible form of expression, the spirit of prayer was

in each boy's heart. He who sat above the floods heard and answered.

"Billy and Jimmy are to take the oars. We want the best men at the paddles. Now then, Tom, let the painter go an' keep the pole handy for driftwood."

The painter is slipped, and the boat's head is turned riverwards. She is soon out of the slack, and feels the full force of the flood. The starting-point was nearly a mile and a half above the township, so that there was a liberal margin for drift. The river was quite a mile wide. There was still a quantity of driftwood, and many difficulties beset them which made delicate steering and skilful management incumbent. When they had travelled about half the distance, Tom, who was eagerly conning the other shore, gave a shout, pointing at the same time to a headland above the village.

"Some 'un's waving! See 'em, over there!"

Mrs. Blain was the first to spy the advancing boat. The boys' mothers had been trapsing the lagoon shore and river-side for hours, in a semi-demented manner. The minister and the others had returned after a fruitless errand. The police, with a strong crew in the Government whale-boat, were scouring the shores in the vicinity of the Bend, and had not returned. The disappearance of the boys had seemed most mysterious until the break-away was discovered. Then the accident as it really happened was immediately conjectured. The profoundest sensation was created in the village, for the boys were dearly loved by all.

The feelings of the poor parents may be but faintly imagined. Great was the relief, therefore, when Mrs. Blain, whose eyes were devouring the flood waters in her frantic eagerness to discover some hopeful sign, suddenly screamed out in an alarming manner, gesticulating wildly as she did so, and acting to outward seeming in a frenzied fashion. Other searchers, scattered along the river-bank, hearing the piercing cry, and seeing the untoward gestures of the joy-possessed woman, came running towards her, thinking for the moment that she had lost her reason.

"See, see!" screamed she, pointing to a distant spot on the waters. "They're saved, they're saved! God be praised, our lovely boys are returning all safe; yes, one, two, three, four—the darlings."

Looking in the direction indicated, the neighbours saw, far out on the wild, impetuous, wreckage-strewn waters, a tiny boat with four slight figures running the blockade; threading their course between the thousand objects which intervene and threaten destruction.

The good news is now shouted from end to end of the township, and in a few minutes the river-bank is lined with exultant and yet anxious spectators. For the joy of the discovery of the lads is almost quenched at times by sights of the perils of the passage.

The mothers of Joe, Tom, and Jimmy are grouped together, wrought up to

such a pitch of anxiety as to be well-nigh silent. They noted every danger and counted every oar-stroke. The gallant rowers lifted their blades in the twilight, as the last rays sparkled on the flowing waters. Beyond a landward look the boys had no time to bestow upon the excited spectators. Eye and mind, in close conjunction, are continuously engaged in evading danger and maintaining the boat's position.

"We'll make the point," exclaimed Joe, after an interval of silence. "We'll make the point, all right. Keep her steady, lads," turning the boat's nose, as he spoke, well up stream, at an angle inclining shorewards. "Now, pull like a prize crew for five minutes an' we're there. We're out of the driftwood as it is."

The rowers needed no further stimulus. They bent to the oars like old salts.

"Capital! just the stroke! Keep it up! Hear 'em cheering!"

The cheering spurred on the boys, and in less than five minutes they landed in the midst of a wildly excited and loud-cheering crowd. And wasn't there a hugging and kissing, and hand-shaking and back-slapping!

Just as the women were up to their necks in it, to use a homely figure, some one happened to glance at the boat. The glance extorted a scream.

"A baby, a darling baby! See, see, see! a little baby in the boat!"

A moment's dazed surprise, and every one crowded to the boat. Joe, who had not moved far from the boat's nose, and who only waited for the violence of the welcome to abate a little that he might call attention to the precious freight, waved the jostling crowd back, and in a few words related the incident of the rescue.

A great wave of feeling passed over the crowd as he spoke. The women wept copiously as the scene was conjured us, and strong men unconsciously shed briny tears as the story reached its culminating point of the discovery of the helpless and orphaned babe, bound to the dead breast of her who had thus made the great sacrifice of motherhood.

While Joe was reciting the story of the rescue, Jimmy Flynn held on to his mother's arm and whispered excitedly into her ear. The narrator had hardly finished ere Mrs. Flynn stepped forward to his side and faced the crowd. Ordinarily, this woman was undemonstrative and shy. Now she is unconscious of any timidity. The moment was an inspired one; to produce which Jimmy's whisperings had played an important part.

"Mr. Blain, and friends all, give me the darling baby. It'll take the place of the one God took from me last month. The clothes'll fit——"

The bereft mother could get no further. Any woman who has lost a child will tell you why.

"My friends, you all know Mrs. Flynn, as I know her. If it were a matter of choosing between you, I should still say that no one in the town is better fitted

for the sacred duty of mothering this little flood-driven stranger. None of us can say to whom the child belongs; whether there is a father or near relations. But until it is claimed by those who can prove the right to do so, the very best of all possible arrangements, and one I regard as providential, will be for Mrs. Flynn to take this baby to nourish and cherish it."

The murmurs of assent were unanimous. Joe, without any more delay, stepped into the boat, and, picking up the child—which all this time looked round, wondering in its baby way at this ado—put the little one into its foster-mother's hands.

The river baby was evidently delighted beyond measure to receive a warm motherly embrace; judging, at any rate, by the way it gooed and crowed.

As soon as she could get through the admiring throng, Mrs. Flynn hastened home, and before long the baby, washed and dressed anew, was filling its "little Mary" with sweet new milk.

CHAPTER XI
THE BREAKING-UP

"With trumping horn and juvenile huzzas,
At going home to spend their Christmas days,
And changing Learning's pains for Pleasure's toys."
TOM HOOD.

Out through the gateway of the National School, on one sultry afternoon in late December, tumbled a pack of noisy boys and scarcely less noisy girls; the while they kicked up a fine dust, yelling in an uproarious fashion. Were you, a stranger, to ask the cause of this demonstration of voice and capering limbs, you would be answered by a score of voices in rousing chorus—

"Hip, hip, hurray for Christmas Day!
School's broke up, hip, hip, hurray!"

However strongly one might be disposed to question the quality of the couplet

as he listened to the trumpetings of this cluster of children, he would cheerfully admit the gusto of the proceedings as the juveniles issued pell-mell.

If truth be told, the master was no less pleased than the youngsters when the actual moment of dismissal came. Like all schools, this particular one was infected for weeks previously with a spirit of restlessness, which made it well-nigh impossible to secure the undivided attention of the children. There was no disposition for serious study, and Simpson, who was a wise teacher, attempted no coercive measures. Natural history was presented in its most attractive forms. Grammar and arithmetic were for the most part tabooed, and instead of puzzling refractory brains with arithmetical and grammatical abstractions, the children lived in the jungles of India, crossed Sahara, took a trip to the Booties, wandered into Arctic circles, or, what was equally exciting, made transcontinental trips in company with Sturt, Burke and Wills, Leichhardt, and other great Australian explorers.

Many were the schemes unfolded and plans laid by the boys during the last schooldays. The holidays would not be an undiluted playtime to any one of the boys. Many of the lads would work hard on the farms; their parents, bearing in mind the old adage of Satan and idle hands, will take good care to anticipate the sinister designs of that interfering old gentleman. The wood pile stood as an unfailing object of labour. Sheds were awaiting the whitewash brush. Fowl houses loomed expectant. Fences demanded attention. These, and many other duties about house and farm, were put off till the "holidays."

There were other anticipations, however, far more highly coloured and bewitching than these. Charm the schoolboy never so wisely, his thoughts, with a dogged obstinacy or triumphant breakaway, return to the delectable things of the groves, streams, mountains, and plains. Horse, gun, dog, rod, bat, duck, quail, pigeon; perch, bream, mullet; kangaroo, wallaby, dingo, brumby, scrubber! These are the sources and instruments of pleasure; things that people the imagination, and make an earthly paradise.

Sobering down, after an unusual indulgence in larks to mark the auspicious event, Joe, Tom, and Sandy, separating from the others, sauntered to the slip-rail entrance of the school horse-paddock. Joe and Tom, at the express request of Mrs. M'Intyre, are to spend the holidays with Sandy on the station. Here all kinds of fun and alluring adventure are promised the lads. How well that promise was redeemed let the sequel bear witness.

"Now then, you fellows, don't forget that you are to be at Bullaroi on the morning of Christmas Eve without fail."

"I say, ole boss, what does eve mean?"

"Eve! Why, a—er—short for evening, I s'pose. What makes you ask, Joe?"

"Well, if Christmas Eve is evening, how can we be there in the mornin'?—

you savee?"

"You're mighty smart, Blain, but did you ever know an evening that didn't have a morning to it?"

"Oh—ah—yes, I see. We're to come out on the morning of the evening. Sure it's an Irishie ye ought to be instead of a Scotchie."

"Scotchie or no Scotchie," replied Sandy, who was the essence of good-humour, "ye're not to be later than ten o'clock of the forenoon of the day before Christmas. There! Will that fit you, you pumpkin-headed son of a bald-bellied turnip?"

"Thanks, M'Intyre; I'm sure my father'll be delighted when I tell him the respectful titles you've given him," returned Joe, with mock sarcasm.

"He'll no dispute the title of his son's head, anyhow," flung back the Scotch lad, as, bridle in hand, he strolled on to round up his steed.

This parthian shot nettled Joe, but the answer he would have given remained unuttered, for at this moment his eldest sister appeared and beckoned to him in an emphatic manner, at the same time calling upon him to hurry. So, contenting himself with levelling Midshipman Easy's masonic sign at the retreating lad, he hurried along towards his sister.

"Father wants you to go down the river with him in the boat."

"Where's it to?"

"Down to Beacon Point. Tom Tyler's had a bad accident, and they've sent for the doctor; but he's away. He was called out to a bad case at Dingo Creek head station, and is not expected to be back till midday to-morrow. So they've asked father to go down, and you've to hurry along. Father's waiting down at the boat for you."

Mr. Blain was waiting at the boat with everything that was required for the trip. As soon as the lad was in, he pushed off, and, taking the stern oar, with Joe at the bow, father and son started on their twelve-mile pull.

In answer to the boy's question the minister gave some details of the accident, and, further, informed the lad that it was his intention to call at Mrs. Robinson's, distant about five miles from Tareela.

They had now settled down to a steady stroke, and as the sun was on its westering wheel, and the sting out of its slanting rays, the row became enjoyable. Mr. Blain was a sort of newsletter to the settlers, and in his trips up-stream and down-stream was frequently hailed and made the target of questioning from the riverbank.

Robinsons' was reached a little before sunset, where they were made abundantly welcome. Some years previously Mr. Robinson met his death by one of those accidents all too common in new settlements. Felling scrub timber is a risky performance. It so happened that in felling a stout fig tree, Robinson failed

to notice some lawyer vines that, hanging from the high branches, had attached themselves to the bare limbs of an adjacent dead tree.

Standing at the base and watching the toppling fig tree, as it slowly swayed preparatory to its final crash, he was unaware that the cable-like vines were retarding its progress. Gathering way, however, the falling tree brought a strain upon the vine, and tore away a heavy limb of the dead tree. This falling upon the axe-man, killed him instantly.

The widow was blest with a family of boys and girls who were true grit. Misfortune breaks some people—it makes others. The latter was the truth in this case.

In all the trying times Mrs. Robinson underwent, the minister was her friend and counsellor.

CHAPTER XII
DOWN THE RIVER

"When the full moon flirts with the perigee tide,
On a track of silver away we ride,—
Oh, glorious times we have together,
My boat and I in the summer weather."
ELLA WHEELER WILCOX.

The boat was sighted from Robinsons' some time before its nose grated on the shingle at the landing-place.

Isaac, the younger son, a giant in stature and a prime favourite with Joe, was at the landing-stage. Seizing the bow what time it touched land, he half lifted, half dragged the boat two-thirds of her length out of the water, and made her fast to an old stump.

"Mother's so glad you've come, sir. She wants to talk with you about that boy of Maguire's, who's bin givin' us a lot of trouble."

"Won't be able to stay long, Ike. We've got to be at Beacon Point to night. We just put in for a cup of tea and a bite. Mother's inside, I suppose? I'll go in and have a chat with her."

"You'll find her in the kitchen, sir. When we saw you roundin' Piccaniny

Point we knew you'd be here for tea, and mother's lookin' after things."

"I hope she won't go to any trouble. A mouthful is all we want."

"Well, you know mother, sir. She feels that nothin' is near good enough."

"Any pancakes for tea, Ike?"

"Pancakes! Why, of course. That's what mother's makin' now. She knew that'd be the first thing you'd be askin' fur, Joe."

"Rather, Ike!" said Joe, pursing his mouth and drawing in his breath with the peculiar, half-whistling, unwriteable sound which boys instinctively make when visions of goodies arise. More especially when such goodies come within measurable distance of consumption.

Master Joe had a healthy boy's appetite. The rowing exercise gave additional spice to his hunger. Pancake was at that moment the gate of entry to the boy's very material heaven.

"Tea won't be ready fur a few minutes, Joe. Let's go down to the barn. I was just goin' to rub some more mixture inter the skins when I seen your boat roundin' the point. Sorry you're goin' on, my son. When I seen you on the river I ses to meself, ses I, 'By George! Joey an' I'll have a great night at the 'possums.' I wish to goodness you'd been stayin'. There'll be a grand moon ter night, an it's very temptin'."

"By gum, ain't it just! It'd be simply, rippin'. 'Member last time I was down? That was a grand bit of sport we had. Forty-seven was it, or forty-nine? I know it took a dashed long time to skin 'em."

"Forty-seven it was. We'd do over fifty to-night."

"Well, as mother says, 'What can't be cured must be endured.' By dad! that's a grand wallaby skin! Where'd you get it?"

"Got it larst night." Ike had the Colonial drawl to perfection. "I was up at the top end of the scrub cultivation paddick, mooseying around after some cockatoos that'd bin skinnin' the corn. It was just about dusk, an' I was waitin' in the corner for the cockies, as I knew they'd soon be leavin' fur their roosts, an' my bes' charnse at 'em was on the wing. They're so 'tarnal cute, yer know, yer carn't git 'em on the corn."

"I know. Didn't I try my best to stalk 'em the last time I was down, Ike! I got three altogether, you 'member, an' you said it'd be a crest apiece to take home to the girls."

"Waal, as I was sayin', I'd sarcumvented the ole boss cockie, which was keeping watch in the dead gum-tree that stood in the middle of the patch, an' was posted in the middle of the corner expectin' them ter fly over every minit. But ole Pincher, who was chevyin' about, starts this ere boss outer the pumpkin vines; they're death on pumpkins, yer know. The dorg made a dash at 'im, an', by jings! he did streak. Greased lightnin' wasn't in it with 'im. I tried to draw a

bead on 'im, but, what with the dusk an' the bushes an' stumps, I couldn't get a good line. I banged away one barril, but was yards off, I reckon.

"Pincher, he disappeared in a brace of shakes, an' I made sure the vermin ud get through a 'ole in the fence. I was makin' for 'ome, 'cause the cockies, yer know, 'ad all gone. All of a suddent I heers a yelp, an' knew ole Pinch 'ad somehow 'eaded 'im. Reckon 'e missed the 'ole, or the dorg'd never got near 'im. Anyhow, 'e was a-streakin' a bit now, an' Pinch at 'is 'eels. He was makin' fur the maize agen. I lined 'im this time all right, though it was a longish shot; about sixty-five I reckon; an' dropped 'im clean at the very edge."

"It's a prime pelt, anyway."

"Yaas, 'e was a grand ole buck fur a wally; about the biggest I've got this season."

"How many skins have you taken, Ike?"

"Two more'n I'd 'ave six dozen."

"Gettin' a good price for 'em?"

"Waal, Jack Croft, 'e offered me nine shillin' a dozen fur 'em. There are about twenty kangaroos among 'em. Jack reckoned it was a stiff price, an' 'e sed 'e'd not offer anythin' near it but fur the kangaroo skins, which 'e 'ad a fancy fur."

"Old Jack can put it on, you know."

"Oh, I know Jack all right! Me an' 'im's 'ad dealin' afore. Jacky's not too bad, but 'e knows 'ow to draw the long bow. Anyway, ole Eb Dowse's boat'll be along nex' week. He's sent word ter say as 'e'd do a deal with me fur 'em."

"Better wait an' see what Eb'll shell out for 'em, Ike, I reckon. German Harry, up the river, says he can always knock a shillin' a dozen more out of Eb than Jack."

"I ain't hurryin', Joe."

Just then the welcome supper cooee reached their ears. The boys lost no time in getting to the supper-table. Joe instinctively eyed the contents. Cold streaky bacon; a big dish of fried pumpkin and potatoes; a mountain of home-made bread, sliced; a basin of prime butter; Cape gooseberry jam galore, and amber-tinted honey in the comb. What more could any hungry lad desire?

Mary Robinson, a great tease, caught Joe's glance, and said, with an amused smile, "No pancakes to-night, Joe."

Joe was abashed for the fraction of a second. Quickly rallying, he laughingly said, "Tell another, Mary, while your mouth's hot."

"Very well, my boy! If you don't believe me ask our black tom-cat. He chased a mouse into the batter and upset the bowl; so there!"

"Mary, Mary!" remonstrated Mrs. Robinson. "There's only a grain of truth in the pound of fiction she's giving you, Joe. The cat, it is true, did chase a mouse; but it did not jump into the batter, nor was the bowl upset. The pancakes are

cooked, with currans in 'em; just the sort you like; and they're keeping hot by the fire."

"Thanks awfully, Mrs. Robinson; I believe *you* anyway. As for Mary, she's like Sandy M'Intyre's old, toothless sheep-dog."

"How's that, Joe?" interjected Ike.

"Bark's worse than her bite."

"My stars! what originality, what refinement! Sandy's razor is not in it with master Joe Blain for sharpness. I'll remember this, though, the next time you ask me to go out to the scrub with you for passion fruit. Anyhow, there's no resemblance between you and Sandy's wonderful barker."

"*Indeed!*"

"No; your bark's noisy enough, but your bite's a hundred times worse—especially when pancakes are about."

With this "Roland" Mary ran out to the kitchen to get the teapot.

Joe made a royal repast, topping off with the hot pancakes at a rate which caused his father to dryly remark: "Too much pancake won't help the boat along, my boy."

Tea finished, the visitors prepare to continue their voyage. With Ike's powerful assistance the boat is shoved into the water, and her nose pointed downstream. In due time Beacon Point is reached.

CHAPTER XIII

OFF FOR THE HOLIDAYS!

"Boyhood is the natural time for abundant play and laughter, without which rarely does high health touch young cheeks with its rose-bloom, or knit bones strongly for the fighting and the toiling that awaits them."—JOSEPH H. FLETCHER.

"Now then, Norah, look slippy with breakfast! It's half-past six, an' Sandy's to be here at seven. Said he'd leave the station at five with the spare horse for me."

"Begorrah! at the rate breakfast's cookin' it'll be midnight before it's ready. 'Tis the bastliest wood that niwer was."

"Time the fish was fryin', Norah."

"Fish, bedad! For two pins ye wuddent have anny fish. The thrubble Oi've

had wid thim! Phwat for did youse lave thim in the bag all night? If ye'd put thim out on the dish, ye spalpeen, Oi'd have seen thim and claned thim long ba-fore Oi wint to bed. 'Sted of which it's tuk me two morchial hours to scale the brutes, they was that dry and hard. Be Saint Pathrick, they scales was loike porky-pine's pricklies!"

"Sorry, Norah; my fault as usual," remarked Joe good-humouredly. "Father called out to turn the horse from the lucerne just as I reached the back door. So I threw the bag down on the steps to chase the moke, an' clean forgot 'em when I came back."

"Well, Oi'll forgive ye wanst more, which makes about a million tousandth toime; but, moind ye, 'tis——"

"All serene, Norah! Oh, I say, Norry, I'd nearly forgotten it! Paddy Lacey asked me yesterday to tell you that they want you to go to the Hibernian picnic on Boxing Day. They've chartered the *Firefly*, an' are goin' down to the Bar."

"God's truth! 'tis only gammoning me ye are, Masther Joe. It's a young thrick ye be, indade, with yure Hayburnion picnacs."

"It's as true as true, Norah. No make-up this time. An' oh! I say, d'you know what Jimmy Flynn tole Tom Hawkins?"

"Nawthin' good, bedad!"

"Ain't it! Well, opinions differ. At any rate he was goin' to set a line on Friday night, an' as he was roundin' the point he hears somewheres ahead of him a noise between a smack an' a crack. Then comes a bit of a squeal, an' a woman's voice sings out: 'Don't, stop it!' Then there was another smack-crack, an' just as he got round the corner he sees a couple, for all the world like you and Paddy, sittin' on a log. No, 'twas Paddy that was on the log, an' you were on Paddy's——"

"Ye loi-in spalpeen! Oi'll pull yure tongue from betune yure teeth," screamed Norah, as, blushing furiously, she chased the nimble Joe out of the kitchen right into the arms of Sandy M'Intyre, as he was coming up the back doorstep.

"Hello, Sandy!"

"Hello, Joe! What's row inside? Norah givin' you the rounds of the kitchen as usual, eh?"

"Only jiggin' her about Paddy Lacey, an' got her *paddy* up a bit. You're up to time, Sandy, ole man. By jing! I see you've brought Curlew in. Am I to ride him? My word! it is good of your governor to let me. I thought you'd a brought the piebald."

"So I intended, but he was limpin' when he was run into the stockyard; so father says, 'Take Curlew.'"

Curlew was Mr. M'Intyre's favourite horse, and Joe was highly honoured

in being allowed to ride this mettlesome but lovely paced steed.

Just then breakfast appeared. After a substantial meal Joe brought out his father's valise and strapped it to the saddle.

"All ready, Sandy? Good-bye, mother. Good-bye, father. Good-bye, girls!"

And so, with kisses and cautions from the family, the boys mounted their steeds and cantered down the street to the punt, on their way to Bullaroi, as Mr. M'Intyre's station was called.

Across the river the boys were joined by Tom Hawkins, who was to accompany them. Tom, who was mounted on a brisk pony, greeted them with a cheery cry as the punt reached the shore. A jollier trio of young Australians could not be found than this chattering, capering band, who on that brilliant morning raced along the bush track.

Plans of fun and frolic were projected during the ride, including astounding adventures that would have taken half a year to carry out. In anticipation the lads were already having tip-top fun. Tom's riotous imagination, especially, made the spoils of the gun, the rod, and the chase to assume brobdingnagian proportions.

In due course they pulled up at the slip-rails marking the Bullaroi boundary line. Thence to the white gate seen in the distance, and which fronted the homestead, a mad race ensued. In this Curlew was first, the rest nowhere. Indeed, Curlew became so excited by the gallop and the shrill shoutings of the riders that Joe, who had made no attempt to pull him till the horse was almost on the gate, found it impossible to stop his steed, which was full of running. Before the boy fully realised it, Curlew was soaring through the air, clearing the gate by at least a couple of feet. Joe, parting from the "pigskin," was sailing through space on his own account, leaving a foot or two between his sit-down and the saddle seat.

Joe, though a fair rider, was not a practised steeple-chaser. He was not a horseman, as were Sandy and Tom, who were to the manner born. Little wonder, then, that his heart rose with the horse and his rider, and for some brief moments palpitated furiously in his mouth. That mysterious and natural law of the universe called gravitation was on hand, however, and saved the situation.

Curlew's hoofs struck the ground on the descending curve as lightly as a cat. Joe's legs, which in this aerial flight had assumed the shape of an inverted V, came plop into the saddle at the right moment. But his body was thrown forward, his hands clutching frantically at the horse's neck and mane. In this condition, unable to recover his equilibrium, with but the loss of his hat, the rider is carried over the intervening distance to the stables, amid loud laughter from the station people, who had been attracted by the shouting of the boys.

Sandy cleared the gate in pursuit of Joe, but failed to catch him. Tom was obliged to haul up and open the gates, as the jump was too high for his pony. Thus the rider of Curlew came in a winner, and all three dismounted amid laughter and

teasings.

"Weel, Joseph, my lad," said Mr. M'Intyre, who possessed a pawky humour, "Johnny Gilpin couldna hae done the trick better. You kep' up wi' Curlew, anyway. I thocht he was goin' to leave ye behind. Ma certie it's deeficult to say which is the winner, you or the horse. We'll juist ca' it neck an' neck."

"Take no heed to him, Joe," said Mrs. M'Intyre. She saw through the lad's apparent good-humour a sense of humiliation at his unhorsemanlike entry. "You did well to stick to him, not knowing his intention. But come away in, boys; ye'll be ready for something to eat after that ride. We're right glad to see you. Sandy was so excited last night at the prospect of your coming that I am sure he didn't sleep a wink. Why, he had the horses saddled at dawn, and was off without a bite if I hadn't stopped him and made him drink a cup of coffee."

The day was a busy one on the station. Every one was engaged in finishing off jobs and cleaning up. For during Christmas week, and until after New Year's Day, only that which was absolutely necessary in the way of work was expected.

During the previous week drafting and mustering had been the all absorbing work on the run. That finished, and a mob of "fats" despatched overland to Maitland to catch the Christmas market, the last few days were occupied in culling "boilers" and in branding calves. On this particular day all the available hands were engaged in tidying up; the whitewash bucket being in great request.

Willy and Jacky, the aboriginal boys, together with an Irish lad,—Norah's brother, in fact,—were enrolled as whitewash artists. Their special work consisted in converting dingy looking hen-roosts, dog-kennels, pigsties, milking sheds, and the like into a brilliant white. Meanwhile two of the men, with rough brooms made of stiff brushes, were sweeping the ground within a fair radius of the house.

Inside, the housework was prosecuted with great vigour. Two gins were set to work with the scrubbing brush; while in the kitchen, where Mrs. Mac and the two elder daughters were domiciled, Christmas cooking went on apace. There was, indeed, such a weighing of flour and raisins, such a slicing of candied peel, such a dressing of flesh and fowl as to make Ah Fat, the cook, fairly amazed, and to wonder how in the name of Confucius the oven was to stand the cooking strain that was being brought upon it. While from the kitchen an odoriferous perfume was wafted across the yard, assaulting all noses, and breeding high anticipation, most pleasurable from the standpoint of creature comforts.

Mr. M'Intyre, no patron of idleness either in man or boy, took the lads early in the day into the harness room, and set them to the task of cleaning the saddle and harness ware. Saddles, girths, bridles, various sets of light and heavy harness, required attention. All leather was to be well cleaned and oiled, stirrups and bits to be burnished, and broken straps to be repaired.

The pals threw themselves, *con amore*, into the work. It was hard to say which moved the more briskly, tongues or hands. The afternoon was well advanced before the last piece of steel and electro silver was polished, the last girth and surcingle refitted, and the whole placed on their respective brackets. This task finished, the boys felt that they had earned the promised reward—a glorious swim. Within a couple of hours of sunset the whole of the outside work was accomplished, and, for the time being, each employé was a free agent.

The homestead faced a large affluent of the river, which was known as Crocodile Creek. Why the creek was so named was a sort of a mystery. No species of the saurian tribe was ever known to infest its waters. The name may have been given to it through some fancied resemblance in its course to the aforesaid reptile.

Crocodile Creek formed a fine frontage to Bullaroi run, being distant from the homestead about a quarter of a mile. Immediately opposite, the creek widened out into a fine sheet of water some three miles long, and varying in width from one hundred to one hundred and fifty yards. There was a particular spot which stood about seven or eight feet above the water. Here Mr. M'Intyre had a spring-board constructed. The water was fully twelve feet deep at the jump off, and, added to other advantages, formed an ideal spot for bathing purposes.

Having finished their allotted tasks, the lads came bounding out of the harness-room and across the yard to the house, shouting, as they capered, "Who's for a swim?" The stockmen certainly looked, and no doubt felt, that the one thing above all others necessary for their ease and comfort after the stable and the house-yard cleaning operations was a plunge into the cool, sweet waters of the creek. If they were semi-black by reason of their employment, it was no less true that the black boys, Willy and Jacky, were semi-white.

Dennis Kineavy, the Irish lad, was the "broth of a bhoy," and all three were cram full of impishness. No sooner were the finishing touches of whitewash decoration given, than Denny, sneaking up behind Willy and Jacky, who stood off a little from the hen-roost admiring their artistic handicraft—with capacious brush well charged with the sediment of his bucket—smote them in quick succession across the bare shoulders and breech, and then, with an Irish yell, darted round the stable.

Surprised for the moment, but nothing loath, the black boys snatched their buckets, wielded their brushes, and, shouting their native war-cry, dashed off in hot pursuit; Denny dodged them successfully for a while, but was at length outflanked, and then ensued a battle royal which only ceased when the supplies of ammunition (whitewash) were exhausted.

It was at the tail-end of the fray that Sandy and his mates came racing along with the cry of, "Swim O! Swim O!"

Boys and men, black and white, were all ready and willing, nay, eager, for a jolly bogey.[#] There was a rush by the whites for towels; then, in quick procession, the motley band made for the water.

[#] "Bogey," native name for bathe.

After a plunge and a short swim to get rid of the dust and muck, an impromptu carnival was arranged. First of all came the long dive. This meant a run along the spring-board and a dive straight out. The diver in each case, when reaching the surface, had to tread water, keeping as nearly as possible to the spot of emergence.

Tom Hawkins led off, the others followed in order at twenty seconds' interval. The blacks, by reason of their native abilities in this direction, were made to do the dive with arms interlocked, Siamese twin fashion. The darkies were the whippers-in of this diving procession. Tom, who led off, faltered in his stride when leaving the spring-board. He rose to the surface at about thirty feet from the bank. Joe, who followed, dived a good ten feet farther out than Tom. Sandy, however, when he shot up through the water, was fully fifty feet from the shore. Both of the stockmen beat Joe, but were behind Sandy.

Then came the blacks, side by side. With an even, measured, and springy stride they raced down the board, which was wide enough to admit of this manoeuvre. They took the water without a splash, like a pair of frogs, leaving scarce a ripple. It was naturally thought that by being coupled in this way matters would be evened. It was the general opinion that they would fail to reach Sandy's limit, and probably not get beyond Joe's. The boys eagerly awaited their reappearance, watching the water closely for some sign. After what appeared to be an interminable period they were startled by a double cooee, and, lo! the twins, so to speak, had risen at least twenty feet beyond Sandy, or seventy feet from the shore.

Somersault diving followed the long distance trial. In thia Harry the stockman, who had been a circus rider and acrobat in his youthful days, outshone all the others.

Then came the exciting game of "catch the devil." Willy was chosen devil. It was his business to dive off the spring-board and run the gauntlet, the others being scattered in the water. To catch the aboriginal seemed a comparatively easy matter, all things considered. He was, however, a superb swimmer and trickster, diving and dodging like a cormorant. A dozen times surrounded, he marvellously eluded his pursuers. The game was at its height, and there was no knowing how long the "devil" would remain at large, when the station bell rang out a lusty

summons to supper.

This brought the carnival to an instant conclusion. And now each swimmer scrambled for the shore, and soon the whole company, with clean bodies and healthy appetites, were hieing along the track. When the boys reached home they found a new arrival in the person of a young Englishman. This gentleman was out on a business tour, and, being anxious to see something of station life, was recommended to Mr. M'Intyre by a mutual friend. Mrs. M'Intyre's hospitality was proverbial, and Neville, for such was the "new chum's" name, was heartily made welcome.

The day had been a long one, and, supper ended, the boys were quite resigned to go to bed, or at least to the bedroom. The noises therefrom, after their retirement, were very suggestive of prime larks, and continued long after lights were out. The pals were domiciled, to their great delight, in a big spare room, which contained a double bed and a single one. Joe and Tom shared the former, while Sandy camped on the latter, which was, indeed, his stretcher brought in for the occasion.

Silence reigned supreme at length within, and without was broken only by the hoarse croaking of the frogs, an occasional call from a night owl, and the weird wail of the curlew.

CHAPTER XIV

CHRISTMAS FUN AND FROLIC

"It was the time when geese despond
And turkeys make their wills;
The time when Christians to a man
Forgive each other's bills.
It was the time when Christmas glee
The heart of childhood fills."
BRUNTON STEPHENS.

Daylight had barely broken. The only stir in the household is that produced by Joe, whose slumber had been disturbed by the persistent crawling of flies across his face.

There are three things in animated nature which run each other very closely for the supremacy in downright tenacity to purposeful cussedness. Pig, Hen, Fly—these three! And of the three, the cussedest and most exasperatingly tenacious to its rooted purpose of squeezing in between one's eyelids, sinking a well in the corner of one's eye, or climbing the inside walls of one's nose, is the Australian species of the common house-fly.

It is possible at times to circumvent the "gintilman wot pays the rint," and persuade him to return through the same hole in the fence which gave him escape, by appearing to be anxious to drive him out on to the plain. That is pig strategy; or rather, strategy with a pig. He is beaten, so to speak, by the law of contrairy. When all resources fail in persuading the hen that the flour-bin, or the linen basket, is not specially constructed to suit her convenience in the daily duty of egg producing, one can at the last resort requisition the services of Madame la Guillotine.

But neither strategy nor tactics, neither force nor fraud, avail anything when the early fly, with recruited energies and fiendish intent, starts on her mission of seeking whom and what she may annoy. She—it is quite safe to put the insect in the feminine gender—can be neither coaxed, persuaded, shoo'd, deceived, frightened, nor driven from her prey. The fly always wins—in the end.

Driven from Blanket Bay on this eventful Christinas morning by the incorrigible fly, Joe proceeded at once to reverse the Golden Rule, and promptly made war upon his mates on that morning which, of all the days in the year, makes for peace and goodwill among men.

Tom had sought refuge from the fly in the bed-clothes, and muffled nasal monotones made a sonorous chorale. On the other hand, Sandy, impervious to all impious fly assaults, lay on his back, mouth wide open, breathing heavily and steadily. Sandy was of the pachydermatous order. Neither mosquito nor fly troubled him. The flies evidently found his eyes to be a dry patch, while they were unable to obtain a permanent foothold at his nostrils owing to the intermittent, horse-like snorts which blew them as from the mouth of a blunderbuss. But they heavily fringed his mouth, eating with manifest relish their bacilli breakfast.

In a jiffy the bed-clothes are whipped off the slumbering lads, and in less than no time the latter, pillows in hand, make common cause against the aggressor. Joe puts up a gallant fight, but the odds are too much for him; he is driven into a corner at last and unmercifully pelted.

This prelude to the day's enjoyment concluded, the pals jump into their clothes and proceed to execute the second item on the day's programme, namely, a horseback scamper through the bush before breakfast.

Oh, the glory of it! Out from the confines of four walls into the open spaces of the world when night is merging into day; to move in the dawn of a new day;

to stand enwrapped in its pearl-grey mantle ere the mounting sun has turned its soft shades to rosy brilliance; to inhale the spicy breeze which, during the night watches, having extracted the perfumes of the forest flowers, comes heavily freighted o'er gully and range, and diffuses the sweet odours as the reward of the early riser. And then—to watch the daily miracle of sunrise!

"See! the dapple-grey coursers of the morn
Beat up the light with their bright silver hoofs
And chase it through the sky."

Sandy, on old Rufus, kept for that work, soon rounds-up and yards several steeds from the horse-paddock. From these three are picked and saddled; and ere the rising sun has walked "o'er the dew of yon high eastern hills," the lads are scampering through bush and brake, o'er dale and hill. They chivy the silent kangaroo through the lush grass; have a glorious burst after a belated dingo; rouse screaming parrots and paroquets from their matutinal meal off the honey blossoms of box and apple trees; pulling up at last on the summit of a dome-shaped, treeless hill, from whence, with the bloom of the morning still upon it, the landscape extends in a vast stretch of undulation, broken at irregular intervals by silver ribbons of creek and river.

Belts of scrub and forest, rich pasturages and arable lands, are dotted here and there, with minute spots from which rise slender threads of smoke indicating settlers' houses; while away in the background are the purple hills and the blue mountains.

Boys are not usually considered to be impressionable creatures on the æsthetic side of things. Herein we wrong them. They may not attitudinise, nor spout poetry when under the supreme touches of nature, for the boy is too natural to be theatrical. But, without doubt, the morning and evening glories of dear old mother earth do touch their sense of beauty; and though these impressions may seem to be effaced by other and more sordid things, nevertheless they linger through the long years, called up from time to time in sweet association with days that are no more.

The lads, while they rested their steeds, stood in silent and wondering gaze, broken at last by Tom, who, pointing across the intervening spaces to the broadest of the many silver threads, exclaimed, "Tender's Tareela!" Many miles away, as the crow flies, lay the river village, a small cluster of dots, a few of which glistened in the sunlight. These shining spots indicated the "superior" houses that sported corrugated iron roofs, new in those days. For the most part the "roof-trees" were shingle or bark.

And now, homeward bound, the horsemen slither down the hillside, plunge into a pine scrub, to emerge therefrom on the border of a small plain, and chase a mob of brumbies grazing thereon. They, with snorting nostrils and waving manes, headed by a notorious grey stallion—of whom more anon—dash up a ravine into the fastnesses of the scrub, and, though followed some distance by the reckless riders, vanish from sight with a celerity possible only to wild bush-horses.

Skirting now the banks of the Crocodile, they disturb flocks of teal, widgeon, water-hen, and other aquatic birds. At length they give a view halloo, for the old homestead is in sight. This scares a flock of cockatoos that are camping in the river gums, after an early morning's poaching expedition to the adjacent maize-fields, and brings out the station dogs with a babble of barking, as they pound up the track with a final spurt.

"Breakfast ready, Ah Fat?" sings out Sandy, as the boys come rushing into the kitchen from the stables.

"Leddy? Tes, allee globble upee! Missee say no kleep anyling for bad boy. Lockee allee glub." Ah Fat's twinkling, humorous eyes redeemed his hatchet face and stolid countenance.

"It's all right, fellows. He's only pokin' borak at us," said Sandy, giving the Celestial a familiar slap. "Come along, I'm as hungry as a hunter. They've only started, I know."

The family were seated, heads were bent, and Mr. M'Intyre was saying the long Scotch grace, when the boys burst into the room with a fine clatter. The rude intrusion brought a severe remonstrance from that gentleman when the exercise was concluded. Mrs. M'Intyre—always ready to defend the boys and to champion them, to condone their faults and to extol their virtues, in which she was wise or otherwise, as the reader may decide—broke in with a Christmas greeting. For a minute there was a fusillade of "Merry Christmas to you and many of them!"

"Now, boys, take your seats before breakfast's cold."

On proceeding to their places the boys stood stock still, for there, resting against their respective chairs, stood three brand-new, double-barrel shot-guns.

"Weel, bairns!" exclaimed Mr. M'Intyre, with quiet amusement, surveying the amazed boys as they gazed at the weapons. "What are ye frichtened at? Is it snakes y're lukin' upon? Why dinna ye sit doon to yure food?"

"Oh, father! mother!" cried Sandy at last, picking up his gun, pleasure beaming from his face. "This is what Harry meant when he said last night he'd brought out a parcel from the town that'd come by steamer." Then with a rush, Joe and Tom at his heels, he danced round the abashed Scotchman, and gave him a hug, repeating the dose with interest on Mrs. M'Intyre. It was hard for the boys to settle down to breakfast and dislodge their eyes from the weapons. What their

souls coveted most was a gun. The clamant claims of hunger, however, are not to be disregarded; so, stacking their guns in a corner, the boys did ample justice to a generous meal.

"Did you have a pleasant ride this morning, boys?" inquired Mrs. M'Intyre. "You've not been out on the run before, Tom, have you?"

"No, ma'am. We'd a good time, though!"

"How far did you go, Sandy?"

"To the top of Bald Hummock, mother."

"Splendid view from the top, is it not, Joe?"

"Not bad, Mrs. M'Intyre."

"That's a negative descreeption o' ane o' the graundest sichts the hale deestric' can boast," said Mr. M'Intyre, with emphasis.

Joe became conscious of the banality.

"An' why did ye no' tak' Mr. Neville wi' you, boys? Ye did wrang no' to invite him to ride wi' you. I think ye owe him an apologee, Saundy."

"I'm very sorry," said the lad, turning in some confusion to Mr. Neville. "If I'd thought——"

"Oh, I shouldn't have dreamed of going out at such an early hour, my lad," replied Neville loftily. He had a somewhat affected accent and a superior air. "I nevvah exert myself before breakfast. Besides, I am not sure that I should find a safe escort in a parcel of—er—schoolboys. With the young ladies, now," he continued, fixing his monocle and bestowing a patronising stare upon Sandy's sisters, Maggie and Jessie, "I—I—should be delighted to go for a bush ride, as I think these equestrian expeditions are called in Awestralia, in the cool of the afternoon."

"We don't call them even bush rides out here, Mr. Neville," answered Jessie saucily. She resented patronage. "We call 'em spins. Boys, I vote we all go for a spin this afternoon. Let's ride as far as Ben Bolt's cave. It'll be something interesting to show Mr. Neville. Ben Bolt's a famous bushranger hereabouts, you know, and the cave is a favourite rendezvous for his gang, as well as a safe hiding-place. At least, it was so until a few months ago, when the police and black trackers discovered it, and nearly nabbed him. Fancy having a bushranger's camp on the Bullaroi boundary! But Ben never uses it now. So let's ride out to it. Are you game, boys?"

"Game!" snorted Sandy. "What's to be game about? The main thing is, will Mr. Neville care for an eighteen-mile spin? If not, we could go for a short ride down the Crocodile."

"Please don't question my ability, boy!" retorted the new chum, who resented the implication contained in Sandy's remark. "I find," continued he, addressing his host, "you good people out heah seem to think that Awestralia is the

only place where horseback riding is indulged in——"

"We ride steers also, an' billies too," slyly interjected Joe, with a wink at the girls.

"And we read that they ride donkeys and—er—hobby-horses in England," chipped in Jessie, whose eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Good for you, ole Jess! Let 'em bring out their English fox-hunters an' steeple-chasers that they brag so much about, and we'll give 'em a dingo run, or a go at cutting out scrubbers,[#] an' see how they'd be with their pretty coats an' breeches, at the tail of the hunt!"

[#] Wild, unbranded cattle, frequenting scrub country,

"Are ye addressing the English nation or oor guest, Saundy?"

M'Intyre could be caustic when he willed. He had no liking for Australian blow, and hit at it as he would hit at a snake, whenever occasion arose. He now turned the laugh against his son, Jess laughing loudest of all.

"It's settled, then, that we ride out to the cave this afternoon?" said Maggie, with an inquiring eye on Neville.

"I'm shore 'twill be a pleasant jaunt, Miss M'Intyre," replied the Englishman. "I shall have pleasure in acting as your escort. But this—er—famous—er—notorious—er—highwayman, is it—er—safe? I mean—er—I'm thinking of the—er—ladies, you know."

"What's to be afraid of?" quoth Jessie. To her, risk meant spice, an added zest. Her whole heart went out to the life of the open air and the pleasures of the chase. Her greatest delight was in a mad scamper through the bush behind the dogs, in the kangaroo hunt.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Neville; Mag and I'll protect you should the—er—famous—notorious—bushranger—highwayman turn up," went on the audacious minx. "I'd dearly love to see Ben Bolt. I think he's a lot better than many who run him down. Oh my! wouldn't it be fun if we surprised him in the cave? I'd——"

"Stop, Jess; cease your blether!" said Mr. M'Intyre sternly. "The mon may no' be as black as he's pented, but he's no' an honest mon. Misguided he may be to an extent, and no' a'thegither answerable for some of the steps in his doonward career, but a creeminal for a' that, whom the country were weel rid o'. But as for the reesk, there's na reesk in ridin' to the cave. The Sub-Inspector telt me a few days ago that Ben Bolt's gone o'er the border. News is to hand to the effect that he stuck up a Chinaman on the Brisbane road. So the cave's safe enough."

"That's settled, then," broke in Maggie. "If we leave here about four o'clock

'twill be early enough, and will give us plenty of time to get back by dark."

"Maidie, my pet," said Mrs. M'Intyre to her little three-year-old, a dainty, precocious miss, "what are you staring at? It's rude to stare at any one like that."

"Oh, muzzer!" exclaimed the child, turning her bright eyes mother-wards for a moment and then fixing them with a fascinated gaze upon the Englishman.

"What is it that interests you, little girl?" remarked Neville in a patronising tone. "Is it the colour of my tie?"

Maidie shook her curly head, and, without removing her eyes from Mr. Neville's face, leaned towards Jessie, who sat next to her, and whispered, "The genkilmun's got somesin' on his fevvers."

Suspended from the tip of one of Neville's incipient moustaches was a yellow string of egg-yolk. Jess had observed this for some time, with a tendency to hilarity whenever it caught her eye. Maidie's comical description added fuel to the fire of the girl's merriment, sending her into convulsive laughter. She answered looks of interrogation by pointing to the dangling egg thread, and saying as well as circumstances permitted, "Maidie says—ha—ha—ha!—that Mr. Fevv—he—he—he!—Mr. Neville's got egg on his—fev—feathers." This explanatory and ludicrous mixture created a general explosion among the young folk. The situation, however, was promptly ended by Mrs. M'Intyre, who discreetly rose on seeing that the guest did not join in the general laugh.

There was nothing much for the men-folk to do; but the boys were burning to try their new fowling-pieces, The squatter, seeing their intent, directed them to use their skill on the cockatoos and king parrots that were devastating the maize crop.

These birds, especially the former, proved wily customers, so that not many opportunities offered for testing the guns. Enough was done, though, to prove that the guns were no "slouches," and great things were predicted when the lads should "know" their respective weapons.

"Whatyer think of the new chum, Joe?" said Sandy to Blain, as they sat on a log under a low-spreading wattle tree, on the look out for a flying shot.

"Goes thirteen to the dozen, ole man, don't he? Knows a lot more'n us, he reckons, and can't help showin' it."

"Yes, he can't stand us chaps at no price. By George! Jess's got his measure, and Mag too, for that matter. They'll take his nibs down a peg or two before he goes, I bet tuppence."

"Little Maidie fitted him all right," chipped in Tom. "Fevvers—ha—ha!—yes, goose feathers."

It was evident that the visitor was not in favour with the young people. He had struck a false note. No one can be quicker than boys to detect superciliousness and to resent it. The patronising air is to them the unforgivable sin.

Henceforth Neville went by the name of "Fevvers" among the boys, to the great amusement of the girls, who, unfortunately for the Englishman, had assigned him a place in prig-dom.

Neville, it must be confessed, was a bit of a prig; but at heart he was not at all a bad fellow, and there came a time not far ahead when respect supplanted contempt in the pals, and the ridiculous nickname was dropped; while he on his part discontinued the use of the irritating comparison, "the way we do things in England," which at the beginning he was for ever introducing.

The household was enjoying a siesta after the typical Christmas dinner which was partaken of at midday. Stillness reigned within the house, save the cracking of house timbers under the influence of the heat. This seductive calm and the sweet sleep of the girls was at length rudely broken by Sandy, who in the exercise of a brother's privilege shook the door violently as he shouted, "Now then, lazies, get up and dress! It's half-past three."

"Bother you, Sandy, you *are* a nuisance!" sleepily complained Jessie. "I—I—was having *such* a lovely dream. Neptune was just on the heels of a blue flyer,[#] and I was galloping alongside him. The chase led us to Blind-fall Gully, and we three took the jump together, and were almost landed on the other side when you thumped the door. I thought at first it was the thud of Kangie's tail, but no! there she was flying through——"

[#] Maiden kangaroo, a very fast runner.

"That comes of eating too much plum-duff an' mince-pie, my girl. But I say, you two, look slippy, or you'll be too late. I told Jacky to saddle Nigger for you, Jess. What'll you take, Mag? Rainbow or Sultan? They're both up."

"Don't care, Sandy. I'll take Sultan, I think. No, I'll take Rainbow. Wait a moment, p'r'aps——"

"Oh! stop your silly nonsense. I'll put the saddle on Sultan," shouted the impatient boy, as he made off through the house to the stockyard.

"Say, Sandy!" cried out Jess, who was now wide awake. "Have you roused Mr.—er—Fevvers yet?"

"'Ssh! mother'll hear you," exclaimed the boy warningly, as he returned to the door. "He didn't have a snooze. Says it's unbusinesslike to sleep in the daytime. Says they never do that in England. England be blowed, say I. An' whatyer think? Harry offered him the loan of his leggin's, but he wouldn't have 'em. Says they smell of the stockyard, ha—ha! Says they don't wear 'em in England. Listen! He's got on a pair of white duck britches, an' my crikey! they won't be white

any longer. He asked Harry for his fourteen-foot stockwhip. Says he was told an 'Awestralian' horse would never budge without one. Only dad was there I'd 'a' put his saddle on Dick Swiveller, an' by jing! we'd 'a' had some sport. We'll knock fun out of him as it is, I reckon. But look alive, girls, or y'll be left behind."

CHAPTER XV

A BUSH RIDE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

"Then hey for boot and horse, lad!
And round the world away;
Young blood will have its course, lad!
And every dog his day."
KINGSLEY.

The weather in Australia at Christmas is not ideal for riding parties. Midsummer heat and dust, together with hordes of flies, largely countervail the delights of the saddle.

The enthusiastic party that cantered along the tracks leading from the Bullaroi homestead on this particular Christmas, with one exception, made small bones about either dust or heat. Neville, however, was irritated by the dust which the horses' feet knocked up. Nor would he seek alleviation as did the others by leaving the track at every opportunity. The victim of prejudice and conventionality, expressed in terms of cussedness, he obstinately stuck to the dusty track. The boys and Jessie frisked here and there, making short cuts, jumping gullies and logs, and generally enjoying themselves. They raised, it is true, clouds of dust, to the annoyance of the new chum, as they pounded along the track on their return to the others, after having forged ahead some distance; behaving, in short, like gambolling dogs. Mag would have dearly loved the frolic, but hospitality's demands made it imperative that she—the eldest—should partner the guest.

Neville was no rider. His knowledge of the ways of the horse was of the most elementary kind. Had he had the common sense to have admitted that palpable fact, many of his painful experiences, and indeed tortures, would have been minimised, if not altogether avoided.

Like all inexperienced riders, he responded to every movement of the horse. He had no sense of balance. He held the reins shoulder high, and was for ever jerking them. When his body was not stiffly straight it inclined forward. The inevitable result was made abundantly manifest in chafed limbs and aching bones. With Neville, as with most new-chum riders, the trousers legs *would* work up from the bottom, displaying a section of calf, to the great amusement of the boys, who baa'd most vehemently at such times.

This, however, must be reckoned for grace in Neville: he made no complaint, nor admitted any discomfort. He was forward in his criticisms of the boys' style of riding: their seats were un-English and cowboy.

No greater contrast between the riders could well be imagined than that which the new chum and the pals presented. Theirs was to the manner born, to be confounded neither with cowboy nor military. While there is an utter absence of stiffness in the Australian style, there is at the same time nothing bordering on the truculent as affected by the cowboy. The movements are willowy and rhythmic. Horse and man are one and indivisible. This means to both the minimum of work with the maximum of ease.

How far removed from this attainment was poor Neville! His figure was of the ramrod pattern for the first few miles—ultra military, so to speak. His feet, well through the stirrups, inclined outwards at a sharp angle; his left arm, held at right angle as rigid as a semaphore, gripped the reins; while his right clutched the stockwhip with tenacious grasp. The steed, a fair pacer in experienced hands, in his became a veritable jogger. He rose and fell in springless fashion with every motion of the horse.

It was not in Neville's power to maintain that iron rigidity, and so he gradually inclined forward. His back became bowed, and his nose at times was in imminent danger of the horse's head. His arms, too, hung listlessly at either side, until at last his appearance resembled nothing so much as a doubled-up Guy Fawkes perched on a rail. Yet his dogged spirit, essentially British, half courage, half cussedness, bore him up.

Nearing the caves, the party, with the exception of Neville and his companion, raced ahead, and by the time that the latter arrived were cooling off beneath the shade of some coolibahs.

And now disaster of such a character as to shake from him the last remains of superiority and propriety, overwhelming him in the depths of humiliation, overtook poor Neville. These mortifying results were brought about by his attempted gallantry.

The selected camp, as related, was beneath the grateful shade of a cluster of coolibah[#] trees that grew on the banks of a mountain stream, close to the mouth of the caves. Seeing that Maggie was about to dismount unassisted, the

youth exclaimed in eager tones, "Wait a moment, Miss M'Intyre!" and so saying, threw himself from his horse in order to do the gallant by helping his companion down, "as they do in England."

[#] Water gum trees.

Sad to say, however, so cramped and stiff were his limbs, especially his nether extremities, that the instant he touched ground his legs doubled in a powerless condition, and he fell prone to the earth. Unfortunately, the ground at the spot where he tumbled down began to slope towards the creek. In his frantic efforts to rise quickly to his feet he overbalanced himself, and began to roll down the incline. He saved himself for a second, and the impending disaster might have been averted but for the confounded stockwhip, which led to his undoing in a most effectual way. This weapon, which he still held in his clenched right hand, got entangled with his legs by some means, lasso fashion, bringing him smartly to the ground again in a fresh attempt to rise. The sloping bank at this point became almost precipitous: with a rapid turn over-and-over, he rolled down the steep gradient, crashed through an undergrowth of bushes and bracken that fringed the perpendicular bank of the creek, and shot out into its clear, deep waters.

This unrehearsed performance, taking less time to act than to relate, brought a powerful shriek from Maggie, who, arrested in her intention to dismount unaided by Neville's proffered aid, beheld from her horse the undignified collapse of her escort, with its quickly succeeding acts of comedy and tragedy.

The others, who were witnesses of this performance, hugely enjoyed it, giving a loud hurrah as the new chum splashed into the creek. There was one exception. Sandy, who was on his way to the creek with the billy can, and who realised in a moment that the discomfited Englishman had fallen into a deep pool,—the very spot where he had often fished for big perch,—threw away the billy and rushed to the spot where the unfortunate man had fallen in. Only that day had Neville declared that "my water exercises have been confined to the house bath."

Beyond the agitated surface there were no signs of their visitor in the water. Without pause, the lad took a header to the bottom, which was at least ten feet from the top, discerned the sunken man kicking and clawing, hauled him to the surface, and towed him to the bank. Here willing hands were ready to grip the victim of this misadventure and pull him to land.

As soon as he was dragged to safety, the cause of his abject helplessness in the water was revealed. The stockwhip had so encircled his legs as to prevent

the free use of them, besides which the shock of the whole accident had to an extent numbed his senses.

In sooth he was a sorry sight as he lay on the turf. The immersion did not cover more than half a minute; it was long enough, though, to take him to the verge of unconsciousness and to fill his lungs and stomach with water. The boys speedily unwound the whip, and subjected Neville to some rough but wholesome treatment, during which process the water was rapidly ejected from his interior regions.

The girls, as soon as Neville was landed, discreetly withdrew. Merriment had dissolved into pity.

"Poor Mr. Neville! I'm *so* sorry. Isn't it a shame, Mag?"

"Seems like a dream; it all happened so quickly and unexpectedly. I'm afraid father'll be very angry about it. The poor fellow was going to be so gallant, too. 'Permit me to assist you,' he said, and the next moment——"

Here the whole scene comes up so vividly and comically that, strive as she may, Maggie cannot withhold laughter of a somewhat hysterical kind. And so, between laughter and tears, the two girls superintended the billy-boiling and tea-making business.

Meanwhile the lads, stripping Neville under the lee of the bank, wrung his clothes, and then re-dressed him, bringing him up to the fire little the worse for his cold douche. The girls quickly recognised the finer qualities of Neville's character, which broke through the crust of his artificiality in the hour of adversity.

"I'm very sorry to have caused this trouble, Miss M'Intyre. No one's to blame but myself. Your brother and his mates have been exceedingly kind to me. Indeed, I owe a debt to your brother that I can never repay, for without doubt he saved my life. I was utterly helpless with that wretched whip curled around me."

Indeed, it was true. The accident might easily have had a fatal termination, and the thought of it (for all that Neville cut such a grotesque figure in his shrunken clothes) drove the last remains of latent hilarity away. Maggie assured the forlorn-looking youth that no thanks were due to any one; that all deplored the accident, and were thankful that the finale inclined rather to the comic than the tragic.

"Take this pannikin of hot tea, Mr. Neville. Father says that whisky's not in it with tea for recruiting one's jaded energies."

As there was no need for starting on the return ride awhile, the three boys, leaving the girls and Neville at the camp, proceeded to the caves.

The caves, three in number, were connected with one another by narrow entrances. The outermost one had an inlet through a narrow crevice. This opening was concealed from the casual eye by a sentinel-like boulder which stood directly opposite, and about eighteen inches in advance of the wall of rock. It

was a squeeze for any one above the average size to get through.

Before its occupation by the bushrangers the outer cave, by evident signs, formed a favourite wallaby haunt. These had been disturbed and hunted by the bushrangers, who from time to time, according to police report, used it as a hiding-place. They had often lain there when the district was filled with troopers. On one occasion, as was afterwards known, Ben Bolt and his mate, a youth of eighteen years, lay concealed for weeks. The boy had been badly wounded in the thigh during a brush with the police in the New England ranges. Ben Bolt, who was passionately attached to him, by incredible labour and consummate skill—for the pursuing police were on their tracks all the time—brought his wounded mate to the caves in order that he might lie in safety until his sores were healed.

Sandy was the only one of the lads who knew anything about the caves. In company with his father he had visited them a few weeks previously. He therefore acted as a guide to the party.

The fissure, a mere crack in the limestone rock, extended in tortuous fashion for some distance. Lengthening out and making a curve, it suddenly broadened into a chamber of respectable dimensions. At the entrance of the crevice Sandy had lit a candle, one being sufficient for the cramped passage. Before entering the cave proper, all three candles brought for that purpose were lit.

The cave was bat-inhabited. Large numbers of these uncanny creatures, which were clinging to the roof and sides, disturbed and dazzled by the light, flew about in aimless fashion, often striking the boys in their uncertain flight. Numbers of them fastened on to their clothes and limbs with their claw-like pinions.

Joe and Tom, to whom this was a new experience, were uneasy and a good bit scared. Their nervousness increased when the fluttering nocturnals more than once extinguished the lights.

"You must do as I do, boys!" sang out Sandy, who was in advance, as they walked cautiously over the uneven and stone-littered floor. Sandy had removed his hat and held it over the candle. This, while it darkened all above, gave ample light on the floor space, and protected the candle from the nocturnals. The others thereupon followed suit, and soon reached the opening on the opposite side that led to the second chamber.

This narrow passage made a stiff ascent for some yards, inclining to the left, and then extending like a funnel. Sandy was proceeding very cautiously, for the opening into the interior cave was made at about ten feet from its floor. A rough ladder of lawyer vines hung from the opening in the wall to the basement. Down this the boys speedily slipped, and found themselves in a dome-like space, bigger by far than any room, barn, or church that they had seen. The atmosphere was very chill, and the continual drip of falling water made a monotonous sound.

A narrow, clear stream of running water flowed along one side, disappearing in a floor crack near the far corner.

Contrary to what one would have expected, the lime crystals were few, and for the most part small; not to be mentioned in the same breath with the matchless statuary of the far-famed Jenolan Caves. On the ground, however, were some interesting stalagmites, whose grotesque figures highly amused the boys. At the first sight, though, a fearsome feeling possessed them. They were children of the sun, and this new and cryptic experience in the cold, dark, vaulted chamber quickened their pulses and shortened their breaths.

Everything seemed to have a ghostly appearance to the pals. It was a fitting abode for spectral creatures, and they had a feeling that at any moment such might appear. This sensation, however, was of short duration. A few minutes' familiarity with their surroundings dissipated it, and the lads moved freely in their investigations.

"Didn't you say there was another cave adjoining this, Sandy?"

"Yes, I'll show it to you in a few minutes."

While the question was being asked and answered, Sandy was peering into a crevice immediately behind a huge stalagmite, and in a dark corner of the cave.

"This looks as if it might open out somewhere, but the opening's jammed with a big limestone boulder."

"Let's have a pull at it," said Tom, as he leaned forward to take hold of a projecting point.

"No go, Tom. Look at its weight! See how tightly it's wedged! You'll never budge that. It'll need a crowbar to shift it. Come along, boys, and we'll take a peep at the other cave, just to say we've seen it; then we must make tracks back."

Sandy, however, bore in mind this sealed chamber which was destined later to yield important and far-reaching results. He made for a low, narrow aperture in the wall, at a far corner, which opened directly into a vault-like ceil—a small bedroom or pantry, as the case might be.

"Here's where the rangers camped," said Sandy, when the boys had struggled through. "Here's their beds, an' there's where they had their fire."

A couple of sheets of stringy-bark, placed stretcher-fashion on crossed sapling frames, formed the sleeping-bunks of the outlaws. On these were placed a quantity of bracken which made a comfortable resting-place for men who more often than not slept upon the ground.

"I say, Sandy," remarked Joe, after standing a moment in deep thought, "this is an all-right place for hidin' in, but where'd they keep the mokes? That's what beats me."

"It beats more'n you. It beats father. It beats the police. Yes, they can't get a clue. Must have had the horses handy, too; for when the police got into the

cave the time they tracked 'em here, the rangers couldn't have been gone more'n a few minutes, 'cause a fire was still burning in Ben Bolt's room, as they call it. The bobbies have searched inside and outside and all over the ridge for another opening, but can't find it."

"They've clean bunged the p'lice, the cute beggars!" exclaimed Tom, with a grin. "Wonder if they'll ever come back again. Ole Ben's a game un. They say he wears a reversible suit of different colours. An' sometimes he straps up a leg an' fastens a wooden peg on it an' stumps along, led by a dog on a string like a blind beggar."

"He's always bluffin' the police, anyway," said Joe. "The Sub-Inspector was at our place about a month ago, telling father how he an' the others were fooled not so long ago."

"Tell us, Joe."

"Well, 'twas like this. A bushman on a piebald horse rode up to the police camp out Kean's swamp way, bearing a note from Sub-Inspector Garvie, ordering them to cross the ranges an' get into Walcha secretly, as he possessed reliable information to the effect that Ben Bolt intended to stick up the bank two days later.

"It appears this same man called at the Sub's quarters earlier in the day, who was laid up with a sprained leg. This chap told how he'd been in Ben Bolt's company two nights previously. The ranger and his mate—the same boy as was wounded—came upon him as he lay by his fire in the evening, and asked permission to camp alongside. They pretended to be stockmen in search of strayed heifers, and made out that they had come across their tracks just at nightfall. As it was a goodish way to the station, they would be glad to sleep by his fire and get after the cattle at dawn.

"The man said that as soon as he spotted 'em he knew 'em, but he was too frightened to let on. He gave 'em some grub, an' then lay down in his blanket. As soon as they had scoffed the prog they lay down too, on the off side of the fire.

"The man didn't go to sleep, though he pretended to. By an' by the two men began to talk in low tones. He could hear 'em, though, pretty well, and found out that they were goin' to stick up the Walcha bank. The date they named was four days from that night. Although the chap lay as if he were dead he didn't sleep a wink. Just before daylight the coves saddled their horses, which had been short-hobbled, and singing out, 'So-long,' they galloped off.

"'And what prompted you to bring this information?' said the Sub.

"'Well, if you cop the rangers,' he answered, 'I shall expect something substantial for supplying these particulars.'

"'As for that, you'll get your share. And now you can do something further that'll help you in the matter of reward. Take this note to Sergeant Henessey,

who is camping with four police and a tracker in the foothills, at the head of Kean's swamp.'

"The Sub-Inspector, who had hastily written a note of instruction to the Sergeant, handed it to the man, who said his name was Sam Kelly. Sam promised to deliver it by daybreak; which he did. As soon as the Sergeant read it, he roused up the men, and after a hasty meal it was 'Saddle up.' A few minutes later the troopers were on their way to cop the rangers. Now listen: that very day, towards evening, the Port Macquarie mail was stuck up!"

"My eye!" said Sandy, "weren't the p'lice sold! Fancy ole Ben goin' into the lion's den with his information an' then takin' the letter out to the camp, an' none of 'em cute enough to twig 'im! He's a downy cove is Ben. Ain't he, Joe?"

"They say," concluded Joe, "that the piebald he rode was his favourite horse, the blood-bay he calls Samson."

"But how was it he turned him piebald?"

"*Painted patches of pipeclay on him!*"

"Now, then," exclaimed Sandy, pulling out his watch, "we've only a few minutes left, an' we mustn't be late, as Mr. Neville won't be able to ride fast."

"Poor old Fevvers!" exclaimed Tom reminiscently. "This hasn't been much of a treat for him."

CHAPTER XVI
THE DINGO RAID

"What's up, old horse? Your ears you prick,
And your eager eyeballs glisten.
'Tis the wild dog's note, in the tea-tree thick,
By the river to which you listen.

* * * * *

Let the dingo rest, 'tis all for the best;
In this world there's room enough
For him and you and me and the rest,
And the country is awful rough."
ADAM LINDSAY GORDON.

"Here's a fine how-d'ye-do!" exclaimed Mr. M'Intyre wrathfully, as he strode into the house, one hot morning shortly after the events recorded in the previous chapter. "Why sic rubbish were ever created passes understanding!"

The irate squatter, contrary to his usual habit, clattered through the hall and out on to the front verandah, slamming the door most vigorously as he made his exit.

"Whatever's stung dad this morning, Jess?" remarked Maggie to her sister, as their excited parent made his noisy intrusion.

"Something bad, you may be sure, to cause dad to parade in that fashion. I expect the blacks have been performing. They madden father at times by their 'want o' intellect,' as he calls it."

"I'll—I'll cut the livers out o' them, the sneakin' hounds! Rot 'em, I'll pizen every faither's son o' the dirty vermin!"

"Oh, father!" cried Jessie, "you surely are not going to poison the poor things?"

"Pizen 'em, that am I! Pizen's ower guid for them, thieving brutes that they are! 'Puir things,' as you ca' the wretches," continued he sarcastically, "I'll hae the life o' the hale o' them, if it tak's a' the pizen in Tareela!" barked the exasperated man.

"Then you're no father of mine!" blazed out Jessie. "What have the poor boys done that you should threaten such dreadful——"

"W-h-a-t!"

"Why, poor Willy and Jacky: what have they done that you should——"

"What on earth is the lassie haverin' aboot?" roared Mr. M'Intyre to Maggie.

"The blacks, father. Didn't you say that you were going to poison them? But I don't believe it for a——"

"The blacks! Wha's talkin' o' blacks? It's the reds, the blessed dingoes, wha've been playin' havoc wi' the calves. The blacks? Ma certie!" continued he, as the humour of the situation seized him, forcing a smile. Turning to his daughter, he exclaimed, "Ye're a fine bairn, I maun say, to be accusin' yer ain faither o' *black* murder!"

"Forgive me, dad!" cried the impulsive girl, as she threw her arms round his neck; "I never thought of the dingoes. I—I—I made sure the black boys had been up to tricks, and never dreamed——"

"There, there, that's enough, my lassie! It's a case of 'misunderconstumbling,' as Denny Kineavy would say. But it's enough to make ane feel wild and gingery. Eleeven fine yearlin's killed! It's the wantonness mair than the actual loss that vexes me: though the latter is bad enough, for some o' the best, of course, are sacrificeed to their slaughterin' instincts."

That evening, in conference with his chief stockman, Mr. M'Intyre laid his plans for the extermination of the pack of dingoes which had just given an exhibition of their destructive powers. In this particular instance the brutes had driven a number of yearling calves, weaners, into a blind gully. Having boxed them up in this *cul de sac*, the rapacious dogs found them an easy prey.

The Australian wild dog is a combination of several very excellent qualities—from the canine standpoint, that is. He possesses more sagacity than any other wild thing of the bush. Keen of sight, quick at scent, subtle of wit, noiseless in tread and bark, tenacious to rooted purpose, he pursues and stalks his quarry, whether bird or beast, with all the odds in his favour.

There he stands, this indigenous dog, with a great, broad forehead, his eyes narrowing in sinister expression; well set in body, showing big sinews and a good muscular development; strong jaws, with teeth like ivory needles; white in paw and tail-tip, bright yellow everywhere else, save the chocolate-coloured streak running along the spine from neck to tail. There he stands: but that is a figure of speech, for a more restless animal than this same dog does not exist.

Australian cattle-dogs have a world reputation, and the very best are they which by crossing inherit a strain of dingo nature. That which makes the dingo so hated by stock owners—who pursue him relentlessly—is the killing lust which possesses him. Were he to simply kill for food, and be satisfied with a victim that would furnish enough for present needs, settlers would be far more tolerant of him. The plain truth about him is that his predatory instinct is so strong as to practically intoxicate him. The sight of a flock of sheep or a bunch of calves makes him "see red," and then he simply runs amok. One snap—he does not bite in the ordinary sense—of his steel-like jaws is enough. The mouthful of flesh and muscle is torn out in an instant, and the victim invariably dies of shock. One dingo in a sheepfold will kill fifty sheep in a few minutes.

These dogs are more troublesome in bad than in good seasons. When the cattle get low in condition and weak, they become a comparatively easy prey, then the cunning of the dingoes becomes manifest. They will select their victim and drive it towards a water-hole or swamp. In dry times these are mere puddles and exceedingly boggy. The object of the canine drovers is to reduce the bullock to helplessness by bogging it. The drive will sometimes take hours, and no experienced drover could do the work more cleverly. Finally, when their quarry is down in the mire and practically helpless, he is tackled and bitten to death. In good seasons, when the cattle are strong, Mr. Dingo, save for an occasional foray on the calves, has to content himself with his natural diet—kangaroos, 'possums, and emus.

Fortunately, there was at the station at this time an eccentric bushman who combined the work of horse-breaking and dingo-trapping. Nosey George was

reputed to have a sense of smell equal to that of the dingo itself. Certainly, his slouching gait made it often appear as if he were "nosing" the tracks of the game. But in truth he owed his prowess as a trapper to a pair of eyes that knew no dimness. At first sight of Nosey, one saw nothing but his nose. But when you noticed his eyes you forgot the nose, and lived in the presence of a pair of eyes that sparkled like diamonds, or as searchlights that permitted nothing to escape their scrutiny.

Nosey's feats of tracking were really marvellous. On one occasion he got on to the trail of a dingo bitch which had raided his hen-roost, and followed it for twelve miles, mostly through scrubby and rocky country that was criss-crossed with innumerable tracks of bush vermin. For all that, this human sleuth-hound tracked Mrs. Dingo to a cave in the mountains where she had five pups, and returned with six scalps.

The dingo trapper rode out early the next morning in company with Harry the stockman and the boys to the scene of the slaughter, there to devise means, for which he had received *carte blanche* from Mr. M'Intyre, for the capture of the raiders.

The weaners' paddock was about three miles from the house, and had an area of five thousand acres. Most of the enclosure consisted of plain, but a corner of it contained a belt of scrub; and it was in this corner, where the weaners camped for warmth in the night-time, that the drive and slaughter had been made. The beasts, most of them, lay huddled, showing evidence of mangling; others had struggled out of the gully into the scrub. After gazing awhile at the slain, Tom Hawkins broke the silence—

"I say, Nosey, ain't this a go? Poor brutes!"

"Here, you kid," cried the trapper, turning sharply on Tom, "who gave you leave to call me names? Like yer blessed cheek! How'd yer like me ter call yer monkey-face? If yer had a decent nose, I'd tweak it fer yer."

Nosey, who was very sensitive on this question of nickname, and had had many a fight over the same, made such a menacing move towards Tom that the lad shrank back in fear.

"That'll do, George," said Sandy. "Leave the boy alone. He didn't mean anything. It's what everybody calls you."

"I'm not goin' to let brats of boys miscall me, anyhow. Don't know why the boss sent you blokes, for all the good y'are!" growled the grumpy, cross-grained, but not really bad-hearted old man. "Youse better be keepin' quiet, anyways, till me an' Harry has a look round."

"Let him be," whispered Harry. "If you get his dander up he's as likely as not to chuck the whole blame thing. He always jibs at that name; carn't stand it from kids nohow."

Nosey, or to be respectful, George, now proceeded to examine the surroundings of the carcasses. Bending forward until his protuberant nose almost touched the earth, the trapper moved his eyes swiftly, now concentrating on twig or grass-blades, now wildly roving and all-comprehensive. The rest of the party were following at his heels, when he turned round and fiercely waved them back.

"All right, Nos—George!" sang out Joe. "I see; you want to keep the tracks clear. We'll stay here till you've finished."

Drawing on one side, the group watched the proceedings with great interest. The ground was hard and stony; quite unimpressionable and barren of sign to the pals' untutored sight, yet to this man of the woods, who was ignorant of the alphabet, the rough earth surface was all-revealing, and made known to him in unmistakable characters the story of the attack.

Having at length concluded his investigations, the trapper straightened his back and moved to where the others stood. Producing his knife and a plug of tobacco, he began to shred a pipeful, making no remark to the expectant onlookers.

"Reckon we'll have to drag it out o' the old un," said Harry to Joe in a low tone. Then raising his voice, the stockman began to question the man.

"Had a good look round, George?"

Nod.

"Ain't missed anything worth seeing, I bet?"

Head-shake.

"Whatyer make of it?"

"Razorback pack," replied the old man of frugal speech, as he cleaned out his pipe.

"Razorback pack? You surely don't mean it! Why, that is a matter of twelve mile or so!"

"Suppose it is; what of that?"

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Harry dubiously, yet not wishful to offend the old man's susceptibilities. "Of course you know best, George. How many of 'em do you consider they'd be?"

"Five dorgs an' two bitches."

"Good gracious, Nosey!" cried Tom the unlucky, the next moment beating a rapid retreat as the dog-trapper made a vicious dart at his caudal appendage, finally coming to grief over a fallen log which lay in the line of retreat. The pursuing foe, even, had to stop and join in the laugh raised at the ludicrous figure which Tom cut as he lay, head down, heels up.

"Beg pardon, George!" he cried breathlessly the next moment, as he recovered his original position. "It slipped out, old fellow. I—I didn't mean it."

"Come, now, George, that's handsome. You must accept the apology," in-

terjected Joe.

The trapper nodded assent, and the incident passed.

"How *do* you know what pack it is, George? Blest if I can understand how you find out all these things! First you tell us the sex an' then where they come from."

"Tell it by their paws."

"By their paws! How on earth can you tell they've come all the way from Razorback by their paw marks? Mightn't it be the turkey scrub lot?"

"It carn't be, an' isn't, 'cause I knows the pack."

"How's that?"

"Got two of the vermin in the traps six months ago over at the mountains, an' a cove wot got away left two toe nails of his near hind-foot in the trap."

"Too fly for poison, eh?"

"'Twould be a waste of good strychnine over the rubbage," replied the trapper, waxing more communicative. "They know a bait better than a Christun. 'Sides, I tried them over at Razorback. Got plenty o' cats, gohanners, an' crows; an', be gosh! laid out one of my own cattle puppies, but ne'er a dingo."

"The traps'll fetch 'em, won't they, George?"

George returned no answer, but "smoled" a cryptic smile. Mounting their steeds, the party turned in the direction of home. Mr. M'Intyre received the trapper's report without interruption, and then consulted as to the best way to work their destruction.

"Hunting them is out of the question," said the squatter in reply to a remark of his son that it would be grand sport hunting them. "We'd only ruin the horses in that country and miss most o' the dingoes. Na! the traps are the best an' safest. If ony ane can catch 'em in that fashion, George is the mon. I leave the hale matter in his hands. He kens best what to do to circumvent the brutes; so go your own way to work, George. What aboot traps? Have ye enough?"

"Got seven or eight, dunno for sure. Ought to have a dozen."

"Varra weel; ane o' the laddies will ride to Tareela and get ither fower."

Accordingly, Joe and Tom mounted their horses and rode into the store for the additional traps.

A dog-trap, it should be explained, is simply an enlarged spring rat-trap, with extra strong jaws and saw-like teeth. These instruments of capture weigh about ten pounds, and are planted in likely spots. The native dog is an exceedingly suspicious animal. His reasoning faculty is large. A mere glance at his head will convince one as to his capacity, and those who have had to do with him count him as the slimmest of the slim. Hence, only by outmatching him in cunning may his adversary succeed. In this Nosey George was an adept, and Mr. M'Intyre did not overstate the facts when he declared no one to be capable of

matching the dog-trapper in the art of setting lures.

The pals readily obtained leave to accompany the trapper next morning to watch the proceedings, on the understanding that they were in no way to interfere with him. Each lad had a pair of traps slung across his horse's withers, and George carried the balance on the neck and croup of his steed. They made their way to the weaners' paddock, and after a brief inspection of the carrion the trapper declared that there had been no return of the dogs.

"I didn't expect them larst night," remarked George. "They're like the blacks, can eat enough at one meal to do 'em fur days. A gorge is Chrismus to 'em."

"What do you intend doing with the dead beasts, George?"

"Leave 'em be, o' course. They'll help me more than anythin' else. Dogs'll come again to get another feed or two; an' as boss's took the weaners away to a safe paddock, they'll go fur these dead uns like winkie—likes 'em a bit high, in fact. Supposin' we burn these wretches, the vermin'll keep about their own haunts. They're out of their beat when they come over here, while they knows every stick an' stone of their run. Consequently, it gives me a better charnse with 'em on unfamiliar ground."

So saying, the cunning hunter proceeded to carry out his plan. The dingo has a well-defined method of carving his veal, so to speak. The hide of the animal is not uniformly thick. The softest and tenderest part is that underneath and between the thighs. The ravager, therefore, attacks this tenderest and most susceptible part. He tears a big hole through the skin and into the flesh in a short time, and literally eats his way into the body; until, when he and his fellow-feasters have finally finished, and cleaned paws and jaws with that self-provided serviette the tongue, nothing of the animal remains but the skin and bones—always providing that no foe appears to stay proceedings against the gourmands. This finish, of course, entails several feasts when the course happens to be a bullock, or, as in the present case, toothsome veal.

The trapper proceeded to lay a trap facing the torn portion of each carcass—that, of course, being the place of attack on each occasion of the canines' visits. After a careful consideration of the ground surrounding each beast, he dug a hole in the earth and then placed a trap in it. He next produced some sheets of the inner bark of the ti tree, which is as flexible as paper and softer. A sheet of this is laid over the gaping jaws of the trap, which is, of course, properly set. The "jaws" are now level with the ground. Over this fine earth is sprinkled until all appearance of the trap is hidden. The superfluous soil is now removed with care, and the surroundings are made to look as natural as possible. This in itself is a work of art; for the slightest appearance of disturbance or make-up alarms the wary dingo, and nullifies the trapper's design.

There is one thing, however, that Nosey George had not reckoned upon when starting his operations—the number of carcasses to be treated. It will be remembered that eleven animals were slaughtered in the dingo raid. This would mean the use of eleven traps, were every animal to be used as a lure. But it is contrary to the design of the trapper to use up all his traps in the vicinity of the beasts. Some are to be set along the line of approach. A number of carcasses, therefore, must be removed. With the help of the boys, five of the beasts are dragged about two hundred yards away, put in a heap, covered with dry wood, and then burned.

This left the trapper with several traps to use in other directions. Having laid six traps in the vicinity of the calves, he proceeded to follow up the tracks of the dogs. The first gin was laid in a soft patch of ground directly in their footmarks. This he continued at intervals, until the last one was placed at a spot about two miles distant.

"How many dingoes do you think you'll nab, George?" exclaimed Tom, as the party rode homewards in the late afternoon.

"Tell you when I visit the traps termorrer, boy."

"I say three," judged the judicious Joe.

"I say one," opined the cautious Sandy.

"I say the whole bloomin' lot," loudly proclaimed the sanguine Tom.

"I say, wait," drily remarked the wise trapper.

The trapper's prophecy was justified; for, on a visit to the traps in the early morning by the expectant and impatient boys, in the company of Nosey George, to the surprise and disgust of these same youngsters, not a trap was sprung.

The trapper, who while examining the ground had maintained a sphinx-like attitude, broke silence at length under a fusillade of questions.

"Yees want ter know, does youse, why it is no dog's copp'd? Simple enough. Dogs didn't come."

CHAPTER XVII

DINGO *V.* EMU: A FIGHT TO A FINISH

"Afar I mark the emu's run;
The bustard slow, in motley clad;
And, basking in his bath of sun,

The brown snake on the cattle-pad,
And the reddish black
Of a dingo's back
As he loit'ring slinks on my horse's track."
GEORGE ESSEX EVANS.

The next morning's visit told another tale.

The dingoes, having recovered from their surfeit, hunger-induced, made a second nocturnal trip to the feeding-grounds. Cunning and wary as they habitually are, they fell, some of them at least, before the wiles of the trapper. Four of their number paid the death penalty. Two female dogs were caught in the traps set about the calves. The trapped animals had not moved any great space.

It should be said that the traps are not fastened to the spot whereon they are laid; because, were they stationary, the dingo, especially the dog dingo, in his frantic efforts to escape, and by reason of his great strength, will frequently save his life at the expense of his paw. That dog, it is safe to say, will never be trapped again; as on the principle of, once bitten twice shy, he will ever eschew the most deftly constructed device of man.

[image]

"The emu failed to elude the panther-like spring."—See p. 134.

On the other hand, should there be no fastening, a strong dog will carry a trap for miles, especially if caught by the hind-leg. In order to remedy this, a device, similar to that which sailors use, called a sea anchor, is attached. A block of wood not too heavy is tied to the trap by a chain or a piece of wire. This acts as a check to the animal, besides leaving a broad trail that is easily followed up.

When the trapped dingoes were approached they set up a dismal howling, which turned to a vigorous snapping with their teeth; the while they tore the earth with their paws in vain efforts to escape.

"Put the poor wretches out of their pain," cried Sandy, after watching the agonised efforts of the canines for a few seconds.

The trapper, armed with a heavy "nulla-nulla," dispatched the brutes, and scalped them; for the district Stock Board, to induce their extermination, gave £1 per scalp, and experienced trappers like Nosey George did well at times. They concluded that there was at the least one other victim; for while the bitches were snapping and howling, answering howls of rage and sympathy could be heard in

the distance along the trail.

The next act was to cremate the slain, which was speedily done. After this the group proceeded to follow the track along which the other snares were secreted. The very first trap contained a dog. It was set in the centre of a soft depression, at the edge of the scrub belt on the farther side. The dog had dragged the trap about three hundred yards, when the "anchor," fouling in some saplings, his retreat was stopped. The beast was immediately brained and scalped, and the body flung into a clump of bushes.

There was still another victim. The farthest out trap was gone. Nothing was to be seen but the trap-hole. George, however, was soon upon the trail. The country here was fairly open, and offered little obstruction to the determined dog. The track led on and on with little deviation until a course of three miles or so had been traversed. It now curved outward and down toward a patch of scrub. Nosey suddenly stopped and pointed to the ground.

"What's up, George?" exclaimed Joe, who stood nearest the trapper.

"Look an' see fur y'reself."

Bending over, Joe saw in a sandy patch the deep impress of the toes of a large bird.

"I can't make it out. What in thunder is it? Far too big for a crow; bigger even than an eagle or a bustard."

"As big as two eagles, young mutton-head," declared the old tough. "Tell 'im, Sandy."

"Why, you greeney; that's an emu track!"

"Emu!" shouted Joe in great excitement. "It's the first time I ever saw an emu track. What an enormous foot he must have."

"Ye'd know it, me boy, if ivver ye got a kick," grunted the trapper. "I've seen them break a dog's leg like a carrot."

"Blest if I don't think he's follerin' up the dingo!" continued Joe.

"Just wot 'e *is* a-doin' of," answered the man. "These 'ere emus is more curious nor a woman."

Joe now remembered Sandy relating how his father used to lure the emu he was stalking within shot of his fowling piece, by lying flat, and slowly waving his handkerchief from the point of his ram-rod; or even doubling his leg as he lay breast downward, and elevating his hat on the foot thus raised. With slow and hesitating yet irresistible steps, fascinated by the mysterious object, or a victim to curiosity, the bird would approach to its undoing.

This particular emu was no stranger to the dingoes, nor they to him. Never before, though, had he beheld a dingo with such an appendage, or in such difficulties. The unwonted appearance of the canine furnishes the bird with an unusual sensation, and queries in rapid succession flit through its brain. "What

on earth is the matter with the limping, whimpering brute? What is that object trailing behind the horrid creature? Let me draw near and behold this great sight!" Fate has delivered his old-time enemy into his hands. That lolling, swollen tongue, those blood-shot eyes, that painful whimper, the wild despairing glances; all these loudly proclaim his downfall. "Well, what matter! He's getting his punishment now. What is there to prevent me wiping out old scores?"

And so, with cautious yet confident step the huge bird, second in size only to the ostrich, strode on at a short distance behind his enemy; and in a few minutes both are swallowed up in the scrub. The huntsmen follow well on the heels of the animals.

"I wonder if the bird's still following?" asked Tom.

"Soon see," answered the trapper, carefully examining the ground. "Not a quarter of an hour since he passed this spot: must be in the scrub still."

A minute or so brought them to the edge of the scrub. Pushing along, they were soon enwrapped in its gloom. Following the advice of George, the boys tied their horses to saplings at the outskirts of the belt, and proceeded on foot. Suddenly the trapper, who was leading, stopped dead in his tracks, and uttered a warning note in a low voice. Motioning the pals to remain where they were, he noiselessly moved forward, and was soon lost in the thick foliage ahead.

"Wonder why ole Nosey made us stay back?" muttered Tom, after the lads had stood silently awhile. "What can be in the air, now?"

"Hist!" exclaimed Sandy in a whisper; "he's returning."

At this moment the trapper reappeared.

"Follow as quiet as mice, an' ye'll see summat like wot ye've ne'er seed afore." There was an unusual gleam in the man's eye as he made this deliverance.

Cautiously and silently the party moved Indian fashion through the wood. After going in this way a hundred paces or so the hunter stopped again, and beckoned the boys, indicating a stealthy approach. Very gingerly they trod until they were abreast the man. Following his muttered directions and example, they quietly parted the intervening brushwood.

It was an unique sight on which their eyes fastened; one they would not readily forget. Beyond them was a small natural clearing, such as often occurs in the densest scrub.

It was circular in form, and about fifty yards in diameter. Here, almost in the centre of the clearing, the bird had bailed up the beast. Curiosity in the emu had grown into anger, and was at a white heat, judging from the manner in which it pirouetted and menaced the dog, keeping up the while an incessant gabble. The gabble, rightly interpreted, declared that the time of vengeance was at hand. The fates were thanked for being so kind as to furnish this fitting opportunity for paying off old scores: "Here, you sneaking thief and flying murderer, stop! It's

you and I for it now; so, off with your coat and roll up your sleeves!"

Nor was Master Dingo disinclined to accept the challenge thrown down by the strutting bird. Weary as he was and full of pain, he was in no humour to eat humble-pie, or to fly before another foe. His warring instincts rose to the gage of his hereditary enemy. Many of his kind were scarred with wounds from the terrible emu kick, or deep score made by the horny toe of this formidable antagonist.

Nor could he retreat, if so inclined: behind him, to a certainty, was the monstrous biped; far more to be feared than this animated piece of impertinence, whose wicked eye squinted and winked in defiance.

Forgotten in a moment is all fear, whether of the visible bird or the invisible pursuers. Handicapped as he is, and goaded by his pain and shameful condition, the dingo fires the first shot, as it were, by making a sudden jump at the emu's throat, narrowly missing it, and still more narrowly missing the leg stroke of the bird as it made its counter-stroke.

Both bird and beast are practised in all the arts and devices of animal warfare. Each knows the tactics of the other. But for the disability of the dog through the tenacious trap the chances would be in his favour; but his exhaustion and encumbrance give the odds to the other. Still, he makes a gallant fight, and the bird needs all its wits and agility to escape his savage snaps, one of which, had he been able to lay hold, would tear out the neck from throat to breast.

The combat was at its height between these gladiators when the pursuers sighted them. The boys hold their breath in fair amazement as they eagerly watch the two figures in the sunlit arena struggling for the mastery. So engrossed are the combatants that the spectators may come out into the open and surround them, for all the notice that will be taken of them. As it is, the boys' astonishment is quickly transmuted into animal excitement and battle-lust. They take sides, and cheer, now the beast and now the bird.

But the end comes quickly and tragically enough. The pace of the conflict tells terribly upon the dingo. He is now weakening fast; can hardly see, so bloodshot are his eyes. Yes, he can hold out but little longer. Realising this, he fights purely on the defence for breath. Then, concentrating all his energies in one last irresistible stroke, he springs, arrow-like, and this time strikes fair on the bullseye—the neck of his adversary. The emu had failed to elude the panther-like spring. But now the counter-stroke!

When the dingo's fangs close vice-like upon the emu's throat the bird's fate is irrevocably sealed. The jugular vein is torn out with a mouthful of flesh and muscle, and the skin is stripped to the bosom. What time this savage and fatal stroke is given the vengeful bird, by one terrific downward blow of its powerful leg and toes, disembowels the hanging dog; and then with a lightning side-stroke,

delivered full on the forehead of the prone beast, smashes in its skull. A vain attempt to crow a note of victory; a few short, uncertain, rotatory movements, life-blood gushing the while from its severed jugular, then a collapse, falling across the body of its slain adversary!

Which of the two is the victor?

The surprise of the boys, at the sudden and bloody termination of the fight, may be better imagined than described. They stared aghast for some moments at the spectacle, too dazed to move or speak. Even the hardened bushman, George, was moved.

"Well, of all the fights I ever seed, this licks creation; it's better nor cock-fightin'. Be gosh, 'twas a grand fight to a finish!"

The trapper now busies himself with the scalping-knife, and, as the boys stand around, a feeling of sadness rises within as they contemplate the slain.

"Poor brutes!" said Sandy feelingly, "I've a notion, lads, that they deserved a better fate."

"The boss wouldn't agree to that as fur as the dorgs is concerned. As fer the emu, he's neither good nor bad," grunted the old man.

"Well, after all," broke in Joe, "it's their nature, as old Simpson is always preaching to us in school. They're not to blame for following their instincts. By jings! there's no coward's blood in these poor brutes,—they're as brave as brave."

But such moralising was beyond Nosey George.

"Emus is sight enough in a way, an' only eats grass an' roots,—but dingos! they're vermin, an' any death's good enough fur them. By the hokey!" exclaimed he as he looked at the trap; "I'm blamed if here isn't the blessed paw!"

It was true. The wretched beast's foot was evidently so lacerated and broken by its efforts to escape, and in dragging the trap, that when it made the last and fatal spring the imprisoned paw parted from the leg in the very act, and that severance enabled it to reach the emu's neck. Having secured the trap and the scalp, the group retraced their steps to where they had hitched the horses.

The haul proved successful beyond measure. To secure four dingoes in one scoop was a great stroke of luck. Not so much luck, on reflection, as skilful management. An amateur might have set a hundred traps with seeming skill and not have bagged a dog. No one save a trapper like George could trap with any degree of certainty.

"I s'pose you'll bag the balance to-night," remarked Tom to the trapper when they had remounted.

"No jolly fear! Never catch any more along this line."

"How's that?"

"Why, d'yer think a dingo's no sense? Be gosh! all the calves in creation wuddent tempt what's left of the vermin to come along this track again. Wish

we'd a' got the old dog, though."

"What are you going to do next?" inquired Tom.

"Fust an' foremost thing is to collect the traps, then we'll burn the weaners."

"Won't you try for the other dogs?"

"My oath, won't I?"

"Give us your programme, George, there's a good fellow."

"I'll try 'em about Razorback with the traps, as soon as they've quietened down a bit. They've been scared out of their precious wits by this 'ere business."

In due time the party arrived at the homestead. Mr. M'Intyre expressed his gratification at the result of the trapper's work, and praised his skill. He further bade George continue his work until the beasts were exterminated, promising him a liberal reward should he achieve this end.

The boys related with great gusto, to an almost incredulous household, the particulars of the fight to a finish.

The trapper fixed his camp in the hills, and employed his best endeavours to trap the remaining dingoes with but partial success, securing one only. The old dingo, which on a former occasion had left two of his claws in a trap, and now had received this additional fright through the ensnarement of his comrades, was not to be lured by any device, however crafty. George, who knew their run intimately, surrounded them with traps. 'Twas all in vain, set them never so wisely.

This defiance and immunity irritated the old man beyond endurance, and he swore by all the dignities to get their scalps, if it took him till the crack of doom.

As he was camped on the ranges, in the vicinity of Razorback, his weekly ration was taken out to him by the boys, who were keen on this matter. They had been out twice with the rations, and now were being sent out the third time. What befel them on that trip will be related in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CHASE, AND ITS SEQUEL

"A southerly wind and a cloudy sky,
Proclaim a hunting morn;
Before the sun rises away we go,—
The sleep of the sluggard we scorn."

OLD SONG.

"Now then, sleepies,—up you get!" cried Sandy in the early morning, as he performed his usual preliminary of whipping off the bed-clothes from the sleepy-headed Joe and Tom.

"Sun's laughing at you through the windows. Come, Master Hawkins!" cried he with a grin as he tumbled that grunting individual on to the floor, piling the bed-clothes on top of him, and then seating himself on the wriggling pile. "If soft measures won't avail I am prepared to adopt severe ones."

Tom, now thoroughly aroused, and as peppery as you like, shouted and yelled and writhed, getting his arm at last round his persecutor, the laughing Sandy, and by a violent effort pulling him on to the broad of his back, thus reversing their positions.

"You red-headed Scotchman, I'll teach you meddle with—" pommel—"me again"—pommel, pommel.

Here a cold douche arrested the uplifted arm of the irate Tom, and took his breath for a moment, as it descended upon the prone bodies, accompanied by sundry "ouchs" and shrill yells. As the boys scrambled to their feet they joined forces and rushed the dodging Joe, who, after a few ineffectual dives, was caught and jolly well punched.

The usual early morning diversion ended, the lads, rosy with health and brimming over with animal spirits—the essence of good nature for all their rough play—dressed with haste and made for the stockyard, to pick their steeds.

This occupied their time till the seven o'clock breakfast, after which they secured from the storeman the rations for the trapper.

"Now Sandy, my boy, ye'll no forget to tell George what I named at breakfast."

"M-yes, about the dingoes, father?"

"No, stupid. Didna I ask you to tell him that, dingoes or no dingoes, he is to come next week at the latest, to handle the colts?"

"Oh yes, dad, I won't forget. I expect he'll growl a bit, as he's mad on getting the dogs and the reward. He's quite cranky over it."

"He'll come richt enough if ye gie him my order."

The trapper's camp, as previously stated, was situated about eleven miles from the homestead. Four miles or so from home the track roughened, and became what is known as broken country, all hills and gullies, for the most part very rocky, and heavily wooded in places.

The boys' progress was but slow, owing to the nature of the ground, and it took them nearly three hours to reach the camp, which they found unoccupied.

After cooeeing in vain for the absentee, they proceeded to light a fire in order to boil the billy, spreading the substantial lunch which Mrs. M'Intyre had furnished them.

"Bother old Nosey; wish he'd turn up!" exclaimed Sandy, when the boys had finished their repast. "We can't go till he comes. There'd be no end of a row if we went home without delivering the message."

"Oh, he'll be here before long," interjected Joe. "I vote we do a camp in the shade for an hour or two; it's hot enough to fry a steak."

This was good advice, and the boys made themselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted under the shade of the trees. So the hours passed without any sign of the trapper.

"Well, I declare," exclaimed Tom for the twentieth time in the course of the last hour, "it's too bad of Nosey. I'm full up of waitin' here with nothing to do. Can't you leave a message somehow for the ole cuss?"

"How is it to be done, Hawkins?"

"Oh bother! write a note, of course."

"Well, you are a greeney, Tom. Where's the pen, ink, and paper to come from?"

"Why, hasn't ole Nosey——?"

"Old Nosey, be hanged! Of course he hasn't, any more than he's got a dress suit and a toilet mirror."

"I've got a pencil," said Joe, feeling in his pocket.

"No good in the world; where's the paper to come from; an' supposin' we had pens, ink, paper, blotting-pads, writing desks, and whatever else you like to name in the scribbling line, what good 'ud it all be?"

"Meaning——?"

"Meanin' this, you dunderheads—it's got to be read."

"Well?"

"Well!—of all the thick-heads, muddle-pates, soft-uns, hodges, and idiots that ever I came across——!"

"Here, draw it mild, young porridge-pot. There's two to one against you: mind that, you red herring!"

"I'll *mind* more than that, if I am the son of a Scot, which is no great disgrace, after all," replied Sandy jeeringly. "But look here and listen, chiels. I'll tell you a story—

"Once upon a time, when pigs were called swine an' monkeys chewed tobacco, there lived a bully English captain, the commander of a man o' war. This frigate, sailing up the channel on her return from foreign parts, sighted a French ship, not more'n about twice her size. Instead of closing with the Frenchy slap bang, an' givin' her what-for, she turned tail an' showed her a clean pair of heels.

This outrageous proceeding on the part of a British sea-dog demanded instant investigation, and so the jolly captain was promptly court-martialled. After the case had been put by the prosecuting officer, and not denied by the prisoner, he was asked by the president of the court why he did not engage the enemy. The captain, in reply, said that he had ten reasons. 'Name them,' says the boss officer. 'The first is: I had no powder; it was all used up.' 'Enuf sed,' sings out the judge. 'We don't want the other nine. You're discharged, my man, without a stain on your character.'"

"Oh, that's all right for a yarn," cried Joe; "but I want to know what it's got to do with your father's message to Nosey?"

"Just as much as it's got to do with the grass of a duck in a forty-acre paddock," jeered Sandy.

"It's a story with a moral, boys; and as Captain Kettle—no, I mean Cuttle, says in that book of Dickens, the moral of the story lies in the application."

"Apply it, my wise man."

"Here then: old Nosey has ten reasons for not gettin' a written message."

"Name the first!"

"He can't read."

"Now then, Joe," said Tom, turning to that worthy, "what's the verdict of the court?"

"I s'pose we'll have to discharge the prisoner without a character," replied Joe with a wink.

"Blow these bally flies!" cried Tom, after an interval. "They're here in millions. Faugh!—splutter—there's one down my jolly throat. Say, Joe, what are you goin' to do?"

"Boil the billy," replied that youth laconically. "May as well do something, an' kill time."

So the hours sped until the sun was well on its descending curve in the late afternoon. Their patience was now thoroughly exhausted in waiting for the trapper. They canvassed the reasons for his non-appearance, until they were mortally sick of discussing the subject.

"Tell you what, boys, message or no message, Nosey or no Nosey," cried Sandy at last, "we must make tracks for home. We are not to blame for old George's absence. They'll be wondering what's become of us. It'll take us all our time to get there before dark as it is. At the worst, we'll have to come out to-morrow."

It took but a few minutes after this to secure the horses, saddle them, call the dog which had accompanied them to heel, and set out on the return journey.

After jogging briskly for a couple of miles or so the cattle dog, a strong wiry hound and a noted warrior among his species, began to sniff about, uttering a

series of low, short barks.

"Hello, Brindle, what's up? Got 'possum scent? Bandicoot, I 'spect. Fetch him, boy!"

Just at this moment Brindle made a dash forward, what time a big dog-dingo started out from under an old log a hundred yards or so ahead. The route taken by the chase lay up a long gully. This gully was, more correctly speaking, a depression, lacking abrupt and precipitous sides, and was comparatively free from rocks.

The boys hesitated a moment, but the temptation was too strong. Joe, clapping his spurs to his steed's sides, started off with a clatter, the others following pell-mell. The gully was long and winding, and to this, for some reason, the dingo stuck. The hunters now began to gain a little on the beast, and were in full sight, the cattle dog just holding his distance. At length the gully petered out at the base of a ridge, over which the quarry sped, the dog and boys in full chase. The other side of the ridge was more precipitous, and covered with bracken and stunted bushes. Down this the pursuit thundered, Joe in the lead and well to the cattle dog's heels: the dingo leading by not more than seventy yards. So absorbed was the boy in the hunt that he remained in ignorance of a calamity that was even now happening to one of his mates.

Tom's horse, in bounding down the ridge, and when close to the bottom, put his foot in a wombat's[#] hole that was hidden by bracken. Over came horse and rider, Tom striking the ground on head and shoulder, while Sandy, who was about a length behind, narrowly averted collision with the fallen steed and boy. As quickly as possible he pulled up his galloping animal, shouting out as he did so to Joe, who was too far away and too much engrossed in the chase to hear the call.

[#] Wombat—-a burrowing marsupial.

Returning to the collapsed pair, Sandy jumped off and lifted Tom's head, for the lad lay stiff. His appearance frightened the boy as he lay still and death-like. To his great joy, however, on feeling Tom's wrist, Sandy detected a feeble pulse-beat. Laying his stricken mate gently down in the bracken, he made a hasty examination of his head. It bore no trace of wound, save some gravel scratches and a nasty bruise under the left eye. The relieved boy hurried to the bottom of the ridge, where by good hap was a rill of water. Filling his hat he returned and laved the brow and wrists of his companion. After some twenty minutes or so Tom began to stir, and quickly regained consciousness. No bones were broken,

but the boy was badly shaken, and all thoughts of further pursuit were out of the question. The horse, by a miracle, was without hurt.

"You're a lucky beggar, Tom," said Sandy, after a few minutes. "From the way you crashed down I made sure every blessed bone in your body was broken. How do you feel now, ole boss?"

"Oh, I'm all right," replied Tom feebly. "Shoulder's the worst. It's not dislocated, but it pains a lot. Phew! but it does hurt when I move it. I expect it felt the full force of the tumble. But—where's Joe?"

"Joe's ahead. Goodness only knows where he's got to by now. He hasn't a ghost's show of getting the dingo if he makes for the hills."

"I tell you what," continued the boy; "we'll get off home as soon as you feel fit. It's no use waiting for Joe. He can easily catch us. You'll have to go slow, old man, you know."

This was true, for Tom's shoulder was in an agony of ache, which the movement of the horse, after they had mounted, intensified to an almost unbearable degree.

It was long after dark ere the pair sighted the homestead lights. They had not been overtaken by Joe, much to their surprise. They were met at the slip-rails by Harry and Jacky, who had just been dispatched to look for them, as the family were getting uneasy at their prolonged absence. The men returned with the lads to the house. Beyond a severe word to Sandy for being tempted to pursue the impossible when on the homeward track, the squatter justified their act of returning from the camp; also in not waiting for Joe.

"I expect the rascal will turn up in a few minutes. His horse would soon be knocked up in that country, and he would therefore be unable to catch you after he abandoned the dingo. The cheek of you boys, to think you could run it down in that country!"

The minutes sped without sight or sound of the huntsman. Anxiety deepened in the women; the men, too, became uneasy.

"Some one ought to go after the lad," broke in the perturbed mother, at length. "The poor laddie must have met trouble. His horse has knocked up. Perhaps he has lost himself. Perhaps he——!"

"Perhaps nothing of the kind has happened, except that the horse may have knocked up. You women will always jump to the worst conclusions. Willy, you and I'll ride back a bit; come you too Sandy, if you're not too tired."

Mr. M'Intyre feared more than he showed. It would be easy enough after all, he reflected, for a boy who was ignorant of the lay of the country and who had no experience in bush travelling, to lose his way. He determined, therefore, to take his son with him, so that he might lead them to the spot where the accident occurred, if it were necessary. Accordingly the three set off on the track. Fortu-

nately it was moonlight and clear, so that they were able to make good headway through the bush.

It is time, however, to return to Joe. That ardent hunter had followed the chase for some distance ere he missed his pals. What with the severity of the pace and the increasing roughness of the course, its twistings and turnings, all his attention was focussed on the quarry. If he did think at all of his companions, it was to picture them following close behind. But in the heat of the chase he had little thought for others. When it did dawn upon him that he had outdistanced his companions, as happened eventually, he attributed little importance to that. They, no doubt, had good reason for slackening their pace. His horse, as he well knew, had a dash of speed denied to theirs. Maybe their steeds had caved in. Anyhow, he was having a glorious time, and "the finish" was touched with roseate hues to his imagination.

His horse was justifying the reputation given of him to Joe by Harry, the stockman, one day when they were discussing the relative merits of their mounts.

"For a hack," that worthy had remarked, "there's nothing on the run equal to the little thing you're ridin'. With a light weight up like yourself she can show a dash of foot an' staying powers that'll take a tremendous lot of lickin'."

This was a just criticism, as events were proving. Still, the pace was beginning to tell, and Joe was forced to ease the mare somewhat, even at the risk of losing sight of the quarry. The rough ridges, too, made the going to be precarious.

Things were as bad with Master Dingo, however. The pursuit was hot enough to extend him to the fullest. He was always in view, and could not shake off the foe. As long as he remained in sight it was impossible to resort to any trick by which he might gain time or wind. The ordinary pace of the dingo when on the chase may be described as a lope. This can be kept up the live-long day, and thus wear down the fleetest victim. To keep extended at full gallop in this unwonted fashion is not at all to the dingo's liking, and the sooner he can reach the distant scrub, which is his objective, the better pleased he will be. The cattle dog, though not ordinarily a hunter, is strong and tough, and possessed of a good pair of bellows. He started the game with the utmost alacrity, and now continues it with the greatest vim and determination.

So the chase continues, and is now but little more than a mile from the scrub belt which fringes the base of the hills. To this ark of safety, therefore, the dingo strains every muscle, and seizes every small advantage which his instinct discerns. No less strenuous is the cattle dog. He has the staying powers of his class, and he too runs to win. In this way the pursued and pursuers hurry-skurry over bush and brake, over stony ridges and across intersecting gullies.

Within half a mile of the scrub the country flattens out, and this gives an advantage to the cattle dog, who closes up. Joe's horse is now in distress. The course has been long and rough, the pace severe, and the grass-fed steed is weakening, can make no headway, is indeed losing in the race. The lad sees this, and chevies the dog on, for he can plainly mark now that unless the chase be ended on this side of the scrub all hope must be abandoned, Oh, to win! A supremely glorious thing were he to achieve the impossible! There are chances. Lots of things might happen yet. On, on, good doggie! Catch him, Brindle! Hurrah, Brindle is closing; is surely creeping up!

They are now about three hundred yards from the timber belt, and the dingo is slowly but surely being overhauled. Visions of the scalp as a proud trophy fill the boy's imagination. If only Brindle may seize his victim and hold him till he rides up and gives the brute its quietus with the stirrup iron! Brindle is now not more than four lengths behind, and the beasts are still a hundred yards from the scrub.

"On then, doggie: catch him: hold him!" shouts Joe across the widely intervening distance. The voice is borne faintly to the dog's ears, and nerves him to heroic effort in this the final stage of the struggle, the last lap, so to speak. Breath is too precious to be wasted in answering cry, but the spurt of the hound speaks volumes: "I shall catch him, master, never fear: I am gaining; but "twill be on the post."

Both dogs, wild and domestic, are stretched to their fullest extent. It is the crowning burst. They are labouring heavily, staggering, and rolling in their stride. The pace is slow but hard. It is a question of endurance. Every ounce of strength in each body is laid under contribution. Once within the scrub the chances in favour of the dingo will immediately increase a hundredfold, for in doubling and dodging through the densely timbered belts the native dog has no equal.

Only thirty yards now lie between the dingo and his salvation—the good thick scrub that will swallow him up; but—the breath of the pursuer blows hot upon him. Throwing his head over his shoulder for the fraction of a second, the desperate beast sees that only by a miracle can he escape. The adversary is upon his quarters, and in another second the brute's fangs will be buried in his back. It is a supreme moment. Now or never! Making a super-canine effort, the fear-stricken thing draws away from its enemy in the last dozen strides. Saved, saved! Alas, alas! Right at the very fringe, and within a single step of safety, he tumbles in a heap, and with a convulsive gasp rolls over and gives up the ghost: the prolonged exertions have broken his heart.

You can work your will on the hunted one now, Brindle: no need to fear the vicious snap that was reserved for you should the worst happen. But the

dog's instincts inform him that all power of resistance has gone from that mute and still form; indeed, he has no strength to worry should the call be made: the last spurt has left him without a vestige of strength. And so, when Joe appeared upon the scene a few minutes later, it was to behold the motionless dingo, and by his side, with lolling tongue and cavernous mouth, the panting and exhausted Brindle.

In a moment the boy has slid from his horse, and is dancing a grotesque fandango, expressive of his unbounded joy. But, when in a calmer moment he understood the tragedy of it from the dingo's side of things, a feeling of compassion possessed him, yet joy persisted. "He's a noble fellow, and has given me the grandest sport I've ever had. I'm sorry, and yet I'm glad," quoth the lad. "What'll old Nosey say to this! My stars, ain't the boys out of it! Wonder where the poor beggars have got to. Hope nothing's happened to them. Poor beast!" apostrophising the dingo, "you made a royal struggle and deserved to escape, but the fates were against you. And you, good old Brindle; my word, you've covered yourself with glory, sir! Poor fellow, you are done up; can only blink your pleasure; can't wag even the tip of your tail. Good doggie, I'm proud of you!"

"I'm blest if I don't skin the dingo," exclaimed he, after a moment's pause. "I'll keep it as a trophy. Something to look at in after years when I'm a greybeard," chuckled the youth. So saying, he whipped out his knife. Joe had never before skinned a dingo, but as he had performed that office on many a wallaby and 'possum he was fairly expert, and in a few minutes had achieved his object. Rolling the pelt in the approved manner, the youth bound it with a stout piece of cord which he extracted from his pocket, and fastened it to the saddle ring.

"Next thing's to get some water. My word! I'm as dry as leather, an' could drink a tank dry. The animals, too, are clean done up, an' I'll get nothing out of them unless they have water. Good gracious! why—the sun's down, an' it'll soon be dark."

Not until this moment did the young hunter realise his position. "Must be miles and miles off the track," muttered he as he took a brief survey of his surroundings. "I'll have to make tracks with a vengeance! Won't do to be nipped here. Let's see; yes, the way back is across that flat for a certainty, and then over yon stony ridge. Beyond that we bend to the right till we reach a rocky creek." In this way the hunter strove to recall the innumerable bends and curves taken in the chase. "Ah, here's the moon rising: good old moon!"

Joe had plenty of heart, nerve, and resource. His good spirits were proverbial. Yet the situation was not at all inviting. Fourteen miles or so from home on the eve of night. A complete stranger to this rough and trackless region, and his horse badly used up! These were things calculated to try the nerves and tax the courage of the benighted youth.

He made small bones of these, however, and started off at a slow pace on his return. The dog had recovered sufficiently to drag himself along at the horse's heels. The boy eagerly scanned the country for signs of water for this would afford the greatest relief to man and beasts: all of whom felt an intolerable thirst. At last they dropped across a small pool in a stony creek, to their great delight.

Both horse and dog drank as if they would never stop. This, the boy felt, would be bad for the animals, and he sought to stay them. He with difficulty checked the horse, but the dog would not quit lapping until he was as tight as the proverbial drum. Joe himself drank sparingly, and then moved onward. The dog soon began to vomit, and appeared to be on the verge of collapse. So after vain waiting and entreaty the lad was forced to leave it behind, in the hope that it would recover during the night, when he had small doubt as to its ability to find its way home. The horse went easier, now that she had assuaged her thirst. All light had vanished save that of the moon, which shed an uncertain light, making puzzling shadows on the rough ground.

"It's time I was at the head of the long gully," muttered the lad. "From there it's only a mile or so to the home track. Get up Jill, and moosey along. The other chaps are home by this time I expect, and they're wondering what's become of me."

Strange to say, the long gully refused to appear, until it dawned on Joe at last that he was off the track. None but those who have experienced it can understand the weird feeling that possesses one in the dawn of that consciousness. To be in the lonely Australian bush, where the silence is an oppression, is something like being cast adrift in mid-ocean on a raft, with nothing in sight save the wild waste of waters.

That he had lost his bearings became increasingly evident to the wanderer as he moved along. He became a prey to disquieting qualms and the creeping chill of apprehension. Gruesome accounts of the fate of lost travellers had often been related at the home fireside, and these memories awoke in his mind.

"I'm off the track all right; still, I'm sure to cut across the Razorback trail; it'll lie over in that direction." After a pause he determined to adhere to the way that he had been pursuing for some little while. On then "breast forward." There is no semblance of a track, and presently the lad gets into very difficult country. It would be bad enough to travel through in daylight, but now the trouble is accentuated; yet the boy, with strong faith in his ultimate emergence from this chaos, bravely faces the situation. Up hill, down dale, across gullies, forcing the patches of scrub, slithering down ridges, going on hands and knees, ever and anon, to feel for the hoof-prints on what appeared to be the longed-for track—an unceasing march goes on.

At last the mare, completely done up, comes to grief over a tree root, and

tumbles to mother earth. The rider rises, unhurt; not so the mare, who has strained her fetlock. What is to be done now? It is a serious mischance, and the boy feels the gravity of the situation. The only thing to be done is to relieve his steed of saddle and bridle, cache his accoutrements, and trudge along on foot.

"Might have been worse," sighed the philosophic lad. "Poor Jill! I don't like leaving you; but it won't be for long, my beauty. Your master will send some one to look after you to-morrow. To-morrow!—Why, it must be past midnight now! Good-bye, Jill."

On speeds the gallant youth, whistling and singing snatches as he tramps the interminable bush. "Might be worse," he reiterates in thought. There's a chill in the midnight air, and the walk will warm him nicely. On, then, through the still hours! Not even the hollow note of the night-owl or the familiar thump made by the feeding marsupial breaks the monotony of silence. No sound, indeed, save the crunching of the traveller's boots on the rough ground. How long drawn out the day has been. It seems an eternity since he dowsed Tom and Sandy on the bedroom floor. Lucky beggars, they are snug and sound under the blankets, dreaming the happy dreams of youth; while he, Joe Blain, is tramp, tramp, tramping. At length the thought of his comrades' sweet repose fills him with longing for rest and sleep.

"How long ago it is since I broke my fast? Must be eight, ten, twelve hours; yes, twelve mortal hours! Eat! Oh, for a slice of damper and salt junk! That were a feed if you like. Puddings, tarts, cakes! Bah! Gimme a slice (thick) of Nosey's damper, an' a slab of that corn-beef."

What a sinking seems to fill his being! How heavy his boots have grown! How steep those everlasting ridges have become! How lovely to crouch down on that patch of bracken—for five minutes only! He must stop and rest awhile; not to lie and sleep: just to get his wind and ease his tired limbs. Shall he——? But no! he must first cut the track—then! His limbs are trembling; he must not stand still, or he will fall. On, on—to the station track! Onward, then, creeps the tottering, stumbling lad. Whistle and song have long ceased. Fatigue reigns supreme, and sheer weariness confuses his brain, and bears heavily on will. Mechanically now, the dear lad staggers over the pathless waste.

But see! Yes, there is a change. What is that line ahead? Is it on the ground or in the air? It rises and falls in the moonlight, but still persists. The ground, too, is getting smoother. The ridges have disappeared. Hurrah! Is not this the end? A few steps more now, and—the station track!

On trudges the lost boy with rising hope. But, alas! the line thickens, darkens, deepens, until it stands out solid, an impregnable scrub. How weird it all is; how awful! In a moment the benighted lad is stripped of hope. He is frightened beyond words. With a momentary strength born of despair the

wretched youth coasts the dismal scrub, seeking an opening in vain. Suddenly he stumbles over a soft, dark mass, and falls to the ground. Putting out a hand instinctively, he touches the substance. Great Cæsar, it is the dingo! Yes, it has happened to poor Joe Blain as it has to many a one more experienced in the ways of the bush—he has circled!

This shock is the last blow. Nature is drained of her resources and can hold out no longer. The lad sinks back into a half-swoon, which presently merges into a dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

"Joe, old fellow, wake up! Wake up, I say; Joe—Joe—d'ye hear?"

"W-w-w-what is it? Drat you, lemme lone. 'Snot mornin'. There's goo-good fler, so s-s-sleep——"

Joe Blain, eyes sealed, dead with sleep, rolls over on the ground, and never was any creature more gently rocked in the arms of Morpheus than he.

Another voice now breaks the silence, sharp and penetrating.

"Hi! hi! there, you sleepy lubber. Are ye going to lie there all day? Rouse up, laddie!"

This imperative speech was accompanied by vigorous shakings and rollings.

"Well, well," grunted the half-awakened boy, "sounds like Mr. M'Intyre's voice. Never knew him to come into the room be-before. Wish they'd leave us alone. Can't open"—and the next moment Joe had relapsed into sleep. Only for a moment, though. The next he was taken neck and crop, lifted to his feet, and shaken violently, what time a voice rasped his ear drum: "Wake up, wake up, ye young Rip Van Winkle!"

Opening his eyes, the dazed Joe starts at the unwonted scene. He is not in his bedroom, then! What on earth has happened? Who are these that surround him? Why—he's in the bush! And then the truth dawns upon the weary and weakened lad; he was really lost, and—thank God he is found!

He greets the squatter with a wan smile, and, with the grace characteristic of the boy, begins to thank him. But Mr. M'Intyre, patting him affectionately on the back while supporting him with his arm, extracts the cork of a pocket flask with his teeth, and puts it to the lad's mouth.

"Tak' a pu' at this, ma laddie; it'll revive ye wonderfu'."

The brandy worked wonders on the boy, so unaccustomed to it.

"We—we ran the dingo down, sir—Jill and Brin—why, here's ole Brindle! Left him at the water-hole; too sick to follow. The horse too——"

"Horse's all right, Joe. We picked her up at the water-hole, where we'll

leave her for a few days, as she's limping badly. Can you sit on the saddle before me?" Joe is sure he can, and no time is lost in starting homewards. M'Intyre, to whom the country was an open book, knew a short cut that would take them home in ten miles.

During the ride Joe recited his experiences to the squatter, who in return related how Willie had picked up the tracks, sighting first the horse and then the dog, and followed the trail till they came upon the sleeping lad.

It was a weary but not unhappy boy who reached the homestead at length. The household, duly apprised by Willy, who had ridden on ahead, were in readiness to cheer the conquering hero.

CHAPTER XIX
CONCERNING WILD HORSES

"Now welcome, welcome, master mine,
Thrice welcome to the noble chase:
Nor earthly sport, nor sport divine,
Can take such honourable place."
Ballad of the Wild Huntsmen.

"Where's Floss and Jeannie, Harry? Don't see 'em in the yard this morning."

"No, sir, they didn't come in with the others."

"Hoo's that, mon?"

"I harsk'd Jacky about 'em when he yarded the others, an' he said they wasn't with the rest. Too lazy, I bet, to look after 'em."

"But I dinna see Tallboy or Dolly, eyther," said the squatter as he peered through the rails at the horses.

"I speck they're with the mares down by the dam, or p'raps campin' on the box ridge."

"Weel, see that they're no missed the morn. Here you, Jacky," to the black boy; "come along here."

"What's matter, Boss?"

"What for you bin no yard all yarraman?"[#]

[#] Yarraman—native name for horse.

"Bail me see some, Boss."

"You bin getting lazy. I'll hae to gie you a taste o' the stock whip."

"Me no 'fraid you, Boss," replied the black with a grin. "You not like my ole boss, Cap'n White. Him murry quick with whip. Sandy bin tellin' me you only gammon."

"See that you drive in every hoof to-morrow morning, or, Sandy or no Sandy, ye'll get a surprise, my boy."

"I cam across some brumby tracks yesterday aifternoon in the springers' paddock," continued the squatter to Harry, the head stockman. "Meant to hae spoken aboot it afore."

"They're a rare nuisance, they brutes! There maun be a gap in the dog-leg fence at the far side for 'em to ha'e got in. You'd better tak' Jacky and Denny at once, and mak' the fence secure. That pack o' rubbage'll be doing a lot o' mischief among the springers wi' their galloping. Ye'd better go across by the horse-paddock, an' see if ye can get a sicht o' the mares. It's almost as near as the other track."

"All right, Boss. Jacky, you go to Ah Fat an' tell 'im to put up some grub. Git the billy an' tots, an' bring 'em along. Tell Denny I want 'im. He's working in the garden."

"Oh, I say," bawling after the retreating boy; "tell Denny to git the small cross-cut, an' a couple o' tommies, an' a bit o' wire to do the mendin' with. Slither away, now, ye son of a black buck!"

In a few minutes the men are on their way through the horse-paddock to the slip-rails in the far corner, to carry on the repairing work in the springers' enclosure.

It may be explained to the uninitiated that the horse-paddock is that nearest the homestead, where the station horses in use are kept; a larger or smaller mob according to requirements. These are yarded at daylight every morning. When the horses required for the day's work are selected the balance are turned loose for the day. The springers' paddock, reserved for the breeding cows, was a large one; one of the best on the run, in fact. The men as they rode along kept a sharp look-out for the missing steeds. Separating as they neared the dam—which was a large sheet of water backing up in the gullies for a mile or so—they rode on either side, coming together at the box-tree ridge where the slip-rails were located. No sign of the horses!

"Strange, chaps! Wonder where they can be. Floss an' Dolly are fair terrors for hidin'. But—hello! there's the slip-rails down!"

Sure enough, the two topmost rails were down. Who could have done it?

The mystery is soon solved; the ground on the outside being trampled with horse hoofs. It told its tale of cause and effect quickly enough to these bushmen.

"The blessed brumbies hev got in an' coaxed 'em out, sure enough. It's the warrigal's[#] mob for a quid. Fifty of 'em, if there's a hoof.

[#] Warrigal—wild, savage; applied indifferently by the natives to animals and men.

"How d'yer think they horses got the rails down, Harry?"

The speaker was Denny Kineavy, who was a new chum at this kind of work.

"Why, it's the ole warrigal's work o' course. Trust 'im fur findin' out a way o' gettin' up a flirt with the ladies. He's the cutest cuss in Australia, bar none. Full o' blood he is too. New Warrior strain outer a great arab mare of Kurnel Dumaresque. I know 'im well, fur I was with Captain White just after he'd bought both dam an' foal from the ole Kurnel; or rather, I should say, Dumaresque swopped 'em fur a stud Hereford 'e was terribly struck on.

"Yes; he was allus a wild un. My word, you should 'a' seen 'im as a yearling! Allus leadin' the other youngsters into mischief; breakin' into the lucem paddocks, an' chasin' the dorgs till they was in mortial terror of 'im; gettin' mad fits among the horses; kickin' an' squealin' an' chiveyin' em', till one day the Captain gits in a towerin' rage an' says to me an' one-eyed Bob, who was workin' fur 'im then: 'Run in that dad-busted, bloomin' brute an' fix 'im; it's the only way ter take the divvil outer 'im.'

"You see, 'e was a grand, upstandin' beast as a colt, an' the Captain wunst thought to have 'im fur stud purposes, fur all 'e was a mix breed; but 'e soon seed that was outer the question.

"Well, as I was sayin', the Captain orders me an' one-eyed Bob to yard 'im. 'Twarn't no easy job nuther, I tell you; for the brute soon cottoned what we was up to. At larst, after a lot of trouble, we yards 'im, and with 'im a couple o' colts an' a lot er fillies. Bob threw the lasso a dozen times afore 'e noosed 'im, cause 'e kept dodgin' in an' out among the fillies. It was the deuce's own job to separate 'em.

"At larst, I say, Bob fixed 'im, an' didn't 'e perform. Howe'er, Bob 'olds 'im, an' I gits 'old of the slack to give a turn round the post, so's ter bring 'im up. But all of a suddent 'e makes a mad rush at Bob, sendin' 'im sprawlin' with three ribs broke; whisks the rope outer my hands, an' streaked fur the slip-rails—six on 'em there wor—an' by 'evans! jumps like a cat at 'em; comin' down with 'is belly on top, smashin' the rail, but fallin' on the outside; never, of course, breakin' 'is bloomin' neck—an' galloped orf like mad.

"Must 'a' bin red mad sure enuff, fur 'e broke through the wire fence the Cap had round 'is 'orse-paddock; and that's the larst we seen of 'im fur months.

”Then one day I was on the out station, lookin’ after some steers, when I come acrost ’im in a mob of brumbies he’d chummed up with. ’E was ’aving a pretty rough time of it, I could see; fur there was a couple o’ stallions in the mob as wasn’t agreeable fur ’is company in the ’arem; an that’s ’ow we come ter git ’im a few years after, I ’spect.”

”Thin you did git hould iv th’ grey divvil?” exclaimed Denny.

”Yes; we got ’im all right. But, look here, chaps, no time’s to be lost. These beggars may be still in the paddock. If not, they’ve got out the way they came in, an’ are ’eadin’ fur the ranges. We’ll cut across to the north end where the fence crosses Rocky Crick. I ’spect that’s where they’ve broken in. It looked a bit shaky a fortni’t ago, as I come by. I don’t think they’ve got in at the dog-leg end, that the Boss spoke about. Anyhow, we’ll try the Crick fust.”

A sharp ride of about four miles brought the men to the spot indicated by Harry. It was a rocky bit of country, and sure enough they found the ”shaky” post and rails lying on the ground. The immediate cause of this was a big limb of a dry stringy-bark tree, which had fallen upon the weak spot and smashed it down. The horse tracks about the spot showed conclusively that the mob had gone in and out by this means.

According to Jacky, the black boy, the inward tracks were about three days old; the outward, a few hours. Without doubt, the brumbies had ”nosed” the rails to which the mares had been attracted by their neighings, early in the night. Then in the dawning of the morning they had moved out to one of their haunts in the ranges.

”The only thing now is to get back an’ tell the Boss. ’E’ll be mad when he knows, you bet; thinks no end o’ Floss an’ Jeannie. Put up the rails, boys, quick an’ lively.” In a few minutes the men had fixed up the broken panels securely, and then rode homewards.

”Saay, Harry, me bhoy, how’d yees yard th’ ould stag, as ye was sayin’ when ye was talkin’ forninst th’ slip-raales?

”Wasn’t an old stag then, an’ isn’t now, fur that matter, the brute’s in ’is prime yet. Let’s see, ’e’s risin’ ’leven now, an’ we got ’im just afore I left the Captain fur the Boss here. Lemme think. Yes, it’s just over five year ago; he’d be about six, then. Fur all his tricks, the two stallions had driven ’im off their beat. ’E’d got a couple o’ mares, though, an’ kep’ ’em in the range country on the out-station; but it was all of an accident that we got ’im.

”One day me an’ the Captain was ridin’ through the run, havin’ a good look at the stock; fur we had a notion of cuttin’ out a mob o’ fats. Well, as I was sayin’, we was ridin’ along the back part of the run, an’ we came acrost a couple o’ brumbies, each with a foal. ’Stead o’ scootin’, as they does in giniral, the mares galloped in a circle, but didn’t clear.

"'It's mighty strange,' ses the Captain. 'What are they 'angin' about fur, an' where's their mate? Never seed 'em parted afore.' 'It is strange,' ses I; 'an' there's only one thing to account fur it, an' that is the cove's about sumwheres 'andy.'

"We moved on to a rocky gully that opens out on to a big plain. At one place a log fence runs acrost to keep the stock in. Bymby we comes plump onter it, an', great gosh alive! if there weren't the grey. 'E seed us as soon as we spotted 'im, an' set up a great squealin' an' pawin', but cuddn't get away. There 'e was, like a bandicoot in a V-trap. 'E was caught by the off hind-leg, between two big logs that lay clost together. 'E was jammed tight enough. Wunder was 'e didn't break a leg.

"When the Cap saw the fix 'e was in, didn't 'e just cuss fur joy. Then 'e sends me back to the hut, about two mile away, fur ropes, an' ole Jack the keeper. Well, I streaked fur the hut, you bet, an' was there less'n no time. Soon me an' Jack, with two green 'ide lassoes an' an 'emp one, also a axe, was on the spot.

"When the 'orse sees the ropes 'e yelled, an' roared, an' pawed, an' snapped 'is teeth, fur all the world like a trapt dingo. An', wud you believe it? *the blarmy mares hadn't follered us up*! There they was just ahind us, whinneying and screamin'; their way o' swearing an' cussin' I s'pose. Wish-I-may-die if we didn't have to put the stock whip on 'em to roust 'em away.

"'How are yer goin' ter manage 'im,' ses I to the Cap when I comes up with the things.

"'I'll soon let yer see,' ses 'e. 'Fust of all we'll pass a rope round 'is free 'ind-leg well up on to the shank. Then we'll put another on the front fetlock an' acrost 'is flanks.'

"Well, it took us a goodish bit to fix 'im up. I forgot ter say that we tied the third rope round 'is neck, an' that was no easy job, fur every time the Cap threw the lasso he'd dodge it with 'is 'ed like a fightin' kangaroo. But, ter make a long story short, when we'd roped 'im, we levered one of the logs with saplin's so's ter git 'is other leg free. Then, didn't 'e play up! But by the time we'd given 'im arf a dozen falls, an' two o' them riglar croppers, 'e seed it was no use, throws up the sponge, an' comes along quietly.

"We didn't give 'im any charnse, you bet, as 'e was such a sly demon. So we got 'im ter the stockyard at the 'ead station, a matter o' thirteen mile or so. We put 'im in the crush fust, then got a 'evvy 'alter on 'im, an' tied it to 'is front off leg so's 'e cuddent jump; in that way we fixed 'im fur the night.

"Early nex' morning, just as I was thinkin' o' gittin' up, there comes a tremenjious 'ammerin' an' bangin' at the door, shoutin' out sumthin' I cuddent understand. I jumps up an' opens the door, an' there was ole Jack singin' out an' makin' a great fluster.

"'What in thunder's the matter, Jack?' ses I.

"'Warrigal's gone!' ses 'e, all tremblin' like. 'Cleared right out in the night.'

"Off I rushes ter the yards, an' sure enuff, the beast had cleared; yet the rails was up.

""Ow the dickens 'e got out, Jack?' ses I, lookin' round. Presently I comes ter the slip-rails, an' soon spots 'ow 'e done it. I'm blest if the ole cuss didn't lay down ter it at the rails an' 'riggled 'is way out sideways. You cud see the ground all tore up by 'is 'oofs as 'e inched 'is way out. There was a knot at the lower side o' the rail, an' it was covered with 'air an' blood, which shows what a tight squeeze it was."

"But 'ow the blazes did he gat out iv th' pathock whin he was knee-haltered?"

"Like enuff 'e worked 'is 'edstall off as 'e 'riggled through. We thought we'd made it tight enuff fur anythin'. Anyways 'e cleared, an', what's more, 'e an' the mares moved off the run an' wasn't 'eard of fur long, then 'e was found bossin' a mob on Bullaroi."

By this time the men had reached the homestead. Leaving the others at the stockyard, Harry proceeded to the house to break the bad news to the owner.

The squatter was greatly put out by the turn the affair had taken. Two of the horses were brood mares on which he set a high value, and for which he had given a big price. They were full of breeding, having the famed Gemma di Vergi strain on the sire's side. The occurrence was no less than a calamity in more ways than one.

Their location was in difficult country, and with such a rogue as the grey outlaw to lead and direct, the job of rescue seemed by no means easy or certain. Mr. M'Intyre, however, was determined to regain his mares, and at the same time to capture or destroy that equine demon. One thing in his favour was the fact that in midsummer there was a scarcity of water in the ranges, and their run, for a while, at any rate, must be in and about the foot-hills.

As was usual in those days, the neighbouring station-holders were invited to join in the brumby hunt, which is, as a rule, the most exciting, and, at times the most dangerous, sport that Australia can furnish, keenly relished by bushmen.

The brumby is no more a native Australian horse than the mustang is a native American horse; that is to say, it is not indigenous to the country. Brumbies are the descendants of imported horses which have escaped into the bush and bred there.

When Australian settlements were confined to the barest fringe of the continent, it was very common for stock, both horses and cattle, to stray from the settled areas into the great wilderness beyond.

An historic illustration is to be found in the genesis of colonial expansion. When the first expedition sailed from England, not only were officials, soldiers,

and convicts shipped; but also an assortment of domestic animals to furnish the requirements of the penal colony proposed to be established on the shores of Botany Bay.

As the cattle in the new settlements increased, many beasts strayed beyond the borders of the occupied country to the interior forests and plains; and before very long "brumbies" (wild horses) and "scrubbers" (wild cattle) covered large tracts, often to the great annoyance of the advancing line of settlers.

CHAPTER XX
THE BRUMBY HUNT

"Like a wintry shore that the waters ride o'er,
All the lowlands are filling with sound;
For swiftly we gain where the mobs of the plain
Like a tempest are tearing the ground!
And we'll follow them hard to the rails of the yard,
Over gulches and mountain-tops grey,
Where the beat and the beat of our swift horses' feet
Will die with the echoes away."
HENRY KENDALL.

"How many are coming to the hunt to-morrow, dad?"

"About a score all told, my son. That is," continued the speaker somewhat inconsequently, "if they a' turn up."

"Gills coming, ain't they?"

"Yes; the old man, son, and ane o' the stockmen'll be here this evening, so as to be ready for the early stairt the morn's morn. That reminds me, I've no telt your mother. They'll be here aboot supper-time."

"Captain White coming, I s'pose?"

"If he's above ground. We'd best coont 'em up. Get a bit o' paper, Saundy, and pit doon the names. Then we'll ken for sure."

"Ready, father."

"Pit doon oor ain lot first. Mysel', you, Hairry, the blacks, Denny, the bullock driver, the ration carrier, Redgate and Broon from the oot-station, Joe, Tom,

N-eville—I suppose. Hoo mony's that?"

"Thirteen."

"So mony's that? At that rate we'll hae ower a score. Weel, that's a' the better. Let's see, noo: pit doun the Gill lot, that's three more. Then there's Captain White. Old Dumaresque says he'll be along, but I dinna reckon on him, so you needna coont him in. White's going to bring twa men wi' him. And, m-yes, there's Davison o' the bank, and Dickson the lawyer. Told 'em the other day I'd let 'em know. They'll need to be here the nicht, too. We'd better send Willy in wi' a message at once. That's a' noo I think. Hoo mony does that tot up?"

"Twenty-one not counting the Colonel."

"Weel, I hope they'll turn up, that's a'."

"I say, father, could Jimmy Flynn an' Yellow Billy come?"

"Eh? Weel, I—I dinna ken. Can they ride?"

"Ride? Listen to him! Why, Yellow Billy's the boss rider among the boys. You know his steer——"

"Ah weel," said Mr. M'Intyre laughingly, "we'll hae 'em. Send word by the boy."

Accordingly, the invitation was taken to the four Tareelians. Gill and party turned up about dark, and shortly after them the town lot, all of whom were welcomed by their hospitable host.

M'Intyre had made extensive preparations for the hunt. There are various methods for trapping wild horses. The one in vogue at Bullaroi and the surrounding stations was that called the "wing" trap. This consists, first of all, in determining the usual brumby run. The next work, and an important one, is the building of yards in a locality specially selected, the object being to get as near as possible to the natural line of the horses' travel when stampeded.

The yards must be well constructed, with a high, strong fence, having an open mouth so wide as to give the hunted steed no suspicion of running into a trap. The upper and nether lips of this mouth, after running parallel a short distance, gradually converge to the throat, as it were, finally meeting, and forming a cul-de-sac.

From the mouth extremity a vast roll of canvas, or, rather, calico strips about six inches wide, is made fast to one of the fence terminals, and from there, at a slight outward angle, is often taken for miles, being secured at intervals to trees or stakes which are driven into the ground. The wing is fixed breast high. This, to the inexperienced, seems but a flimsy obstacle; but the calico barrier, frail as it appears, acts as an effectual boundary. Brumbies are both timid and suspicious, and very rarely charge a wing. When driven on to one they wheel either to right or left, with never a thought of breaking through or jumping it.

The strategy of the "drive" is to station men at intervals from the terminal

point of the wing; each man is armed with a heavy stock whip, a cruel enough weapon in the hands of an adept. Others are left at the trap-yard mouth on the outward side, concealed as a rule, and ready to dart out and head the mob should it scent danger when nearing the opening. The remainder of the men proceed to locate and enflank the mob, and drive them in the given direction. This, often, is a very difficult matter, and sometimes the best laid scheme is defeated by a determined and irresistible rush of the mob in the teeth of their assailants.

Premising the "round up" and drive to be successful as far as the wing, the wing supports wheel them in the right direction; then close in and pass to the outside to strengthen the flank men, who now form a parallel line with the racing brumbies. Thus, with the calico wing on one side, a living, whip-cracking, yelling cordon on the other, and a harrying force behind, the spectacle is as brilliant and as exciting as Australia can furnish in the line of sport.

At sunrise, on a glorious morning in mid January, the Bullaroi party, well mounted, wend their way to the appointed rendezvous, from whence the amalgamated forces are to proceed to the brumby grounds.

The men and boys are variously mounted. All the horses, however, are used to stock work; some of them, within certain limits, being as intelligent as the men who bestride them. Many of them are what is known as "camp horses"; that is, horses trained for mustering and cutting out work on the cattle camp. Quick to wheel, to dodge, to out-manoeuvre the charging bullock, and even to divine the enemy's intention; skilful in wedging through a pack; ready to advance backwards, so to speak, and to use heels when head and shoulders unavail; needing scarce any control, and with a keen zest for the work, the camp horse is an invaluable auxiliary on a cattle run.

Both M'Intyre and Gill were specially well mounted on favourites of the above-named variety. The price of each was regarded by its rider as beyond rubies. Both men were strong-boned, grizzled, and expert bushmen, with not a superfluous ounce of flesh on their bodies. Neville was of the company. He had learned many things in the intervening days; the first, and most essential, was that England could furnish no precedent to Australia in things that are peculiar to station life. He gradually dropped his pet phrase, "The way we do things in England." The scales had fallen from his eyes concerning many things "Colonial."

Mr. M'Intyre, who liked him, paid him no little attention. He rode out on the run with him, giving common-sense hints in his dry way, from time to time, which his guest was ready enough to take. He learned to ride fairly well, and, after many mortifying failures, could crack a stock whip without entangling it in the horse's legs.

Mr. M'Intyre was dubious about Neville going. The Englishman, however, was so set on joining the cavalcade that to object seemed discourtesy. All hints of the danger attached to this expedition were scouted. So, on this eventful morning, mounted on his host's favourite hack, Curlew, the visitor formed one of the company.

The others need no description. With spirits mounting high in anticipation they pass over open plain, through brigalow scrub, along box ridges, and across country on a ten-mile spin to a spot on Rocky Creek called the Glen—a place already decided upon. As there was no knowing to what extent the powers of both men and horses would be tried during the day, the journey was made at a moderate speed, so as to spare them for the arduous task of the drive.

The pals, on this occasion six in number, were compelled to curb their tendencies to fun and frolic; though there were some very tempting and well-nigh irresistible inducements to spurts as the game rose or scudded before them. Inviting jumps, too, lured them; but high jump or low jump, kangaroo or emu, charm they never so wisely, are resisted.

But their tongues are uncurbed. How they did chatter, to be sure! It did the older members good to hear their gay and joyous prattle. Their views of life in general, and brumby hunting in particular, were novel and unconventional. They settled everything touching the day's proceedings, from the place of the "find" to the number yarded. All that the warrigal might do, and all that they would positively do to circumvent him, together with many other things, were discussed with the self-confidence of youth.

In due time the Glen is reached, and the Bullaroi party find that they are first upon the scene.

"Off saddles all o' you. Must ease the horses a' we can. Saundy, you and the boys mak a fire and get the billy going. Denny, bring the tucker-bag from the pack-saddle. Mr. Neville, what in the name of common-sense are ye tying yure nag to that dead tree for?"

"What's wrong with it, sir?"

"What's richt wi' it, mon?"

"I—I—don't know what you mean."

"Boss means yer a fool ter tie the moke up in the blazing sun," said Harry in an undertone, as he passed by the new chum. "Put 'im under a shade tree same as the rest of us."

"Beg pardon, yes—er—I see," answered he, mortified for a moment, as he moved from the leafless trunk to a clump of currajongs, whose thick foliage effectually screened the sun's rays.

"Wot sort of a bloke's that 'ere cove?" asked Jimmy Flynn of Tom Hawkins. "He's a regular greeny, ain't he?"

"Oh, a good enough sort!" replied Tom. "He's new, but he's a learner. He picks up pretty fast, considering. You should 'a' seen him when he came here first; my word, he was a greenhorn then!"

"Here's the Captain, father!" sang out Sandy, as three men cantered up the track.

"Guid-day, White! Guid-day, men! Glad to see you. Off saddle and join us in a tot o' tea and a bite."

"Good-day, M'Intyre! By George! you've got quite a troop, man. Day, Dickson! Day, Davidson! What on earth do you townies think you're going to do? Stand a good chance, Dickson, of cracking your skull and spilling all that legal soph—I mean lore, that's bottled up there. Oh, I say, Mac, old Dumaresque's coming along," rattled on the Captain.

"I'll believe it when I see him, no' afore. The auld boy's better at hame when this wark's on."

"Well, all I know is that he sent me word last night by one of the men, and cautioned me to be sure and tell you."

"If he comes he comes, and if he disna he'll no' be much missed. Noo, boys, bring in the tea!"

"By Jove! M'Intyre, your wife's a sensible woman: this is the sort of grub to work on. Last month I was over at the Glenormiston mustering. De Little asked me to join him at midday after a heavy morning's work, and as I was as hungry as ten hunters I readily consented. What d'ye think he produced from his tucker-bag? Some lettuce sandwiches, no less; and cream puffs! De Little's as good as gold, you know, so I couldn't refuse to take some; but, I give you my word, I strolled over to his men as soon as I could get away decently, and got a slice of beef and a chunk of damper."

"Hoo's De Little getting on?"

"Well, between you and me and the billy-can, he's no more cut out for a squatter than for an archangel. Pity he ever left London. He'd be more at home in Rotten Row. Hello! here's the old Colonel and two boys. Seeing will dissipate even your scepticism, Mac."

Dumaresque was a choleric but plucky old superannuated Indian officer, who on his retirement came over to Australia and purchased a small cattle run, living bachelor fashion. He was now quite old, yet fancied himself equal to any toil. To hint at his age infirmities was to raise a very sirocco of indignant language.

"Hello, Cornel! wha'd 'a' thocht that you——"

"Stop, M'Intyre, stop! I know right well, sir, what you are going to remark. If you, sir, look upon a bit of a brumby hunt as an extraordinary thing, let me inform you that to me 'tis but a trifle. Why, man, when I was stationed on the

northern frontier——"

"Yes, yes, Dumaresque," broke in the Captain, who knew the other's weakness, "we're all delighted to see you. Just in time for a pannikin of tea and a mouthful. Here you, Dick, Tom, Harry, one of you, take the Colonel's horse."

A few minutes later the men filed out of the Glen, and proceeded along the creek to a spur in the foot-hills. Then they left the water-shed, crossing the spur, from which they continued up a grassy valley which extended nearly three miles before it broadened out into an open plain, lightly timbered at the upper or ridge side, but perfectly treeless at its other extremity.

Two-thirds of the way up the valley, in a belt of box trees, was the trap-yard. The trap mouth, before described, extended across the belt to the outermost verge.

After a short inspection of the yard the calico wing was fixed. It was attached to the terminal post of the yard mouth, nearest to the ridge that skirted the valley on the top side. From thence it was taken in a straight line on the ridge side of the valley, until the plain was reached. From this point, inclining slighting outward and made fast at short intervals, it extended right across the plain, ending in a clump of iron-barks.

"Noo, men, ye'll jist hae a wee bit grub and then we'll stairt."

The meal was soon dispatched, and a short consultation ensued. M'Intyre apportioned the men their places. Six, under Gill, were located in the iron-bark clump. Five others were sent back to the trap-yard, two miles distant, to assigned duty there. The remaining sixteen were to execute the task of first "feeling" the enemy; then of outflanking them; and, finally, directing the stampede.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WARRIGAL'S STRATEGY

"Hast thou given the horse his might?
Hast thou clothed his neck with the quivering mane?

* * * * *

The glory of his snorting is terrible.
He paweth in the valley and rejoiceth in his strength.

He goeth out to meet the armed men.
He mocketh at fear and is not dismayed.

* * * * *

He smelleth the battle afar off:
The thunder of the captains, and the shouting."
JOB.

"Noo, men, we'll be on the move."

The leader sprang to his horse and directed him on to the plain.

"Where do you expect to pick 'em up, Mac?"

"Micht sicht them at ony minute, maybe no' for hours; maybe no' at a', Captain."

"Willy and Jacky, you gang on aheed and keep your een weel peeled for signs. No sae fast, lads; mustna spoil the sport at the stairt. Let the blacks get weel aheed. We maun sicht them afore they tak alairm, or it'll be a hopeless stern chase."

Joe, Tom, and Sandy, greatly to their delight, were with the "flying column." Yellow Billy was with the trap contingent, while Jimmy Flynn was stationed with Mr. Gill in the iron-bark clump. Neville, at his earnest request, was given a place with Mr. M'Intyre.

As soon as he touched the myall country, the leader cautiously skirted it, until the party were well out and away from the range of hills that continued on the eastern side. He then took an inward course, and made a slant which carried them back to the foot-hills.

So far there was neither sight nor sound of the mob, nor were there any indications of their presence at any recent date. From the range base another tack was taken, which brought them upon the edge of a scrub that had wedged itself into the plain. By this time the column had covered a lot of ground.

"We'll fringe the timber for a while, and then, if we've nae luck, we'll hae to divide; half to go into the ranges, and the other to keep richt along the plain. Keep weel in, lads, we'll cut that pint," continued the leader, as the men moved on through the outer fringe of scrub; while out on the plain, which was dotted with rosewood and myall clumps, the black boys moved with lithe and stealthy movements.

"Father, I hear a whistle!"

"Hist, men! quiet all o' ye!"

"There it's again!" exclaimed Sandy after a moment's silence, as a low whis-

tle came from the plain. "That's Jacky's whistle, dad, sure enough. I'd know it among a thousand——"

"A' richt, my boy. Jacky's got something. We'll move oot quietly and see."

Wheeling to the right, the column soon arrived at the spot indicated by Jacky's whistle. The black boy stood by the side of his horse, pointing to some fresh droppings and to numerous hoof-tracks.

"What is it, Jacky?" exclaimed Mr. M'Intyre as the men rode up.

"Blendy brumby bin here, Boss, few minutes ago."

The tracks and signs were so fresh that, as the black said, it was only the question of a few minutes since they occupied the spot.

"Most fortunate we've got ahint them. They're near by. At ony moment we micht sicht them. Ye'll fa' into a doubble column, men. Captain, ye'll tak seeven men and I'll keep the ithers. We'll hae twa columns a hunder yairds apairt."

In this fashion the men proceeded slowly, with a black boy ahead of each column as a scout, and following the tracks of the brumbies. As predicted, in a few minutes Willy held up a warning hand.

The columns quickly closed up to the scouts, and their leaders saw, through the willow-like branches of a myall clump, the long-sought-for mob. The horses were standing close together in an expectant attitude. Their suspicions were aroused. Though they had not scented the wind of their pursuers, nevertheless, with that wonderful *something* so common in wild things, they *felt* the enemy's presence.

The intervening distance was about three hundred yards. According to arrangement, each column opened out at its head, with the object of outflanking the horses. Silently the columns wheeled to the left and right sharply, and then moved forward. While in the act of executing this tactic their presence was detected, and scanned in a moment. Then, with a snort, or rather a fusilade of snorts and neighs, heads erected, manes and tails streaming, away flew the alarmed steeds; and in swift pursuit, maintaining their formation, the men followed.

There was no intention of unduly alarming the brumbies, therefore all shoutings and stock-whip crackings were restrained. And now the hunters begin to feel the ardour of the chase, both horses and men; for so eager were the station horses to join in the hunt that the riders were obliged to take a double pull on them.

Neville, in the excitement of the raid, forgot the orders, and broke his line, making a rush for the tail of the flying mob. The Captain, however, nipped his intention in the bud with a few red-hot expletives, ordering the Englishman back to his place in the line.

The brumbies, when started, were about eight miles from the wing, and headed directly for it, going off from the jump with a fine burst. The wily warri-

gal, however, was not going to be run off his legs in a spurt; in a short time the breakneck pace is moderated, and the straggling mob close up.

The horsemen hung on the flanks of the galloping steeds, steadying into an accommodating pace, and, as previously directed, making a semicircle, whose points extended beyond the sides of the retreating animals. The station mares were in the mob, capering for the moment as wildly as any in their company. Tallboy lagged somewhat in the rear. He had evidently received scant courtesy from the brumbies. It was observed that his heart was not in this matter. Had they wished, the horsemen could easily have cut him out of the mob.

The flying steeds—about fifty, young and old—had covered about two-thirds of the distance to the terminal point of the wing, and had not once swerved from this direction. The men were in high glee. So far it was nothing more than an exhilarating gallop, and they kept up the formation beautifully. The horses, too, although the day was very hot, had not yet shown any sign of distress. It was a different thing with some of the hunted animals, however. There were some very old stock among the mares. The pace and the heat combined were telling heavily upon them, and they that rode could read.

One of these was a chronic "roarer," and her distressed gasps were plainly heard above the thunder of the hoof. Two of the mares began to lag in a palpable manner, despite the encouraging whinneying of the stallion, as he turned from side to side with a troubled look.

They who belittle the intelligence of animals, and treat them as lacking heart and soul, can have had little experience of their nature and ways. The old sheik of the wilderness was full of concern for his many wives. Love, despite all that the poets may say, is not blind; it is open-eyed and alert. Had he been alone the warrigal would have snorted at his foes with the utmost disdain, and led them such a dance as not all their imaginings had ever conceived. But, alas! some at least of his faithful ones would be overtaken; were even now in peril. Desertion? Never!

Rescue! but how? Yes; he will plan, he will outwit. He will use strategy against strategy, and at once, by which he may draw these merciless foes from the weaklings and give them an opportunity of escape.

Quickening his pace, he raced along, closely followed by his company—save some half-dozen of the more exhausted mares, who were now widely separated from their mates. Then, wheeling sharply, the flying squadron dashed across the plain towards the foot-hills in a furious gallop.

Divining his altered tactics, the Captain and M'Intyre increased their speed, taking no notice of the hindermost horses, and closely watching the head and ruck of the flying squadron.

On, on! in mad gallop, whip and spur going freely now, sped the hunted

and the hunters; and as they suddenly dashed across the face of the Captain's column, it seemed as if nothing human could stay their flight. The bold Captain and his men, however, nothing daunted nor surprised, wheeled a little more to the left, having some advantage in being well out, as well as being high up on the brumbies' flanks.

"Now, boys," cried Captain White, "head 'em, rush 'em!" Saying which, he rode straight for the stallion's head—who was leading—with four men pounding at his heels. It was a splendid attempt to head the mob, and succeeded save with one exception. That exception was the warrigal!

The bunch of men hurled themselves on the leader, and had he not swerved there would have been a terrific impact, which might have spelled disablement or death to more than one. When a man's blood is up in riotous chase he joyously challenges death in ways that chill him to the bone in cool blood.

The grey demon, however, swerved to the right with tremendous speed, and the Captain crossed his course within a couple of feet of his stern; his only revenge being a savage cut with his whip across the retreating animal's flanks. But if the men's rush failed with the leader, they stopped the stampede of his immediate followers.

Floss and Jeannie, who were hard on the heels of the warrigal, were intercepted and turned. The stock whips, cracking like a blaze of musketry, played upon the ruck of the confused animals in merciless fashion, scoring their flanks and ribs. In a few seconds they were driven, pell-mell, back to the line of retreat. In the meantime those immediately behind the mob, and those on the right flank, kept the balance going and together. Thus the defeated ones regained their fellows, discomforted, and not a little cowed, in their leaderless condition.

And what of the warrigal?

To continue the chase of him were only to knock the horses up in fruitless pursuit. No! he must be abandoned. With liberty uncurtailed let him roam the wilds, fancy free. The station runaways remain, as well as others that will be of value and service.

So wisely reasoned man, but not so the warrigal. Foiled in his purpose, regardless of his own pursuit, the great equine leader wheeled in a wide circle, uttering the while shrill neighs to attract his consorts. 'Tis for naught, however, that he utters challenge to his enemies and appeal to his mates. The stockmen have ringed the mob, and now at a slower pace they continue the drive; the men opening out, and keeping abreast the leading horses.

And now the iron-bark clump is near at hand. To this the enraged stallion gallops. The wing men, on the alert, watch this last manoeuvre, and line out to intercept him should he make for the hills. Such was not his intention, though; and their appearance only accelerates the execution of his determination, which

was simply to regain his companions; this he did with a rush, no one saying nay.

M'Intyre and his men were careful not to push the driven beasts, but were content to let them make the pace. And now at a swinging canter—old mares well up, despite all fatigue—-they struck the clump, and passed the point to which the wing extended. The wing men, joining in the cavalcade by orders of their leader, pass to the right flank and reinforce the drivers there.

They are now within half a mile of the trap. At a preconcerted signal the men close up, and amid an unceasing fusilade of stock-whip crackings the beasts are hustled, the rear men flogging up the lagging ones.

The calico wing acts effectually on the one side, allowing a strong line to form up on the other. Barring accidents, the hunt is as good as finished; for in a moment or two the horses will be entering the trap mouth.

The outlaw is leading the mob in a direct line for the yard. But, stay! His keen eyes sight the fence. *It is a trap*! Past adventures flood his recollection and shape judgment and determination. Inside the trap, death or slavery! Outside, liberty!

Is it too late? No! By the ashes of his fathers he will elude his would-be captors! His faithful spouses, naught, alas! will save them. Let those who dare follow him! Away, then!

With a wild rush, when within some two hundred yards of the trap mouth, he turns swiftly to the right at a tangent, so as to head his enemies and cut away on the outside of the fence.

The gallant grey well deserves his freedom. His courage, devotion, and intelligence should surely prevail upon the men. But the pursuers were not indulging in any sentiment just then, and as soon as his last tactic was revealed the race of interception was begun. He might yet have escaped, for he was full of running, but, alas! the unseen foe!

The five men detailed at the trap mouth, were grouped thereat, just behind a cluster of silver wattles, ready for any emergency. It seemed to them that their services would not be required.

But, see! the warrigal!

There is no time to reason. In a flash they streak out from cover and ride straight at the flying barb. Something must happen. The fearful impact, narrowly escaped but an hour ago, occurs. There is no attempt on either side to avoid the issue. With a mighty bound and a savage snap of his teeth the warrigal flings himself at the foremost, bringing horse and rider down with a crash, both lying motionless upon the plain.

At the same moment, and scarce a length behind, came Yellow Billy. His attempt to head the runaway was blocked by the impact of the steeds. Too near to swerve, his horse struck the leading beast on the hind-quarters at the moment

of the crash, adding to the confusion, and coming down a cropper.

Staggered by the violent collision, the stallion is brought to a sudden stop, but not to the ground. And now an astounding thing happens. Yellow Billy, while falling with his steed, to save himself from the warrigal's feet clutched frantically at that animal's mane, and, by a clever vault, to the amazement of his comrades, sprang upon the outlaw's back.

It would be hard to say if at that particular moment the horse himself was cognisant of the act. The pause covered but the fraction of a second. With a bound he leaped the fallen bodies, and, there being no one in front to stay him, tore off in a direction that skirted the trap fence.

CHAPTER XXII

HOW YELLOW BILLY BROKE THE WARRIGAL

"The snorting of his horses is heard from Dan: at the sound of the neighing of his strong ones the whole land trembleth."—JEREMIAH.

The tragic ending of the last rush held all breaths for some brief moments. Such a contretemps had never happened before. It beat all previous experiences. The vanishing horse and rider seemed a wild fantasy of the brain, that passes like the breaking of a soap-bubble. There, before their very eyes, lay the slain; the victims of the mad charge.

Several of the men dash after the desperate horse and his acrobatic rider. Simultaneously, a small group of men—among the foremost is Mr. Gill—rush to the fallen men and beasts.

Dick Gill, his son, who lies across his horse, was known as a fearless and somewhat reckless rider. At the critical moment, with the lust of the chase upon him, the lad made a mad dash for the racing steed. To swerve him he instinctively felt would be a vain attempt. "I'll ride the beggar down!" With naught of tremor, but with a disdainful scorn of consequence, hawk-like he swooped upon his quarry.

But, as we have seen, the outlaw had his own resolves. These, alas! more than defeat the object of the horseman. The warrigal's last hope trembled in the balance. A narrow gap of open space, and—liberty! This way then, with slap-

dash speed!

We have already related the countervailing efforts to stay that rush: how that hidden horsemen flash from their ambush; how that one, a little in advance, moved to the strike with tornado-like velocity. Then Greek met Greek. Comes the inevitable, the sickening thud; and then—oblivion! Come running men who lift young Dick with all the gentleness of women, and bear him to the shade trees.

Yellow Billy's horse lies stone dead with broken neck. Dick's, with broken back, vainly strives to rise. Its great brown eyes look round with painful entreaty that sends Harry silently to the camp for a rifle, and then the handsome filly joins her companion in the happy hunting grounds.

Meanwhile, under the shade trees, Dick Gill lies, the image of death. An examination reveals a fractured forearm; while a blue-black bruise on the right temple, as big as a crown-piece, attests the violence of the blow. The general verdict is that Dick, the life and soul of his company, will never more crack joke, sing song, or join in the merry chase; and so the conclusion is, dead, or as good as dead—a distinction with a slight difference.

There were two, however, who clung to some shreds of hope; the father of the boy and the Colonel: the latter with obstinacy and emphasis.

"I've seen 'em on the frontier far worse than your boy, Gill, and get better. The lad's stunned with that dickens of a blow; but he'll rally directly and be as spry as ever."

"Poor Dick is alive yet; of that I feel sure, even though I cannot detect any pulsation. What the issue may be, Dumaresque, neither you nor——"

"Tut, tut, man! he's young, and as tough as leather. Neck's all right. Keep up heart, old man. I'll trot down to the yards and see what they're doing to the brumbies."

With that the old officer, whose words were braver than his heart, strode to the yard, where all the others had congregated, save Joe and Sandy, who were in the rear-guard when the accident happened; and who, chilled at heart and filled with apprehension—all zest in sport gone—remain by the side of their companion.

When the warrigal broke, the others of the mob were in full gallop, being rushed by the men. They are subjected to a battery of flogging whips, and swept into the trap-yard; down the converging sides of this they hustle, only to find an impasse. There they huddle, a compact mass of sweating, shivering, and cowed brutes.

The horsemen form a line across the way of retreat, until half a dozen wires are stretched. The rest is a matter of detail which expert bushmen make small bones about. When all is secure the men inside cut out selected horses under the

direction of Mr. M'Intyre, who, with those not actively employed in the arena, occupies a place on the rails. The brumbies designed for use are thrown and branded, etc., then haltered and made fast to the rails. The station runaways were secured early in the proceedings, which, from first to last, consume a couple of hours. The final act is one of horse massacre; all the discarded stock are shot down. It is cold-blooded but necessary work, for brumbies are rightly regarded as a pest on a run.

By this time the sun is well down in the west, and having finished their work at the yards, the men repair to the camp for a bite and a drink.

To their great surprise and delight they find Dick Gill "nather dead nor spachless," as Denny Kineavy put it.

While his father and the boys anxiously watched him, hoping against hope for signs of life, the unconscious lad suddenly stretched his limbs and opened his eyes, as one just awaking from a sound sleep.

The as-good-as-dead youth sat up in wonderment, falling back in pain and weakness the next moment. A wave of joy surged through Gill's heart at this manifestation of life. "God be thanked for His mercies!" he exclaimed. Putting an arm under the sick boy's shoulders, and carefully raising his head, he held the Colonel's brandy flask to his lips. "You've had a spill, that's' all. A bit of a knock-out. Your left arm is broken, and there's a nasty bruise on your forehead. Sip a little of this spirit; it'll brace you up."

A pull at the flask revived the youth, and he pillowed his head on his father's arm, who laved the bruised head with cold water. This greatly helped in the work of restoration. By the time the men had finished, Dick was able to sit up, and expressed a desire to have a look at the brumbies. Beyond acute pain in head and arm the lad seemed but little affected. He enjoyed a feed with the men, and especially was he grateful for a pannikin of tea. Good billy tea is better for the tired feeling than all the grog ever invented.

After a short consultation it was decided that Dick and his father, with Sandy, should proceed to a selector's house about three miles distant. They would be sure to get the loan of Mrs. Mulvaney's spring-cart, and by that means reach Bullaroi. This was carried out despite Dick's protests that he was fit to start on another brumby drive.

What of Yellow Billy and the bolting warrigal! Have they been forgotten? Not by long chalks!

As soon as Mr. M'Intyre had selected the horses that were to be saved and used, he left the other work to the Captain, and, accompanied by Jacky, started off on the tracks of the outlaw. Before long they met some of the pursuers returning. Their horses were knocked up, and they had failed to trace the runaway. "Deeficult as the country may be," mused Mr. M'Intyre, "Jacky's equal to onything in

the trackin' line. It's only a maitter o' time when we'll run 'em doon."

There was much speculation at the camp over the fate of the half-caste. It did not lean to pessimism, though jeremiads were uttered by some. The pals, who knew Billy's ability better than the others, had unlimited faith in their mate. Whatever happened to the steed, the boy would turn up safe and sound. The steer rider, in their opinion, could ride bare-back the toughest outlaw that ever sniffed the wind. "You'll see," said Tom confidently to the Captain, "Billy'll more'n hold his own."

"Didn't youse tell us the other day thet at your gra-at billy-horse-ma-ale-robbery, the steer slung the yallar bhoy——"

"Oh!" retorted Tom pettishly, "that was only——"

Just then the returning men rode up. They had no good news to relate, but said that by Mr. M'Intyre's orders all were to proceed to the Glen, and if the missing boy was not brought in before dark they were to disperse. Let us now follow the fortunes, or misfortunes, of Billy.

As soon as he found himself astride the warrigal, the yellow boy held fast with knees and hands, the stock whip over his shoulder trailing in a long line behind the flying pair. To stick on the racing horse was a comparatively easy thing to Billy, unless, indeed, some fiendish trick should unseat him. But to guide the scurrying brute, unbitted, unreined, were as impossible as to turn and check a Mont Blanc avalanche.

The first instinct of the horse upon escaping from the trap-yard was to dismount his rider by violent means, but there are eager pursuers on the track—so away!

He rounds the trap fence, bolts down the grassy valley apace, twists up a gully with a swerve that almosts unseats Billy, dashes into Glen Creek, and mounts the bank to enter a defile. The first shock over, the half-caste begins to realise his position. For a moment a pang of fear seizes him, and some of the dread possibilities of the ride dawn upon him. This soon yields to a different sensation as they rush through space.

There is that in the half-wild nature of the lad which goes out in unconscious sympathy for the bestridden beast. Despite the mutual antagonism, which, after all, is not that of hate, there is in some way a sense of kinship. Wild answers to wild. Man nature comes thus into close gripping quarters with horse nature. There is no intervening saddle. Flesh mates with flesh, and spirit answers to spirit. Whose, then, shall be the victory? The strains of many generations of desert lords is in the quadruped. But what of the biped? A curious admixture of blood there! On the white side are the well salted strains, which hark away back to the old Vikings. On the other and darker, the stream points backwards to the misty past, when his ancestors, subtle and slim, moved southward from the older

civilisations of the north, and swarmed the valleys of the Ganges and the Indus, fighting for a foothold.

Is not this a challenge to the latent forces in the wild blood of the human? It riots through the youth's veins, giving vim and sparkle to his courage. Who shall win the lordship? Away then, and away!—through the mountain pines till clothes are mere shreds, and breast and thighs are torn and blooded with innumerable scores; slithering down the gorges to the accompaniment of rattling stones; jumping fallen timber, and smashing through the undergrowth, till all pursuit has faded away—the infuriated steed holds his course. On, on! ever up to the inaccessible heights.

But, has the half-breed been doing nothing save holding on, meanwhile?

With incredible difficulty, owing to the mad career of the horse over the wilds, Yellow Billy has managed to pass his whip thong twice round the brute's neck. This, knotted together, forms just the sort of hold-fast the boy has been accustomed to on his steer rides. The grip gives him a great advantage.

But the horse is now scrambling up a gully, which becomes sharper and steeper as he advances, merging into a deep gorge at last, with precipitous sides and frowning, unscalable face. A cul-de-sac, indeed! Even this the indomitable warrigal essays. Again and again does he rush the battlements, and mount some distance; only to tumble back with sobbing breath but dauntless energy.

Cannot Yellow Billy now dismount in safety?

As easily, oh, reader, as one might slip off a rocking-horse.

Why not, then, fling himself off; abandon the desperado, and be thankful for life and limb?

What! Billy show the white feather? Billy throw away his chance of the honour and glory of capture thus? Not for all the wealth of Australia! This is the most ecstatic moment of his existence.

Foiled in his attempt to scale the heights, Bucephalus begins to think more seriously of the foe upon his back. Were he dislodged, what might not become possible? Here then!

So began the battle royal between these well-mated antagonists, to be fought to a finish, there, on that small patch of earth in the rocky fastness; with none in the arena to interfere or to applaud. None, indeed, to witness, save the rock wallaby perched high on a beetling crag, who may have moralised on the unwonted spectacle of the whirling grey-and-brown mass of flesh and blood below. Higher still, wheeling in mid-air, is an eagle hawk, who keenly watches the solitary duel down there, with unwinking eyes of insatiable greed; caring not a doit which wins the mastership, so that the issue may provide a fit object for tearing talons and lacerating beak.

But below there!

The warrigal, with bloodshot eyes flaming in rage and malice, ears set back, head and neck well down between the forelegs, back arched like a bent bow, bucks and squeals, kicks and twists. Forward, backward, sideward; round and round; up and down; now in the middle of the patch; now trying to rub the boy against the rough sides of the rocky canon, but all in vain. Not even the young Mazeppa, lashed to the wild horse, was more securely bound than was Billy to his steed.

There he is; Yellow Billy! Behold him!

Grasping with both hands the encircling stock whip, head and shoulders inclined backwards, his knees grip the horse's sides like a vice. The horse's hoarse neighs are answered with shrill shouts. And so, amid battle-cries, dust and flying pebbles, sweat and foam, with evolutions to which those of the circus ring were flat and monotonous, the tug of war for supremacy between man and beast goes on.

Presently, however, the bucking desperado moderates. There is a lull. He shifts from side to side, making at the same time a slow gyral movement. Is this premonitory of collapse? He is blowing like the proverbial grampus, and ejecting steam from quivering nostrils like an exhaust pipe. The sweat flows from neck, belly, and flanks to the ground in streams. Spasmodic sobs like those of a broken-hearted child send shudder after shudder through his whole frame. See! his head is hanging upon his breast; the symbol of despair. Yes! he is done, conquered! He is broken. Well done, Billy! But the most dangerous moment of Billy's existence is at hand.

Suddenly rushing backwards, the demon rears and throws himself to the ground, almost turning a complete somersault in the act. Crash! down come body and hoofs and—Billy. The boy is taken unawares, and can do little to avert the consequences of this trick. Still, the little saves him. When, in the fraction of a second, he sees the inevitable, a spasmodic jerk flings him just beyond the horse's legs, which are working like the arms of a windmill. Scarce has the animal regained his feet ere, with panther-like spring, the half-caste is reseated. Again the horse is down, but now he is weakening—is rapidly nearing the limit of endurance. All the reserves have been called up.

Again, behold! a rapid change of tactics. The outlaw whips round his head with open mouth and snaps at the rider's leg. Again and again, on both sides, and it is only by the utmost dexterity that the lad escapes. This, more than anything else, begets fear; for Billy, like the horse, is fast tiring. With despair in his eyes the boy looks round him for help, and catches sight of the whip handle, which is hanging, with some two feet or more of thong, from where it is tied to the neck. In a trice his knife is out and the thong is severed near the knot. This end, coiled round his hand, becomes a weapon of offence. A loaded stock-whip handle is as

formidable as an Irishman's shillelah. And now every snap is met with a cruel smack, and this not for long can even the warrigal stand. Yellow Billy does more, he rains blows upon the steed's shoulders and head with such severity as almost to paralyse the brute. The end is coming fast now. Worn, blown, trembling with weakness, dazed, the battle has indeed turned.

There is a point in horse-nature up to which no man may call himself master. In some animals it lies low down. In others, the warrigal, to wit, it is placed at the apex of his mettlesome temper. Let that point in mastery be taken by the adversary and all is yielded. That citadel stormed, there is naught left but the white flag. The independence once surrendered is never regained. In other words, once the complete master, always the master.

See now the lord of the wilderness! the equine conjurer of tricks! There he stands with shrunken form, drooping head, lack-lustrous eyes, motionless and clinging tail, subservience incarnate: fit statue of unconditional surrender! The struggle has been gallant, heroic, prolonged; the capitulation is complete. A well planted blow, now, between the ears, and that noble creature; that thing of bone and muscle, of arching neck and glossy coat; that creature of will and courage, which made him emperor among his kind by right of merit—with a stride worthy the envy of Lucifer! Just one blow in the right spot—he staggers, trembles, and falls.

Yellow Billy is standing at the horse's head. 'Twas a glorious ride, a royal fight, a grand victory. Nothing is left now but—pity! And so, with soft and cheery word, rubbing the nostrils, wiping the drying sweat, massaging the trembling limbs, the boy is mercifully engaged when footsteps are heard, and in a moment the squatter, Jacky, and a couple of men ride on to the battle-field.

Darkness is mantling the earth, and the men at the Glen camp have all gone, save a few, including the boys and Neville, who are still anxiously waiting. The striking of iron on the flints of the creek-bed breaks the dismal silence, as a group of horsemen steal out of the surrounding gloom, and stand half-revealed in the light of the camp fire. Yellow Billy is perched on the croup behind one of the men, while, with a stock whip converted into a halter, Jacky leads the bone and soul sore warrigal, who, in this abject spectacle, drinks the cup of humiliation to

its bitterest dregs.

CHAPTER XXIII
A DAY'S SHOOT

"Alas! that, when the changing year
Brings round the blessed day,
The hearts of little native boys
Wax keen to hunt and slay,
As if the chime of Christmas time
Were but a call to prey."
BRUNTON STEPHENS.

"S-a-n-d-e-e! S-a-n-d-e-e!"

"H-e-ll-o! H-e-ll-o!"

"Where—are—you?"

"Down—here."

"Where's here?"

"Find—out!"

"Where's that horrid Sandy, Joe?" exclaimed Jessie M'Intyre to Joe Blain, as she came out into the back yard, shortly after breakfast, one fine morning a few days after the brumby hunt.

"Can't split on me mates, Jess."

"You're a nasty, good-for-nothing boy, Joe Blain: that's what I think of *you*, and I don't care if you *do* know it."

"Tweedlum, tweedlum, tweedlum twee,
The cat and the rat ran up the tree,"

quoth Joe, as he capered about just out of reach of the girl, who chased him round the room with a broom.

It so happened that as Joe was dancing past the kitchen window, Ah Fat the cook was in the very act of throwing out a dish of kitchen slops, and the contents struck him fair on the head and shoulders.

This unintended but well-delivered blow came so swiftly and so unexpectedly that for the moment Joe was stupefied, gasping and spluttering between wind and water, so to speak. He cut so ludicrous a figure that Jessie had to fairly hold her sides with laughter. Meanwhile the innocent Ah Fat stood gazing at the spectacle in amazement.

"Oh, Missee Joe, I welly solly. Me neffer see you when me tlew um——"

"You jolly Chinaman!" cried Joe, in great wrath. "You—you—yellow joss!"

With that the irate boy jumped through the window and vigorously assaulted the cook with hands and feet.

"Oh!—Missee Joe—welly solly. O—h! Oh, Clismus! O-u-c-h!"

At first genuine sorrow controlled the Celestial. And indeed the onset was so furious and determined that the Chinaman had enough to do in fending blows, and was not a little alarmed. But when Joe, in closing, clutched him by the head, and essayed to unwind his pig-tail, alarm yielded to horror at this unexpected indignity. An ominous glitter came into his eye, and a string of curses in his native tongue flew from the angry heathen.

The boy, having loosened the tail, wound a coil of it round his hand, and began to give fierce tugs. Passion in an Oriental may take any turn. A passion-fired Chinaman, however well-disposed and peaceably inclined at other times, will wreak his vengeance regardless of moral issues. With a yell of mingled pain and rage the maddened man executed a Chinese edition of Jiu-jitsu, sending his youthful antagonist whirling through the air, to come down with a rattling bump that shook the breath from his body. Fortunately for Joe, the part of his anatomy which bore the brunt of the contact was that least susceptible to damage.

This act would have been followed by one severer still had not Mrs. M'Intyre at that moment run into the kitchen, and, seeing the fallen boy at the mercy of the rage-possessed Chow, who was in the act of assault and battery, made for the man with a shrill scream, and hauled him off the prostrate lad. All the while, John Chinaman was in a state of wild excitability, sending forth a torrential stream of pidgin-English.

Joe tumbled to his feet none the worse for the bout save a bruise or two. The sight of Ah Fat with flowing pig-tail and grotesque gesticulation sent the lad into fits of laughter. This only the more incensed his adversary, who made another effort to get at him, being hardly prevented by Mrs. M'Intyre. In this hilarity Joe was joined by Jess, who had followed her mother and stood first in terror, but now with hearty laughter.

"Joe Blain, get out of this kitchen this moment, you wicked boy! Be quiet, Ah Fat, or I'll call for one of the men! Stop laughing at once, Jess, you bold hussy, or I'll box your ears!"

Both Joe and Jess disappeared in a flash, and this had the effect of calming

the Chinaman, who told the tale to his mistress as well as his perturbed condition and broken English would allow.

"Me thlo dirtee watah outa window. Joee comin' plast. Me no see him. Watah 'it 'im head and soljer. He jumpee tloo window, pullee hair, welly angly. Me get angly too, and thlo 'im down."

"Quite true," said Joe, who suddenly appeared at the window. "It's all my fault. He didn't see me, I'm sure, when he pitched the stuff out. My paddy got up, an' I went for him like a terrier. I think the terrier's got the worst of it, eh, Ah Fat?"

The quick acknowledgment of wrong produced an immediate effect on Ah Fat. There was a winning grace about Joe that few could withstand. Hitherto he had been the cook's favourite. And now, no sooner did he express his sorrow for the summary proceedings, and own his defeat, than the mantling frown of anger on the Chinaman's forehead vanished, and his dingy and stolid countenance lit up with a smile.

"Me welly solly——"

"Oh, stow that! No harm done. I'm off to get rid of this muck," cried Joe, as he disappeared from the window. A few moments later, Joe was in the act of passing this same opening to convey a message to Sandy, who was doing a job for his father in the carpenter's room, at the rear of the stables.

The act was observed by Ah Fat, who made a rapid move to the window.

"Hello, Joe!"

"Hello, Ah Fat!"

"Come here, Joe," said the Flowery-Lander, beckoning as he spoke.

"No more soap-suds, Ah Fat?"

"No mo dirtee watah," said he of the pig-tail grinningly. "See a-here, Joe"—displaying a jam pasty, hot from the oven. "You takee dis plastee. Stlawbelly jam, welly good."

"By Cæsar! Ah Fat, you're no end of a brick!" cried Joe, as he received the peace-offering with eager hands and glistening eyes.

"Saundy, ye scoondrel!" shouted he a moment later, bursting in upon Sandy, who was spoke-shaving a piece of timber designed for a swingle bar. "Didn't you hear Jess call you a few minutes ago?"

"I did hear some sort of a cackling an' flustration. What's up?"

"We've got to go an' shoot some ducks."

"That all?"

"That all, ye cauld-blooded Scotchman!"

"An' when have we to go?"

"Now, at once, immediately, if not sooner, ye spalpeen."

"Ye're an odd mixture of Scotch an' Irish this morn, me hairy-breasted hero,

an' a bad hand at either. But why all the hurry about the ducks?"

"Your mother's just got word to say some chaps are coming out from Tareela to dinner this evening, an' they're sure to expect game."

"All serene. Tom comin'?"

"No, he ain't. He's out with Harry on the run. There's only you an' me for't."

"I'll be with you in a jiff, my son. Just finishing this bar."

"Where'll we go for the birds, Sandy?"

"Up the creek, I s'pose. Too far out to the swamp if it's to-night they want them. There's a mob o' woods I'd like to get a smack at—the ones we saw when we were fishin'."

"Jacky told me yesterday he saw 'em the other night roosting on the old dead gum just at the junction of Mosquito Crick an' the Crocodile. How far d'ye call that?"

"'Bout three mile."

"Your mother said we are to try and get some pigeons when we're out."

"Used to be a lot o' pigeons in the scrub; but the last time Dickson and some other coves came out shooting, they went through the scrub, but didn't see a feather—so they said."

"No good goin' there, then?"

"Well, I don't know. We can give it a try, I s'pose. What's the time, Joe?"

"Struck ten as I came along; so we'd bes' be off in less'n no time, sonny."

In a few minutes the boys were loaded up with guns, ammunition, sculls, and the tucker bag. They decided to take the skiff and try their luck on the water, instead of stalking the game along the banks.

"Don't be later than four o'clock. Try and be back before, if possible."

"All serene, mother; we'll be back on time, luck or no luck."

"We'll fetch you some shags anyhow for fish soup," yelled back Joe as the lads walked briskly along.

Sandy took the oars at the start, Joe sitting in the stern with his muzzle-loader. Breech-loaders were at that time a rarity in Australia. There were handicaps in shooting in those days of the muzzle-loader, the powder-horn, and the shot belt, when compared with the modern choke-bore, smokeless powder, etc. But there were compensations. Men were far more careful of their ammunition. Loading itself was an art in which the expert took considerable pride. To every novice the formula was carefully given by the senior—

"Ram your powder well, but not your lead,
If you want to kill dead."

But, beyond all other considerations, there was more of the element of sport in it. There was a greater call for skill. The very limitations of gunnery in those days put the game on a nearer footing of equality with the hunter. There were greater chances for the quarry, and therefore greater merit in the kill. These are the days of machinery, and even in gunnery there is a disposition to do the work by turning a handle—"pumping the lead into 'em," as the moderns put it.

Sandy's father was the possessor of a renowned Joe Manton, and many were the tales told by the lad of his father's prowess and the wonderful distances at which this Joe Manton could kill.

The creek on both sides was lined for the most part with rushes, weeds, and water-reeds, which afforded fine cover and food for the wild-fowl. It was possible to pass within short distances of the ducks in the rushes without being aware of their presence.

"Keep your eyes skinned along here, Joe," remarked Sandy, after rowing some distance. "Might start a brace at any time."

The words were hardly out of the boy's mouth when a bird rose out of the reeds with a great flutter. Joe's gun was up in a trice, and before it had flown a dozen yards, it fell into the water with a splash.

"Good shot, Joe; but what's the use of wasting powder and shot over a red-bill? Thought you knew a coot from a duck."

"Well—I—I'm blest! If I'm not a dumplin'-headed, double-dyed duffer! As if I hadn't shot tons of 'em. Well, well, well!"

"It's not well at all," answered Sandy with a grin, as the boat glided past the beautiful glossy black and purple-hued bird, which, though edible enough, generally ran to toughness, and was not classed as game. Yet a plump red-bill that has fattened on the river-end patch of the settlers' maize is by no means to be despised.

Joe quietly reloaded, and was doubly on the *qui vive* after the misadventure. He had his revenge before long, for on rounding the point they ran into a mob of teal which were camping on a shady mud-beach. The teal rose in a very alert fashion, flying back over the boat. Quickly turning, Joe poured the contents of right and left barrels into the retreating birds. Three of them soused into the water, two of which were stone-dead. The third, though badly wounded, was nevertheless exceedingly agile in dodging the boat by diving. After some trouble the boys managed to secure it, and so a good start towards a full bag was made.

Then their luck departed for a while. Two or three pairs of black duck rose, but out of range.

"Here, Sandy, let me take the oars and give you a spell," said Joe, after proceeding about two miles from the landing. The positions were reversed, and the

boat sped on its way to the junction.

"Pull easy, Joe," said Sandy, as that point came in sight. "There's a chance of the wood-duck on the spit. We mustn't miss this lot, anyway. You'd best land me here, ole man, an' I'll stalk 'em."

Joe, whose back faced the spit, to coin an Irishism, turned round to survey the birds, which clustered thickly on the spit-end.

"See 'em, Joe," said Sandy excitedly. "It's a grand mob. If I don't knock half a dozen, you may——"

"Bag the whole bloomin' lot if you like, Sandy M'Intyre," replied the rower, who had been gazing intently on the birds, and now turned to his mate with an amused smile.

"Why—why—whatcher mean?"

"Mean! Mr. Alexander Duff M'Intyre, bushman, waterman, sportsman, and naturalist by profession, but only a Scotch mixture of bat an' mole for all that! Why——"

"Do you mean to insinuate, Joe Blain, that yon's not a mob of wood-duck?"

"Yes; and ready to swear to it till all's blue. I *did* think you knew the difference between a duck of any sort and a plover!"

"You call 'em plov——?"

Here one of the birds stretched its neck, flapped its wings, gave a hop and a short run, plover-ways, and finished with the typical harsh note.

"Great Donald! you're right, man!" finished the boy, in a mortified tone and with a considerable amount of disgust.

"Oh, well," he resumed, after a moment's silence, "a few plover won't come amiss, especially if we don't collar any more duck. Like 'em myself, grilled, as well as anything; they've such plump little breasts. Pull on, Joe."

Joe made for the spit, coming in so quickly with a few quiet but vigorous strokes that Sandy was able to get in a pot and a flying shot, accounting for no fewer than five.

"I vote," exclaimed that youth, when they had bagged the plover, "that we pull into the mouth of 'Skeeter Crick, tie up to the bank, an' stalk the crick for a mile or so; then we can cross over to the scrub by the old tree. We'll chance to get a pigeon or two, or I'm mistaken. P'r'aps we'll have better luck with the ducks on our way back. Never saw 'em so scarce on the Crocodile before."

Accordingly, they landed a hundred yards or so up the creek, assailed the contents of the tucker bag, and then proceeded to skirt the right bank, on the look out for duck. A single bird, a very fine drake, fell to Joe's gun near the fallen log which bridged the narrow stream. This crossed, the boys entered into a belt of virgin scrub that extended back a mile or so from Crocodile Creek, abutting Mosquito Creek along its breadth.

"We'd bes' separate, Joe," said Sandy, when they had gone a little distance into the jungle. "You keep on a few hundred yards, and then bear on the left towards the Crocodile. I'll make straight for there from here. It'll be hard if we don't account for a bird or two."

The scrub was very thick and interwoven in places. It contained a number of native fig trees of great height and spread. These trees were in fruit, therefore there was a better chance of getting pigeon, some varieties of which are exceedingly fond of the native fig.

The umbrageous trees formed a lofty canopy whose cool shades were very agreeable after a couple of hours on the water under a January sun. The lawyer and other cane vines hung from the great trees in long festoons, varying in thickness from ropes no thicker than one's little finger to the great cables extending downward from the huge limbs of the fig trees. Besides these growths were scrub bushes, many of which were covered with blossom, and still others with berries, blue and red. There were also spaces of bare ground, occupied only by giant fig and other columnar trees. These, by natural formation, made arched aisles, whose loftiness, lights, distances, and vistas constituted a grandeur, and even splendour, unapproached by any of the great cathedrals of earth. These, however ancient, are but things of yesterday when compared with nature's porticoes, cloisters, and altar spaces.

The boys, however, took little heed of these things. They were in the scrub neither for architectural nor devotional purposes. Pigeons and other scrub game alone had any attractions for them.

After separating they walked warily, listening with both ears and scanning with both eyes. Sounds there were in abundance. The ubiquitous minah, as the noisy and saucy soldier-bird is called, is as widespread as the gum tree itself. The thrush, though smaller than its English namesake, and with a differing note, is equally melodious. Then peculiar to scrub country are the musically metallic notes of the pretty but exceedingly coy bell-bird.

Henry Kendal, the greatest of Australian nature poets, has limned it in song. Here is a stanza—

"The silver-voiced bell-birds, the darlings of daytime,
They sing in September their songs of the Maytime.
When shadows wax strong and the thunder-bolts hurtle,
They hide with their fear in the leaves of the myrtle;
They start up like fairies that follow fair weather,
And straightway the hues of their feathers unfolden
Are the green and the purple, the blue and the golden."

There is also the merry Coachman, who cracks his whip with his beak, so to speak, in such verisimilitude that the wandering new chum looks round eagerly for a coach-team.

Added to these are the soft coo-coo of the doves and the stronger and booming note of the pigeon tribe. And beyond all these, the calls, chirpings, and chatterings of scores of feathered favourites. They who call the Australian bush songless libel it.

The pigeon has a coo that is as monotonous and far-reaching as a fog horn. For this sound the boys are now cocking their ears. Presently the loved note reaches Sandy's ears: coo—coo—coo!

"A wonga for a dollar, and where's one is sure to be another."

To locate a pigeon by its note is often a most difficult thing in the scrub. It may be on the tree under which one happens to be standing, or hundreds of yards away. To run down a pigeon by its note is a work that needs experience and patience.

Sandy listened intently, mind as well as ears working. "Not high up, that's certain. Seems to be right behind me. Bet tuppence he's on that white cedar," said the boy to himself after a further scrutiny in the supposed direction. Away in the locality indicated, distant a hundred yards or so, rising above a clump of myrtles, was a white cedar tree, its shining yellow berries revealing its presence as seen through the tree boles and shrubs.

Stealthily moving through the undergrowth and timber, the lad cautiously advanced towards the cedar. Gaining the myrtle cluster, he was thereby screened to some extent even when viewed from above. Just then a coo gave him the location. Moving to the edge of the saplings, he now got a fair view of the tree beyond; and there, on a lateral limb, distant from him not more than thirty-five yards, sat a glorious wonga-wonga, the finest species of Australian pigeon, not to be beaten for table purposes throughout the wide world. The specimen before Sandy was a male bird as big as three ordinary pigeons.

"That fellow's calling his mate, and she's not far off, by the way he's noddin' his head," surmised the youth. "Shall I pot him, or wait for his mate and cop 'em both?"

The question was soon settled, for suddenly, and with a great whirr, the hen rose from the ground, or rather, tiny water pool: for she had been drinking and bathing and admiring her reflected image in the glassy water. Her return, alas! is the signal of death, for what time she alighted on the bough at her spouse's side, the remorseless hunter, with hasty but true aim, brought both fluttering to the ground.

Their necks are wrung and they are bagged instanter, with a laconic but

satisfied grunt from the sportsman: "Not so bad."

At this moment a double shot broke on Sandy's ears. This was immediately followed by a deep, mellow sound that formed the common signal of the pals. Putting his two hands with hollowed palms together, conch-shell fashion, the boy raised them to his lips and blew a prolonged and resonant note followed by three short notes staccato, which conveyed to the other's ears the answer: "Heard you, am coming."

"Joe wants me for something. Got into a covey of bronze-wings, or maybe a mob o' flocks," muttered the lad as he made in the direction of the sound.

He soon espied his mate at the butt of an enormous fig tree, and signalled his advent. The moment Joe perceived Sandy he stooped down and picked up a couple of large black-looking birds, and waved them excitedly.

"My word! ole Joe's run into a flock of turkeys. Hurrah! here's luck."

Yes, Joe had been fortunate enough to "rise" a fine lot of tallagalla, to call them by their native name, better known as scrub turkey.

Unlike the so-called turkey of the plains—which, indeed, is not a true turkey, but a bustard—the scrub turkey is true to its title, being seldom or never seen out of thickly wooded country. Its breeding home is a huge mound raised by scratching together the dry leaves and bits of rotten bark and wood. On the top of this elevation of débris the eggs are laid, some scores of them, and barely covered. As the birds use the same spot for many years, the nests become in time mounds of vast dimensions. Turkey nest, as it is called, becomes in time a rich compost of leaf-mould, and is eagerly sought for garden purposes.

The bird itself is stronger in the legs than in the wings. Unless startled and rushed, it will not rise, but scuttles through the undergrowth with inconceivable speed, and he is a fortunate man who is able to draw a bead as it darts through the thousand obstacles of the scrub. Hence the necessity of a good dog to rush the birds pell-mell and startle them into immediate flight, when they almost invariably seek refuge in the trees near by.

Joe, fortunately, heard the drumming and clucking of a turkey gobbler before he was seen of them. Moving with intense caution through the bush, which was very thick at this spot, he saw at last through the intervening leaves, on a patch of bare ground, scratching among the decayed vegetable matter for grubs, a flock of turkeys containing a score or more.

They were exceedingly active, running hither and thither; many of them, just at the pullet stage, indulging in mimic warfare. The elder ones were busily engaged grubbing. Joe could easily have shot two or three of them as he stood an unseen watcher. There was a better way than that, however. Once "tree" them, and one could leisurely pick his birds. How are they to be got into the trees? He'll be his own dog.

Bursting out from his cover with a hair-raising and blood-curdling yell, making at the same time a high jump and wildly waving his arms, the stalker rushed into the midst of the mob, catching, indeed, a young one by the leg, and generally making such a hullabaloo as to scare them into instant flight.

It is a peculiarity of this bird, like that of its American brother, when once "treed," to remain there. Wanton shooters, taking advantage of this trait, will often shoot a flock right out.

The birds put up by Joe, with one or two exceptions, flew into the trees surrounding them. The lad's first act was to slip a piece of string round the captured turkey's legs and swing it from a tree limb. This done, he took a couple of pot shots, bringing down a young gobbler each time. Having made sure of a brace, he signalled to his mate, as described.

The shooters, with true sporting instinct, refrained both from wanton destruction and from shooting at the hens. They picked out half a dozen of the biggest males, leaving the others on their perches.

Needless to say, the boys were greatly pleased with their success in the scrub. On their way home good fortune followed them. Though they did not sight the mob of woods, they surprised a pair, which they promptly secured. Though the bag could not be considered a big one for those days, it was a good one for variety.

Greatly to Mrs. M'Intyre's delight, the boys reached home a little after three o'clock. During their absence of five hours they accounted for the following game: one black duck, two wood-duck, three teal, five spur-wing plover, six fat turkey gobblers, two plump pigeon, and the captured turkey.

"You are dear, good boys," was Mrs. M'Intyre's comment as the game lay side by side on the bench at the rear of the kitchen. "What fine birds! what a lovely variety!"

Mrs. Mac., while not an epicure, was a noted housewife, and dispensed hospitality in such a whole-hearted fashion and in such an acceptable manner that her dinners were things to be remembered with delight.

"Go into the kitchen, boys, and get a snack: you'll be dying for something to eat. After you've finished you can bear a hand with the plucking and cleaning, as Denny's the only one about. Come here, Ah Fat! What do you think of the birds, Ah Fat?"

"Dem welly good, missee."

"Yes, they'll do very well. The boys'll clean them for you—at least the ones we're using to-night. We'll hang the rest. Let me see! they had better clean the pigeons and plover first. You can put them on to stew: we'll turn them into a game pie. Grill the teal, and roast a pair of ducks and two gobblers."

"Allee lita, missee; I do 'em. That all? I mos go back an' look after puddens."

Denny and the boys set to work on the fowl, and were soon feathers and down from head to foot.

[image]

"Retreating one moment and advancing the following, uttering war-cries."—See p. 219.

"Tell me, Joe, me bhoy, did ye or Sahndy here shute the most b-i-rr-ds?"

"Honours are easy, Denny."

"Begorra! phwat th' divvil's thot?"

"It means that each shot an equal quantity."

"An e-qu-a-al quantitee! Be jabers, wheres did ye put 'em?"

"Put what?"

"Whoi, th' pair iv e-qu-a-al quan—— Be Saint Michael, it's a new sort iv a b-i-rr-d ye've shuted!"

Denny was not so dense as he pretended to be.

"You're a downy cove, Denny," laughed Joe, who caught a twinkle in the young Irishman's eye.

"That's true for ye, Joe," retorted the wit, surveying himself; "but, bhoys, why doan't ye's take me wid youse? Sure an' it's a foine shot Oi am."

"That's news, Denny. Didn't know you'd ever let off a gun."

"Manny an' manny's th' wan Oi've seen me farther bang off, annyways. Did youse never hear tell iv me farther's shutin'? Shure he was a sealabrity in Killarney!"

"Never. Tell us."

"Well, la-ads, wan da' he was rowin' th' Dook iv Dublhin, who was a g-rr-a-at sport, on th' woild la-a-kes iv Killarney. They was lukin' for dooks."

"Set a duke to catch a 'dook,' eh, Denny?"

"Be aisy, Marsther Joe. It's th' flyin' dooks Oi'me dascribin'. Be jabers! farther rowed about a tousan' moile, and th' only dook th' g-rr-a-at mahn shuted was a gull, though they was there in g-rr-a-at mobs."

"The gulls or the ducks, Denny?"

"If you'd 'a' bin there they wud 'a' bin two gulls, annyhow, me mahn."

"Good for you, Denny. Let him finish, Joe."

"Well, shure, saays farther at last, ses he, 'If y're Riall Hoiness wud let me have wan shot, maybe Oi'd bring ye luck.' An' he did it. So farther, he gits th' Dook's big gun, an' th' Dook he tuk th' pathles, an' bynby they see a mob iv dooks all in a loine acrost th' boat's bows, saalin' for all th' warld loike th' owld

loin-iv-batthle ships in th' pictures, stim an' starn.

"'Howld aisy,' saays farther, ses 'e, whin they got abreast thim fowls. With that he pinted th' gun at th' la-adin' dook, an owld dr-a-ake be th' same token—pulled th' thrigger an' let her off. Wud ye bela-ave me, so quick was he that before all th' shot had got out iv th' way-pon he'd got her down to th' tail-most birr-d, an' betune you an' me an' little Garr-ge Washintong in th' Bible, ivry sowl iv thim dooks lay spaachless dead upon th' wather. Now thin, phwat div ye think iv that f'r shutin', ye gosoons?"

"Think of it, Denny," said Maggie, who had been standing at the kitchen door, unobserved of the boys, an amused listener. "Why, you'll be writing a book one day that will put the Kybosh on Baron Munchausen."

"Well, if iver Oi does, Miss Maggie," replied the incorrigible Irish boy, "Oi'll pit y'reself in as th' laaden acthress—Oi mane th' herr-owyne."

"Maggie!"

"Coming, mother."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CORROBBERIE

"Deep in the forest depths the tribe
A mighty blazing fire have spread:
Round this they spring with frantic yells,
In hideous pigments all arrayed.

* * * * *

One barred with yellow ochre, one
A skeleton in startling white,
Then one who dances furiously
Blood-red against the great fire's light.

* * * * *

Like some infernal scene it is—
The forest dark, the blazing fire,

The ghostly birds, the dancing fiends,
Whose savage chant swells ever higher."
WILLIAM SHARP.

"Jacky and Willy want to know if they can have some raddle,[#] whitning, and blue: can they, dad?"

[#] Raddle: a red pigment used for marking sheep, etc.

"They're very reasonable, I maun say. And what are they aifter noo, the scamps?"

"Oh, I thought you knew, dad! There's going to be a grand corrobberie tonight. Old Tarpot has sent in a messenger for them to go out, and take this stuff with them, and——"

"Precious cool cheek on the pairt of Tarpot, and o' the boys as weel. Why couldna they come oure and ask me properly?"

"Dunno, dad."

"It's the blacks' way all over, dad," said Maggie.

"Dad, dad," interrupted Jessie, who was eagerly waiting a chance to get in a word, "you said, the last time there was a corrobberie, when you refused to let us go, that you would the next time. Now then, dado, you can't refuse to let us this time. Say you will. Ah, I know by your eyes you will say yes! You dear thing, it's worth a kiss and a hug."

When the ardent girl had bestowed these filial pledges she turned round to Sandy and the others, out of whose sails she had taken the wind in a manner.

"There now, young people, we are all going, for which I ought to be thanked. Only for my good memory, I'm afraid the dear man would have said no! wouldn't you, dadums? We'll make up a party, and Mr. Neville will, I am sure, be delighted at the exhibition."

"My stars, Jess, but you're gettin' 'em bad! You will be applying for a school teacher's billet next. Such consideration for Mr. Neville, too! Why——"

"Oh, brither mine, bless your poor thick skull; it's positively no use you trying to be funny—you simply can't. Oh, it'll be glorious fun," continued she, turning to the Englishman.

"But, Miss Jessie, please! In the first place, what is this corbobbery? Is that the way it is pronounced?"

"No, sir, it is not; though to be sure they do kick up a tremendous bobbery."

"Well, whatever the name, I suppose it stands for an aboriginal ceremonial

or pastime?" said Neville smilingly.

"Exactly. Cor-rob-ber-ie is their Café Chautant, a free-and-easy; with this difference, though—all their performers appear in full dress; got up to kill by the aid of the tribe tonsorial artists and valets. The young bucks are perfect pictures, I do assure you; and as for the girls——"

"Don't take any notice of the saucy kid, Mr. Neville," broke in Sandy, who felt that he owed his young sister one. "She's only jigging you. It's their native dance and song by the firelight; she's right there. The men do the dancing, and the women simply play the music."

"Music! I had no idea that they were——"

"Musicians. Oh well, not exactly that. They beat time for the men. They, the men, are all painted up and armed. It's a sort of action song, but it's jolly fine, a tiptop sight, especially when there's a big mob of them. Sometimes four or five tribes get together for what they call the 'great corrobberie.' Then you see something; for there's generally ructions before they finish, particularly if there has been any grog in the camp. In that case they usually wind up with a fight, and then there's the killed and wounded to count when the cleaning-up's done. It's all right to-night, though. There will be only two tribes in it, and they've always been friendly. Would you like to come?"

"Come! I wouldn't miss it for the world. Yes, you may reckon on me for one—that is, of course, if your father is agreeable for us to go."

"I suppose, dad," said Sandy, turning to his father, "we may all go? It's to be held at the old spot."

"Oh, weel, I suppose you'd think me hard-herted if I said no? I'll jist mak' one condeetion, and that is, dinna interfere wi' the blacks. You maunna mak' ony attempt to boss them. Let them cairry oot things in their ain way."

"All serene, dad."

"Can the boys have the whitnin' and other things from the store?" repeated Sandy.

Consent is given, and the heart of Tarpot, the King of Bullaroi, is made glad with a goodly parcel of pigments.

That night after tea the party, including Denny Kineavy, mount their steeds and ride out to the corrobberie grounds, a matter of three miles.

It was situated on a lightly timbered box-tree flat, where a cleared space occurred forming a natural amphitheatre, wherein the aboriginal tribes foregathered periodically and disported themselves in their national characters and games at night time.

The blacks make a distinction in these festivals. There is the corrobberie and the cobborn (or great) corrobberie. It was one of the former that the whites were to witness. The latter occurred only at long intervals, and was a time of

feasting as well as amusement; both feasting and play being prolonged often for weeks, and generally attended by all the tribes within a radius of hundreds of miles.

Each tribe would bring its song and dance (corrobberie), in many cases composed for the special occasion. This produced the exciting element of competition. A corrobberie of exceptional excellence would be learned by the other tribes, and on their return to their own country passed on to the surrounding tribes. Thus it happened sometimes that a corrobberie of singular merit travelled round and through the continent.

These folk-songs were associated with the dances, and treated on elemental themes, as war, the chase, the feast, love, birth, death. Often some humorous theme would be introduced, causing immense fun. As a rule each tribe had clowns, whose grotesque attitude and voice intonations were mirth-provoking to a degree. The Australian native manifests a keen appreciation of a joke and has an inborn tendency to laughter.

The preparations were far advanced by the time the station party arrived at the camp. The gins, to whom fell all labour of a manual sort, were lighting the fires, while the bucks were busy "dressing" for their parts.

The girls remained in the clearing talking to some of the old gins, while the males proceeded to the outskirts of the forest, where the work of adorning went on apace.

For this no pains were spared. The naked bodies of the dancers were treated by the tribe experts, and some fearfully and wonderfully startling effects were produced. Take His Majesty, Tarpot, as a sample. The ordinary court dress of the King consisted of a tattered police uniform, together with a crescent-shaped brass plate that adorned his breast, where it hung, suspended by a chain from his neck. The plate—presented to him on one occasion as a joke—bore upon it the inscription—

TARPOT, KING OF BULLAROI

But to-night Merri-dia-o is resplendent in a warrior's full rig. A hole bored through the cartilage of his nose peak displays the bone of an eagle's wing, about four inches long, the insignia of his maturity and dignity—his knighthood's spurs, so to speak.

Behold, then, athwart his nose, the polished bone, gleaming like ivory against the ebony background! His grey hair is trussed up, forming a big top-knot, and is adorned with the sulphur-hued crest of the white cockatoo, also with turkey-tail feathers. Wound several times round his somewhat corpulent

body is a belt of human hair. This serves to hold the boomerang and other short weapons. A dingo-tail skin, split up the middle to the brush, and bound round the forehead with the brush erect and plume-like, gives grace and height to the stature. But the body and limb painting is the principal part. Each tribe has its devices. Pigments are largely used. The greater the number of colours the more fantastic is the effect.

When the boys strode up to the "dressing-room" where the tribe artiste were engaged, they found that most of the men had completed their adornments and were strutting about casting admiring or envious glances at one another. Merri-dia-o, however, was still in the hands of the dressers, and his markings were a triumph. Being a large-framed and portly fellow, he showed the designs to the best advantage. The colour scheme was brilliant, if nothing else. On his massive chest, which was whitewashed for a background, were drawn an emu and a kangaroo. The bird's plumage was bright blue, while the marsupial was as glaring as red ochre could make it. These cartoons covered breast and belly, the limbs being like animated barber's poles in red and white. On his back, upon a white ground, was coiled an enormous carpet snake, with erect head and protruding tongue. When seen in the corrobberie, armed with spears, shield, and boomerangs, this fantastic figure was without peer among the warrior-clowns, the whole effect being an extravaganza at once whimsical and wild.

By the time these preparations were ended the great central fire was blazing furiously, fed as it constantly was from a dry tinder stack.

The "orchestra," to the number of six, sat in a cluster behind the fire and beat time to the primitive measures. The musicians for the most part were old women, who were well-practised performers. Their instruments were as primitive as the songs they accompanied, consisting generally of a tightly folded opossum rug or a shield. These were operated upon by the palms of the hands or by sticks; a vigorous slapping of the thighs also gave variety to the combination. At any rate, a surprising din was raised.

It has been stated that two tribes participated. The Ding-donglas were the guests of the Bullarois, who had provided a grand supper of fat grubs, native yams, and roast kangaroo for the festivities.

According to immemorial precedence the visiting tribe "took the flure" first, and gave a most interesting and picturesque display. The subject of the corrobberie was an emu hunt, and was full of startling incident, presenting ludicrous aspects that created roars of laughter. The descriptive song was chanted in perfect time: a sort of runic lay, beginning in a low and monotonous key and gradually waxing louder as the chase progressed, finally ending crescendo in a cry of victory, what time the animal is overcome and slain.

The spectators, black and white, applauded most generously, our old

friends Jacky and Willy being among the loudest. The station boys were in no ways different from their brothers in get up. For the moment they had abandoned the role of station hands for that of barbaric magnificoes.

The whites, especially the girls and Neville, who witnessed the spectacle for the first time, were delighted beyond measure. The silence following the huntsman's song was of short duration. The story-teller of the visiting tribe now advanced within the circle of light, and in sing-song tones recited one of their folklore stories.

THE COCKATOO'S NEST.[#]

[#] Tom Petrie's Reminiscences.

Once upon a time there lived happily together on an island three young aborigines, a brother and two sisters. This land was not very far from the mainland, and the three often used to gaze across at the long stretch of land, and think of journeying forth from their island home to see what it was like over there. They felt sure they would find lots of things to eat. So one day by means of a canoe they really did cross over, and began without loss of time to seek for 'possums, native bears, and so forth. In this search round about they at length espied a hollow limb, which looked uncommonly like a place where a nest would be, and so, going into a scrub near by, they cut a vine for climbing up. Up went the youth, while his sisters waited beneath. When he had cut open the limb, he found to his great joy a cockatoo's nest with young birds in it, and these latter he proceeded to throw down one by one to his sisters, the fall to the ground killing the poor things.

Now it so chanced that as the young fellow picked up the last little bird from the nest, a feather detached itself from its tail, and floating away on the air, at length settled fair on the chest of an old man asleep in a hut some distance away. This old man was really a ghost who owned the place, and the feather disturbed his rest and woke him up. Divining at once what was happening, he arose, and getting hold of a spear and a tomahawk, sallied forth to the tree, where he arrived before the young fellow had started to climb down. Seeing the birds dead, the old man was very angry, and said, "What business you take my birds? Who told you to come here?" He then commanded the tree to spread out and grow taller and taller, so that the young fellow could not get down, and, taking the dead birds, he put them in a big round dilly, and carried them to his hut.

Although the old man did not wait, the tree did his bidding, becoming immediately very wide and tall, and the young fellow tried his best to come down, but could not. So at last he started to sing to the other trees all around to come to him, which they did; and one falling right across where he stood, he was able to get to the ground that way. Somehow, though, in coming down he got hurt, and the gins had to make a fire to get hot ashes in order to cover him up there. He lay covered up so for half an hour, at the end of which time he was all right again.

Of course these three felt very indignant at the old man's behaviour, and they thirsted for revenge. So, calling all the birds of the air to them, they sought their assistance. These birds went in front, while the three cut their way through the thick scrub to the old man's hut; and ever as they went, to drown the noise of the cutting, the birds sang loudly, the wonga pigeon making a tremendous row with his waugh! waugh! waugh! When they had got nearly to the hut, the old man, who had been trying to make up for his disturbed sleep, heard the noise of the birds, and called crossly to them, "Here, what do you make such a noise for? I want to sleep!" But even as he spoke he was dozing, and presently went right off, suspecting nothing; and when the three reached the doorway, looking in, they saw him quite soundly sleeping. So the three clutched their weapons tightly,—the man his spear, and the women their yam sticks,—and advancing into the hut, they all viciously jobbed down at the old man, and lo! he was dead. His body was dragged forth and burned, and after the hut was robbed of the young cockatoos and all objects worthy of value it also was burned, and the three found their way back to the canoe, and departed home to their island laden with the spoil.

At the conclusion of the "yarn" the Bullarois retired to the trees fringing the clearing on the side directly opposite the audience. After a short harangue from Merri-dia-o, the braves, about twenty in number, fully armed and in their war-paint, issued from the forest, headed by their chief, shouting their battle-cry, gesticulating wildly, and making a great clatter with their weapons. Advancing upon the foe, now in line and now in sections, they battled with the enemy, crouching one moment behind their shields to receive the shower of imaginary spears thrown by their assailants, the next springing erect and casting, as it were, their weapons of offence. Following up this round, they bore upon the visionary foe and engaged in personal encounter. Retreating one moment and advancing the following, uttering war cries and fierce challenge, hurling coarse and stinging epithet, they gradually approached the fire; the gins meanwhile beat time, giving coherence and harmony to the bellicose proceedings.

There was such reality in the battle-play, the men were so earnest, their

cries so passionate, their taunts so bitter; in short, there was such a ring of sincerity, such a presentation of the actual, that the white spectators were carried away as in the drama when the master mummers live their parts.

The boys were in a condition of exultancy. They were inspired by the martial display to a participation of fellow-feeling with the warring company. Neville, too, was fairly captured by this weird yet fierce and savage sham-fight. The thrill of combat held him so strongly that he could not refrain from leaping to his feet and yelling with the rest—urging them, indeed, to greater slaughter.

It was different with the girls. Fear laid hold of them at the unwonted sight. At first they joined in the hurrahs, but when the fighters neared them, and it seemed, as was indeed the case, that the very actors were being carried away by frenzy and battle-lust, their tongues ceased and a cold chill of apprehension seized them.

The warriors are now right up, fronting the fire. In a few minutes the grand finale will have been enacted, and the curtain rung down. Unfortunately, however, one of the young men has a quarrel with a youth belonging to the visiting tribe. In the culminating point of this sham fight he sees his enemy among the crowd of onlookers, and, urged by his excited feelings, he directs insulting remarks full at this man, who, running out into the clear space in front of the fighters, returns these with interest. This so enrages the Bullaroi youth that, darting from the ranks, he slings his spear full at the enemy, and transfixes him in the breast. Loud cries of consternation come from the women, and a moment's awful stillness from the men. Then, as if by magic, the Dingdonglas have risen in their wrath, arms in hand. The play has vanished, and downright fight and bloody battle ensues. Spears hurtle and boomerangs swish through the air; the crash of nulla-nulla on shields supplants the music of the orchestra, the while the gins flee in sheer terror from the bloody scene to their huts in the forest, rending the air with their shrill screams as they speed.

But what of the whites?

They stand a few moments horrorstruck at the raging human cyclone. At first the grim reality seemed unreal, just as previously the sham battle-action appeared real. Joe is the first to size up the situation. Not only are the blacks in blood-red earnest, but there is actual peril to the spectators. The combatants are surging to and fro in the strife of conflict, and circling as though in a vortex. At any moment the spectators might be drawn into the battle zone through the movements of the belligerents.

"Come, Mag, Jess, quickly!" cries that youth, seizing the girls as he speaks and drawing them away. "The brutes are at it in real earnest. Come! we must bolt to the trees. Great Cæsar, look at that!" A spear whistled through the air and impaled itself in a tree near by.

Just then, one of the fighters detached himself from the scrum and came bounding up to the little group, spear extended. As he seemed to be on hostile intent, the youths lined up in front of the girls, ready to defend them and grapple with the foe. On nearing, Sandy knew him to be Willy the station boy. Willy, loyal to the family, came to entreat them to leave the field. There was little fear of any direct attack upon them, though it were hard to say what turn the savage mind might take. The apparent danger was from fugitive spears and boomerangs. So Willy paused but to cry out, "Take 'em girls to horses: safe there; no safe here. Go!" and then skipped back to his band, throwing himself heart and soul into the fray. For the hour the boy was as great a savage as any of the young men of the tribe.

The girls, now really terrified, need no pressure to leave; so they scurry from the field and reach their horses, some distance beyond spear reach. There they watch the tide of battle as it ebbs and flows until it dies, which it is not long in doing, from its very violence.

When the casualties were reckoned it was found that most of the combatants had received bruises or gashes, limbs were broken, but the only fatalities were those of the lads who began the quarrel. Now that the fight is over, both sides settle down to supper in the best of humours. The slate has been cleaned in this primitive fashion, and now friendships are renewed over handfuls of luscious tree-grubs and hunches of roast kangaroo. To-morrow there will be weeping in common over the biers of the departed braves.

"Well, Denny, what do you think of this dreadful corrobberie?" exclaimed Jessie to the Irish boy as they rode home about midnight.

"Phwat div Oi think iv it, Miss Jassie? Whoi, it's been a lovely foight, shure. Och, they're the very divils ontoirely! Nivir seen sich a bit of divarsion since Oi left owld Oireland, bedad! Begorrah, it'd ta-ake owld Tipperary itself to bate it."

"Do you know what I've been thinking of, Denny?" continued the mischievous girl.

"Nawthin' but lovely thoughts, Miss Jassie."

"You of course are the best judge, Denny, being an Irishman. What I was thinking was this: scratch an aboriginal, and you have an Irishman."

"Och, dear-a-dear, Miss Jassie, to maline me poor counthrymen loike that! Troth, then," cried the lad, with a serio-comic air and the suspicion of a wink, "there's one thing indade which Irishmen have in common wid these poor naggurs."

"What is that, Denny?"

"We both suffer at the hands of Saxon landlords."

And Jessie had no answer.

CHAPTER XXV
IN THE BUSHRANGERS' CAVES

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree,
Where Alph the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea."
KUBLA KHAN.

"Joe!"

Silence.

"J-o-o!"

No answer.

"J-o-o-o!"

Profound stillness, broken only by a buzzing fly.

"If you don't answer within five seconds, an' short ones at that, look out for squalls. You're only 'possumin', you rascal!"

Presently a hurtling pillow, and not too soft a one either, struck Joe Blain, who lay flat on his back, with open mouth, closed eyes, and deaf ears. The missile hit him fair and square on the face, hermetically sealing his breathing apparatus for a moment.

A muffled sound, a quick contortion of the body, and an instinctive clutch of the hands got rid of the obstruction, which in a twinkling described a trajectory that impinged on Tom's left ear.

"Well, what's in the wind, now?" asked Joe, after this customary exchange of shots, which was an everyday occurrence.

"I've an idea, Joe."

"Howly Moses, you don't mean it! Terrible, terrible! Where did you catch it?"

"Catch your grandmother's sister's cat! Only, you're such a numskull, I'd try an' put it in your head."

"What! my grandmother's sister's——"

"No, you ass; a simple idea!"

"Then I'll bet tuppence it's simple enough, you goat!"

After this complimentary interchange Tom proceeded: "When we went out to the caves the other day, we said we'd return before the holidays were ended, an' we've come to the larst day, ole man. Ding-bust it! we'll have to make for home to-morrer, an'——"

"Ugh! don't mention it! Go on about the caves."

"Well, then, that day we went out—— Oh Joey! shall we ever forget the sight of 'Fevvers' rollin'——?"

"Look here, Hawkins, if you can't spit out that idea of yours quick an' lively, you'd better swallow it! If you think to waste my valuable time——"

"Your time wasted! Pish! Listen, then. I vote we go out to the caves an' have a look round for the place where Ben Bolt kep' his horses. It'd be no end of a lark for us to find, after the police an' others have given it up. What say?"

"There's not much in your notions, Hawkins, generally speaking; still, you've struck ile this time, sonny. Gewhillikins! it's all right. Let's have a talk with ole Sandy about it."

"Oh, he's sure to be nuts on it! He's always talkin' about the mystery."

"Up, guards, an' at 'em! as Cromwell sang out at the battle of Marathon," quoth Joe, in slight historical confusion, as he tumbled out of bed.

They dressed quickly and then rushed out to find Sandy, who had risen earlier to yard the horses. Sandy was nothing loth. Indeed, he was as eager as the others, if not more so. He had often brooded over the puzzle, and discussed it at times with his mates, but oftener with himself. Like the others, he had theories.

"I've got to take the harrow to the cultivation paddock after breakfast, an' then I'll be free."

"Can't you take it now?" suggested Tom. "Good hour yet to breakfast. You'll have whips of time, an' we'll help you."

Sandy was agreeable, and the boys soon hoisted the harrow on to the cart. They returned in good time for breakfast, and got Mr. M'Intyre's consent.

"Best take us with you, Sandy."

"Girls 'd only be in the way, Mag."

"Thanks, me brither! Just wait till you ask me to cut your lunches!"

"Oh, mother'll do that."

"Yes; rin to your mither and hold on to her apron-strings. For selfishness and for cheek, commend me to a brother! You're all alike. I expect Tom and Joe are no better at home, for all they put on mighty innocent airs here," prattled the girl, in mock sarcasm.

"I hope you'll count me in, boys?" said Neville. "I have intimated to

Mrs. M'Intyre that I shall be forced to tear myself away from her unbounded hospitality,"—"Fevvers" was still a trifle stilted,—"but she will not hear of my leaving till the end of the week. You know," he went on, "I did not have an opportunity—the last time I—er—we were out there—and——"

"You lassoed an Englishman with a stock whip," broke in Jessie the tease.

"And behaved like a brick," interposed Maggie, who noticed the involuntary wince on the part of the Englishman. This was, indeed, a sore spot; but he was growing rapidly in grace.

Neville winced under Jess's sally, but took it in good part. "It's all part of the breaking-in process, Miss Jessie. I believe I can dismount now a little more gracefully. I shall be glad of an opportunity to see the famous bandit's caves. It will be something to relate in England."

It did not take the boys long to get ready. Half an hour later the party was *en route* for the caves, determined to solve the puzzle.

"You'll do nothing rash, boys?" said the careful mother at parting, "Have you enough candles?"

"Plenty; also ropes and tucker. Don't worry about us, mother; we may not be back till near bedtime—depends on what luck we have."

"You've got a scheme, Sandy, I s'pose?" remarked Joe, as they jogged along the road.

"Yes, Joe, I've an idea; but of course only testing it will prove its worth. The caves are situated in a spur running north and south. The opening, we know, is on the east side. Nothing bigger than a wallaby or a dingo, save of course a man, can squeeze through that opening. Either there is another and separate cave adjacent, where the 'rangers stalled their horses, or there is an easier entrance somewhere in the spur that has a connection with the ones we have already visited."

"You must remember, though, Sandy, that Inspector Garvie and his men spent days in searching the locality, an' how are we chaps to do in a day what they failed to do after several days, and with black trackers, too?"

"I'm not likely to forget that."

"I vote, then," said Joe, "we go straight to the caves an' explore 'em first."

"It'd take us all day to search those ravines and bluffs on the west side," added Tom, "so I'm in favour of Joe's proposal."

"I'm not sure that I should have a voice in this matter," spoke Neville. "You fellows will have to settle it between yourselves. Whatever you decide upon will be agreeable to me."

"Matter's decided, then," answered Sandy. "Joe and Tom are for the caves direct. Honestly speaking, although I would dearly love a try at the western side, for I'm convinced that the outlet lies there, I think, on the whole, we'd better stick to the caves, giving them first show, anyhow."

”Carried unanimously by a large majority, as Denny would say,” cried Joe the spokesman.

On arrival at the camping grounds, the place of the late serio-comic adventure, the explorers—for such we must call them—unsaddled, and short-hobbled their horses.

”I vote,” said Joe, ”that we boil the billy an’ have a go at the tuck before we tackle the caves. It’ll be better than taking the prog with us, an’ ’ll save us coming out for lunch.”

”Agreed!” chorus the rest with a readiness and gusto which in matters of meat is almost an instinct of boyhood. Accordingly the wood is gathered, and ere long, with whetted appetites, they are absorbingly engaged on a substantial meal.

”There are three things to remember, mates. First of all, the candles. We’ll divide them equally, three apiece. Here’s a box of matches for each. Father gave me a caution, about lights. We’re to carefully watch the candles as we proceed through the passages. He says the poisonous gases collect in places that are not well ventilated, an’ that means death in no time if we remain in such spots.”

”How’d we know, Sandy?”

”I was just going to tell you. If we get into such places, father says, the candle will burn dimly, an’ if it’s very bad, will go out altogether. When we happen on such spots, if there are any, we are to retreat immediately; so don’t forget, boys, should we be separated.”

”That,” said Neville, ”is most important.” He related one or two incidents of fatal accidents in connection with English collieries through fire-damp. That danger, though, is seldom encountered in such caves as the boys were intent on exploring.

”What’s the third thing, Sandy?”

”The third thing, Hawkins, is to make fast to this green-hide. It is twenty-five feet long, an’ we’ll tie on to it as we go through the passages. Father says there are often holes in the floors and very steep inclines. Best to be on the safe side, though I don’t suppose we’ll really need it.”

”I say,” queried Neville, ”hadn’t we better take some stout cudgels with us, for fear of snakes and wild beasts?”

”Happy thought, Mr. Neville. Not for wild beasts, though an old-man kangaroo can be as dangerous as a bear with his paws when he’s bailed up by the dogs.”

”What about monkeys, then?”

”Monkeys? We haven’t any.”

”Well, I heard one of the travellers say, while he was having a feed at the men’s hut, that he’d been engaged to go for a mob of monkeys.”

"Ha—ha—ha! Well, you are a——Why, the man was talking about sheep. Monkey is a pet name for them. We'll want some sticks, though, as well as the tomahawk."

So saying, Sandy proceeded to hack at a cluster of gum saplings, and cut three waddies about five feet in length, and a fourth one eight feet long, and proportionately thick. Armed with these and carrying the other necessaries, including a billy of water and a snack of food, the exploration party proceeded to the cave entrance.

After gaining access to the first cave, the boys allowed Neville a few minutes' pause to get at home with his surroundings, before going on to the second or cathedral chamber. They then pursued their way through the tortuous and difficult passage between the two chambers, till at length they arrived at the opening.

"Hello!" exclaimed Sandy, who was in the lead, with an involuntary gasp.

"What's up?" cried Joe, who was immediately behind him.

"Why, ladder's gone!"

"Jemima! you don't say so. Why—how——?"

"It's gone, all right," replied the leader, as he peered by the light of his candle into the gloomy recesses of the cave. "Clean gone! Don't see it on the floor below, so it can't have dropped."

Joe, squeezing abreast Sandy, and doubling the light power, added his eyes to those of his mate in the search.

"No go," said he, after a keen but vain search. "Anyway, I can see how to get down easy enough." So saying, he placed his stick across the mouth of the passage, jamming it on either side into an interstice. "There!" he exclaimed, as he hung his weight upon the transverse beam, which, though bowing, did not crack when bearing his weight. "Let's put the rope round this, an' we'll slip down less'n no time."

"Wait a jiffy, Joe," said Sandy, who had been critically eyeing the staff. "We'll make 'assurance doubly sure,' as your father said in his sermon last Sunday,"—poking his stick while he spoke, into the same cavities as the other occupied. "That will stiffen it. It's easy enough getting down: we could jump, for that matter. It's the getting up that's the problem. There, it's as stiff as a fire-bar now. Here's the first to go down."

Holding the rope, the boy swung off, and was soon standing on the floor of the lower cave. The others followed rapidly. They could find no trace of the missing ladder. Not only was the ladder spirited away, there were other signs which showed that the caves had been entered since the last visit of the boys, and on proceeding to the third chamber, where the bushrangers slept, there were manifest signs of disturbance.

"Some un's been here, that's certain."

Sandy gave voice to the one opinion. The bark bunks occupied by the outlaws were thrown off their trestles to the ground. There was no gainsaying Sandy's statement. The situation was peculiar. The boys might well be pardoned for being a little fearsome and creepy under the circumstances.

"I heard Dickson tell your father, Sandy, at the brumby hunt, that a party was comin' out from Tareela to visit the caves. P'r'aps it's them that have moved the ladder."

"Don't think it could have been," persisted Joe. "There's no sign of their camp outside."

"What about the 'rangers?"

The thought was decidedly unpleasant, and when voiced it struck a chill in the hearts of all. As a matter of fact, the thought had lain in Sandy's mind from the time he missed the ladder.

Ben Bolt was not a desperado of the Morgan or Kelly type—men who were conscienceless, treacherous, and full of the blood-lust. Many, indeed, of his acts of gallantry and open-hearted generosity, if theatrical, were nevertheless redeeming qualities in the old-time bushranger. A man of great resource and daring, a thorough bushman, a superb rider, mounted always on the finest of horses,—stud stock mostly, which he "lifted" from celebrated breeding stations,—the 'ranger was, in some respects, a picturesque figure, and had a most adventurous career. Often located and even sighted by the police, he was always able to make good his escape, either by bush strategy or by an amazingly daring piece of riding in rough country, at which even his intrepid pursuers, themselves accomplished horsemen, stood aghast.

There was a spirit of romanticism about the fellow. His dress and appearance gave colour to that. He was passionately attached to his wife and children, and often incurred desperate risks in visiting them when "home-sickness" seized him. His house was ever under the surveillance of the police, who fondly hoped to catch him by that lure. Yet, though often within an ace of capture, he always escaped. Outwitting the subtlest efforts of the police, he was their despair. Though of a sanguine temperament, there were seasons when he was the victim of a black mood. At such times he was most dangerous and cruel.

"It could hardly be Ben Bolt," said Sandy at length. "It's quite possible that the town party has been. How could Ben be here an' in Queensland?"

"Well, what's next, Sandy?"

"I'd like us to explore the opening in the passage first, Joe. Come, boys, let's shin up."

This was speedily accomplished, and the pals proceeded to the spot that was in Sandy's eye, so to speak.

"Here's the place I meant!" exclaimed he, when they had retraced their steps some distance through the passage. The opening, at first sight, appeared to be a deep recess. Upon close examination, however, it was found that the wall and the roof did not meet. There was a hole some two feet in diameter.

"I spotted this when I came with father," explained the leader. "Now, if one of you fellows will give me a hoist, I'll get my head and shoulders into that opening above, and find out whether it's a chimney, or takes a turn and forms a passage."

Accordingly Joe, stooping a little, received Sandy on his shoulders, by which he was able to rise into the hole.

"Hurrah—hurrah!" he exclaimed a minute later. "It's a passage all right, boys. There's a sort of landing, anyway, and it looks as though there's a passage beyond. Hold steady, Joe, an' I'll try an' get my hands on the ledge."

The boy made several efforts without avail, for he was an inch or so too low.

"Step on my shoulders, Sandy." It was Neville who had placed himself alongside Joe. His shoulders were at least three inches higher. Thus raised, Sandy had no difficulty in grasping the ledge of the landing. Catching the lad's feet with his hands, Neville pushed the boy higher, and soon he worked his way on to the floor of the ceiling, as it were.

This done, he proceeded to light his candle and explore, for it was impenetrably dark. Following the passage inwards, the boy advanced some distance. He found that it widened as he proceeded, and became easier to traverse.

"I'd better return now for the other chaps," muttered the lad. Accordingly he retraced his steps and explained matters to the anxiously waiting group. By the aid of the green-hide lariat, the others were soon up with the leader on the landing.

Here, then, was a new situation. In all probability the foot of man had never trodden this place. There were no traces of any living thing. It was in no light mood, therefore, that the boys made a start. Their position was unique and thrilled them. They might, in a literal way, bring to light the hidden things of darkness. Not for ages, or ever, in all likelihood, had those walls been lighted up and gazed upon. Whither would the pathway lead?

Proceeding, they encountered no difficulty for some time, as the passage widened in places, enabling them to walk abreast. Soon, however, it began to contract, and in places it became a squeeze. The roof, too, dipped considerably, so that it could be touched by the extended hand.

Sandy, who was still leading, began to experience a tired feeling. There was a peculiar sensation in his ears, and a tightening in the throat. After advancing a few steps farther he stumbled and almost fell. His candle, too, began to burn

very dimly. His followers were experiencing similar feelings. In a moment the cause of this untoward feeling came flashing across his mind.

Joe, behind him, cried out, "I say, Sand ... I'm gettin' ... short..."

"Back, everybody! Fire-damp!" cried the leader in a raucous voice, after a violent effort.

It was a narrow squeak. Though only a few minutes in the poisoned air, they were all on the verge of unconsciousness. Gasping, trembling, the sweat oozing from every pore, they struggled on until they reached the widened area of the passage, and then sank, exhausted, to the ground. Tom, who was at the tail of the procession was not so bad as the others, not having penetrated so far into the poison zone.

The pure air soon revived them. Their respiration, which was very laboured at first, improved as soon as the sweet, dry air entered their lungs, and ousted the putrid gas which had lodged there. A pull at the water-can, which fortunately they had brought with them, helped them a lot, and in a short time they were themselves again.

"That ends chapter one," said Joe dryly. "Whereaway now, Captain?"

"We've come to the end of our tether sudden enough, and with a vengeance. It'll be something, Mr. Neville, to tell 'em in England. Let us get back to the old passage. This is nothing but a death-trap."

CHAPTER XXVI
THE EXPLORERS

"'The best hearts, Trim, are ever the bravest,' replied my uncle Toby."—STERNE.

"That's a valiant flea that dares eat his breakfast on the lip of a lion!"—SHAKESPEARE.

"How quickly we ran into that poison-trap! No smell or anything to warn us," remarked Neville, when the normal condition of the lads was restored, "save a nauseous feeling which supervened."

"Whatcher think made it hang like that, Mr. Neville? Seemed to me like an invisible fog that we suddenly encountered."

"That is really what I believe it to be, Tom. I know from what I have read

and heard, the gas is colourless and quite heavy. An uncle of mine is a colliery manager in Wales, and this fire-damp, or choke-damp, as it is sometimes called, is often fatal, because it fills the lungs so that no other air can enter, and in this way suffocates its victims. We were just on the fringe of it, I think.

"As I was saying, this fire-damp, which is always much more dangerous after an explosion in the mines, is generally formed by the decomposition of certain substances in vegetable fibres, or in veins of carbonised mineral. That is why it is called carbonic acid gas. It is much heavier than the air. You remember the passage was contracted, and the air seems to have become impregnated at that particular place."

"Well, whatever it is," said Joe, who had just made a few spasmodic heaves, "it's good enough to keep out of. Let's give the acid, or gas, or damp, or whatever it's called, leg bail."

The party of defeated but not disgraced explorers now retraced their steps. Eagerly scanning the walls as they retreated for signs of diverging passages, they soon found themselves at the landing, whence they swung down into the blind alley that led to the main passage.

"Sandy," said Joe, when the party had emerged, "give that passage a name. Leichhardt gave names, you know, to all the creeks, hills, and water-holes he discovered in his travels. I reckon yon's our discovery. Faugh!" ejecting a mouthful of saliva, "it tastes like rotten soda-water. Let's call the beastly place by a name that'll fit it."

"Christen away."

"Me! Well—er—how'd 'Poison Pot' do?"

'"Death Trap' would be better," replied Sandy. So thought the others, and it was accordingly named "Death Trap Passage."

"Now, chaps, let's get back to the cathedral. There's a likely spot there—that hole, I mean, where the boulder was jammed."

"What's the time, Mr. Neville?" asked Joe, on arrival at the big chamber.

"Quarter to one."

"Why, we've hardly been three hours in! I made sure it was about six."

"I vote we have a go at the prog," chipped in Tom. "It'll help to take the nasty taste away."

"Good idea!" was the general verdict.

The pals had lost a good deal of their natural spirits. Three hours groping in semi-darkness, with a throat full of choke-damp thrown in, was enough to stale the strongest; yet they had no thought of surrender. They were "baffled, to fight better."

In a few minutes the outer entrance is gained, and in another five minutes they reach camp.

The hot tea was particularly acceptable. Nothing in the wide world could have been more refreshing and stimulating. Billy-tea boiled with gum sticks, just so far sweetened as to countervail the natural roughness without impairing the aromatic flavour, stands at the head of all beverages—whether aerated, brewed, distilled, or concocted.

"My word, this is bully tea, ain't it?" cried Tom, smacking his lips with satisfaction, after emptying his pannikin for the third time.

Neville in particular—to whom the outing and the exploration was a new experience—felt, as he puffed at a cigar, the stirrings of a larger and a nobler nature than that which had hitherto exercised him. Business life seemed flat and stale compared with this al fresco existence.

"Time to be goin' back again," said the practical Sandy, breaking in on a post-prandial reverie. "Gimme the tommie, Joe."

Tomahawk in hand, the boy walked to the sapling clump, and selecting a stout specimen, vigorously attacked it with the weapon. From this he cut two six-foot lengths, sharpening the thicker ends, crowbar fashion.

"What's that for, Sandy?"

"To prise the boulder. They'll make capital levers."

Armed with these additional implements, the lads returned to the caves, and in due course lowered themselves into the cathedral.

The spot which Sandy had mentally marked as a likely one has already been described. It was a cleft in the floor at its junction with the wall, and immediately behind a huge stalagmite. It must have escaped the vigilant eyes of the professional trackers. The corner was a very dark one, and unless one looked closely behind the boulder the cleft would not be observed. Sandy had lit upon it in a promiscuous search, and was impressed by its possibilities as another outlet, or inlet, to other cavities.

No sooner had the boys arrived at the spot, and Sandy had cast his eye upon it, than he exclaimed, "Somebody's been here!"

"How d'yer know?"

"This stone is not in the same position as when I last saw it."

"Who could it 'a' been?"

"Dunno. I'm crack sure, however, that this stone was not square down the other day. The flat of it was down and the point of it up. Now it's reversed. Besides, here are crowbar marks."

"It'll be hard enough to get out—much harder than it would 'a' been if it hadn't been touched."

"Must have been a strong chap that turned it!"

"Strong? No one man could ever have done it! It would be difficult for two. Why, that stone's not a pound less than four hundredweight!"

"Well, time's goin'," said Joe, "and what's done's done. Let's at it, Sandy. Up-end her, and throw her over on the floor."

The lads vainly tried to insert the wooden bar. The cracks between the lid, so to speak, and the edge at the opening were not sufficiently wide to admit this.

"It won't do," said Sandy after a while; "we're gettin' no forrader."

"I suggest," interposed Neville, "that you widen the cracks."

"How can we do that?"

"Will you let me have a try?"

"My!—rather. Anything to get the blame thing out."

Neville picked up the tomahawk that was lying near at hand, and began striking the edges of the hole where Sandy had been prising.

"That's the stitch!" cried Tom. "Well done, Mr. Neville!"

The limestone readily yielded to Neville's strokes, and the crevice was soon wide enough to take in the thick end of the stout gum sapling.

Sandy and Neville, taking a pull at the end, levered the stone high enough for Joe, who had the other bar ready to insert between the raised end and the floor stone. With this additional lever power the "stopper" was canted on one side, high enough to put the stone chocks in. Another application of the bars, with two boys hanging on each and pulling simultaneously, brought the "stopper out of the bottle," and toppled it over with a thud that shook the floor; bringing down a stalactite with a crash, fortunately without harm to the exploring party.

Before venturing down, Joe, in whose mind an idea had been fermenting while the stone-raising business was being carried on, critically surveyed the stone "stopper."

"Look here!" remarked he, "these are the marks of an iron crowbar. Whoever removed this had the proper tools for it. Whatcher make of that? That upsets the town party theory, don't it?"

"It certainly makes the puzzle harder," said Neville.

"Think so? Makes it easier to me," quoth Sandy.

"How's that?"

"Looks more'n more like Ben Bolt's work."

"Think he's in there now?" exclaimed Tom, in an awed whisper.

"No, I don't think that. But it shows me that he's knocking about here again, an' he's been in the caves quite recently."

The boys looked into each other's faces, and felt—well, just as you would feel, brave reader, were you in the cavernous depths of earth, in the very haunts of proclaimed outlaws, not knowing at what moment they might spring upon you. Standing in the cold, damp, dim underground, at the mouth of an unknown passage, which might take you to the innermost den of the outlaws, could you contemplate advance without an attack of the creeps? The crevice, after going

down sheer a few feet, turned on a level plane, right across the floor of the cathedral, in a westerly direction. How far could be known only by actual travel.

"Come on, boys," said Sandy, after a moment's silence; "it's what we've come here for. I believe, for one, we're goin' to solve the mystery."

One by one the lads dropped into the bottom of the well. The passage was of unequal width, but always wide enough to allow the party to proceed without squeezing, and had a fairly level floor. The floor, after extending two hundred paces or so in a westerly direction, began to decline somewhat sharply, and presently Sandy gave a warning shout—

"Water ahead!"

The others crowded round him as well as they could. There, at their very feet, was a pool of water of unknown depth.

"Here's a go, chaps! Looks as if it might be a swim."

The pool covered a fairly wide stretch, and was in a dip of the passage.

"Don't think it's a swim myself," remarked Joe. "Let's take off our boots an' pants. I fancy we'll find it only a wade. We can move cautiously and test it with a bar as we proceed."

The party did as suggested, and found to their satisfaction that the water did not rise above their knees; for none of them relished a swim in the icy water. After re-dressing, the company moved forward, and soon emerged into a spacious cavern that fairly sparkled with lime crystals. Little time, however, was spent in admiration. They moved across it in the same direction, and found two exits. After a short consultation, they decided to take the larger of the two passages, because it seemed to be a continuation of the old track. Just as they started, Tom, who was in the rear, on looking round, saw what appeared to be a bundle on the floor of the cave, some distance to the right.

"Wait a moment," cried he, as he ran to the object. "Oh, I say, here's a find!"

The others, who were in the entrance, backed out, and ran to his side. Tom held the old vine ladder in his hands.

There was no longer any doubt. There could be only one conclusion. At the sight of this the boys had a bad attack of the creeps.

"It's the 'rangers all right. They've slipped the police again." There seemed to be no alternative to this conclusion. "Seems to me," continued Joe, who was the quickest of the lot in reasoning out a thing, "that they've been back here again, and knowing that the bobbies'll be on the watch to trap 'em at this spot, they've locked up the house, in a way of speakin', an' thrown the key inside. I vote that we go on."

No one said nay, and so the advance was made. The passage presented no serious obstacle, widening and narrowing at intervals, but never too narrow to proceed. As they were squeezing through a difficult place, Sandy again sounded

the alarm.

"What's up now?" said Joe, who was just behind.

"'Nother big cave, an' a deep drop into it, same as the other. There's a bar across here where they've slung ropes. Undo the lasso, chaps."

"Let's hope we're getting near the end of it."

The speaker was Joe. The truth is, the work was most tiring in its nature, and the spirits of the party were yielding to a very uneasy feeling, despite Joe's plausible theories that the end might be the reverse of pleasant. Should Ben Bolt, after all, be in hiding, well—the worst might happen.

Fixing the rope, they slipped down to the floor of the new cave. This, though not remarkable for beauty, was commodious enough, and had several outlets, in one of which there were indubitable evidences of the one-time presence of horses.

"Hello! here's the stable," cried Tom, who was first in this recess.

Sure enough in a vault-shaped but very roomy cavern, entered by a wide passage, was the robbers' stable. Several bundles of bush hay were stacked in one corner. A manure heap filled the other. All this pointed to a prolonged occupation. The idea of the robbers' presence had so materialised by these later evidences that the boys felt they might be confronted at any moment by the desperadoes.

"What'll we do, Joe?" said Tom. "Slip quietly back again?"

"Slip back again, after getting this far! Don't be frightened, Tom."

"I'm not; y'are yourself."

"Well," replied Joe, with a smile, "I'll not deny that I've felt like it more'n once. But there's one thing you've not noticed, chaps."

"What's that?" chorused the group.

"There's not been any horses here for weeks."

"How d'yer know?"

"No fresh droppings."

That fact was indisputable, conclusive, and enheartening. It lifted a load of apprehension, to call it by no harder name; and now, with buoyant spirits, to which they had been strangers for some time, the boys continued the search. The end, indeed, was close at hand.

"Look out sharply for tracks," was the command of the leader on leaving the stable, stooping low as he spoke, and eagerly scanning the floor. Hoof-prints were discovered and followed. They led to a corner of the big cave which narrowed at that point, and continued on as an opening. After going a few paces, Sandy called out, "Hurrah—hurrah! Light ahead!"

Sure enough, a few yards farther the passage was lighted with natural rays that shot through a small opening some distance ahead. The party was exultant,

and needed no telling that this was sunlight. In this subterranean fashion the explorers had traversed, mole-like, the range spur, and proved the theory of the dual entrance.

Like as the exultation of Columbus when the first sight of the new world convinced him that he had solved the riddle of ages, or as Leichhardt felt when he and his dauntless band stood upon the shores of the great northern gulf, after having passed through the very heart of Australia's *terra incognita*, so did the breasts of these brave youths swell with the spirit of triumph when that ray of light revealed the joyful fact that they, a group of mere youngsters, had succeeded where the experts had failed.

The whole company darted through the spacious passage to the opening. It was in the face of a cliff, and fully fifty yards from its sloping base. So steep was the cliff that, viewed from a distance, it appeared perpendicular; forbidding to anything save rock wallabies and—Ben Bolt.

Its very roughness, however, made its ascent a possibility. Had it been a smooth face, no horse, however capable, could have climbed it. Ben Bolt was always able to achieve the possible. Many of his wild rides bordered on the miraculous. His personality magnetised his steeds. Wherever he led they would go, and so the steep ravine that rose from the rocky base to this entrance afforded a precarious footing for the outlaw's horses.

"Now then, boys, before we go down, let's give a cheer," said Sandy. Led by the leader, the group signalled its victory—for such it was, and no mean one—by a rousing cheer that woke the echoes of the precipice and spread wave-like over the landscape beyond.

It penetrated the ears of two men who were riding quietly in the bush that lay beyond the rocky plateau which formed the base of the cliffs.

"What's that?" exclaimed the elder to the youth who rode at his side.

"Sounds like a cheer," replied the youth. "Who can it be—traps?"

Turning their horses' heads, they rode swiftly but silently to the edge of the scrubby timber which they were traversing. Halting just within the bushy barrier, they parted the leaves, and there, perched high up the cliff's side, were four youthful forms—the band of cave explorers.

"Now, boys, we'll go back an' have another look round before we leave. Might find something belonging to Ben Bolt worth carryin' away. We can easily get out on this side, and cross the spur a little higher up, where the cliff runs out. 'Twon't take long neither! I say—won't we have a yarn to spin to-night!"

But the unexpected is yet to happen. The company retraced their steps to the cave, and did a little exploration; finding nothing, however, but a couple of leather mail-bags and some opened letters—the remains of coach-robbery spoils.

"This is the last one, mates," remarked Sandy, as the group entered the

mouth of a passage. After traversing its course a little distance, it opened up into a small cave, twenty feet square. On one side of it were bunks similar to those in the other cave. While in the act of examining it, Joe fancied he heard a footfall. Stopping a moment to listen, he distinctly heard the sounds of stealthy footsteps.

"'S-s-sh-h-h, boys! Some un's followin'!"

At this startling statement the boys halted and turned round, to be confronted by two forms hardly distinguishable in the surrounding gloom. The pals gave a gasp of terror as the call peculiar to highwaymen smote their ears and they faced two weapons, levelled point blank.

"Hands up!"

Candles are dropped in sheer fright in an eye-wink, and hands go up in gross darkness.

The sun had just set as the four youths, in company with two men, mounted their horses and took the track leading to Bullaroi. Strange to say, the lads showed no signs of fear, nor were they bound with cords.

"By jingo!" cried Tom, who had just put his horse at a big log and cleared it in fine style, followed in order by Joe, Sandy, and Neville, "this is the grandest outin' I've ever had!"

"It's a' very weel," answered Mr. M'Intyre, who with Denny Kineavy had been following the tracks of some strayed cattle which were making for the ranges, and were passing the cliff opening while the cave explorers were ringing the welkin with cheers, "but supposin' that instead o' us, it 'd really been the bushrangers returnin' and catcht ye trespassin'? What then, ma laddies?"

This query raised visions of possibilities that sobered the vaulting spirits of the pals for some brief moments. Very thankful were they in a moment of reflection that they had been bailed up by a friendly enemy.

"Heigho!"

"What's matter, Joe?"

"Fun's all over: measly school opens to-morrow!"

CHAPTER XXVII

A RESPITE

"Ah! those were the days of youth's perfect spring,
When each wandering wind had a song to sing,
When the touch of care and the shade of woe
Were but empty words we could never know,
As we rode 'neath the gum and the box trees high,
And our idle laughter went floating by."
GEORGE ESSEX EVANS.

Joe little thought when making the melancholy statement, "measly school opens to-morrow," how prophetic the utterance was.

The first words that greeted the party on their return to the homestead were: "School won't open for another three weeks; the town's full of measles."

The pals tried hard to look sober and concerned as Mrs. M'Intyre dilated upon the nature of the epidemic. It was a vain attempt. To their credit be it said, they were very poor hypocrites. Whatever sorrow they might feel on account of their friends who were in the grip of the disease was more than counterbalanced by the blissful intimation that, owing to the epidemic which had unexpectedly broken out, the school authorities had resolved, for at least three weeks, to keep the school closed.

"There's no going home at present, boys. I wouldn't dream of letting you return. I'll just write to your mothers to say I intend keeping you here, unless they want you particularly. I feel sure they will be thankful for your absence at such a time. So you'll have to make the best of it, boys. Are you sorry?"

"Well—er—of course—I'm a——"

"Yes—a—of course—you're—a—shedding tears at the thought of staying here another fortnight or so—aren't you, Joe? You and Tom do look as miserable as moulting fowls in wet weather at the bare thought of holiday extension."

The lads burst out laughing at Jessie's sally, and declared that it was the crummiest news they had received during the holidays.

"That's a' very weel, and ye needna fash, laddies, that you'll ootwear your welcome. But here's some news that may no' be so pleasant," said the squatter, who had been busy with his mail. "Here's a letter frae Inspector Garvie to say that Ben Bolt and his mate are in the deestric' again. He stuck up Dirrilbandie Station three days ago, drivin' a' the hands aboot the homesteed, along wi' Wilson and his faimily, into ane o' the men's huts, in which they were held by his youthfu' confederate while he ransacked the place."

"Oh! the poor Wilsons! Did he hurt any of them? and did he get much?"

In reply to a fusillade of questions from the excited household, M'Intyre stated that though Ben Bolt was in one of his black humours, was in fact on the

point of shooting one of the men for cheeking his mate, and was only dissuaded from this atrocity by the pleading of Mrs. Wilson, no one was injured. He had taken a considerable amount of loot, however, in the shape of jewellery; also a pair of new improved revolvers, as well as three horses, one of them being Wilson's handsome chestnut gelding, the finest hack in the district, and for which he had a short time previously refused seventy pounds from the police authorities.

There had been an outcry against the Government for not having provided a better class of mount for the troopers. Again and again the schemes of the police to capture the bushrangers in various parts of the colony failed, chiefly because they were out-classed in horse-flesh. A tardy Government, aroused at last to action by the clamour of the people, was doing its best to remedy this unequal condition.

"I suppose, sir, the police are in full chase of the desperadoes?"

"They're doin' their best, ye may be sure, Mr. Neville. Garvie has two pairties oot scoorin' the country, and is holdin' himsel' in readiness to move to ony pint at a moment's notice. As the scoondrels hae cut the Walcha telegraph line, the presumption is they will be raidin' the place, and Sergeant Hennessey is following up with the utmost speed. The Sub wants the loan o' Jacky or Willy, or both, as trackers, and to let him ken at aince should there be ony signs o' them on Bullaroi, 'specially aboot the caves."

"Are you goin' to lend him the boys, father?"

"Weel, it's very awkward, but I'll hae to assist the coorse o' juistice when ca'd upon. We maun dae oor pairt to catch the rascals."

"Suppose you *had* tumbled across the 'rangers in the caves, boys?"

"Well! an' s'p'osin' we had, Miss Jessie?" replied Tom, whose answer in tone and query suggested unspeakably bad things for the outlaws had they been unfortunate enough to meet the cave heroes.

"Let me pit ye a sum in arithmeetic, Thomas, ma laddie; juist a sma' sum in proportion. If twa stock wheep hondles, pinted at fowr cave explorers, each wi' a lighted candle in his hand, would cause the said candles to drop to the flure and fowr pair o' hands to go up like a toy acrobat when ye pu' the strings, what attitudes would the aforesaid explorers strike if a pair o' rale loaded peestols had been presented?"

"Tom is always a duffer at proportion," interjected Joe laughingly. "He has a trick of givin' answers that make Simpson sit up. To tell you the truth, sir, I don't think that the real article could have given us a greater shock. Speaking for myself, I confess that I've never had so bad an attack of the shakes before. My skin went goosey in a moment, an' my hair stood up like a hedgehog's spikes. I couldn't 'a' said a word for a hatful of sovereigns. You see, sir, *it was all very real to us for the moment*, and none of the others felt any better than myself, I bet

tuppence."

"Joe's quite right, sir. I had a most dreadful feeling as we stood there in the black darkness. It seemed as if a vast abyss had suddenly engulfed us and we were sinking to fathomless depths."

"I'll back up Joe and Mr. Neville, dad. My word, when you spoke, it was as if some one had suddenly pulled me out of a dreadful nightmare."

The pals went to bed early, as they were tired out after the unwonted exertions of the day, but not to sleep. They were too excited for that.

"I say, chaps," exclaimed Sandy, jumping out of bed after he had tossed about for a few minutes, dragging his stretcher alongside the bigger bed, "let's settle what we're goin' to do."

"Was just thinking of doin' a sleep, Master M'Intyre, when you commenced to drag the jolly stretcher with enough noise to wake the seven sleepers. An' as for ole Tom, I fancied I heard a snore comin' through a hole in his pumpkin——"

"Pumpkin yourself, Blain. I'm as wide awake as you, or that grinnin' ape Sandy."

"How d'yer know I'm grinnin'?"

"'Cause I can see your jolly teeth shinin' in the dark. But I say, ole chap, I'm on for a confab. Ouch! my legs *are* stiff. Wish I'd taken that hot bath your mother advised. Whatcher got in your ole noddle?"

"Something big, mates, but the difficulty will be with mother. You see, now ole Ben's prowlin' about, mother'll be hard to persuade."

"Well, tell us what's up your sleeve; we can discuss ways an' means after."

"It's this: go on a campin' trip to the Bay, where there's grand fishin'; then go out to the gold-diggin's, an' put in a couple o' days with the fossikers."

"Jemima! that'd be no end of a prime lark! It'd top off our stay here, wouldn't it, Tom?"

"Susan Jane! it would that, Joe. My word, it'd be a scrumptious finish! but what charnce would we have of carrying it out?"

"I don't think that either your Jemima or Susan Jane'll have much to do with it. Mother'll be the chief obstacle."

"What about a tent, Sandy? We'd have to get one, wouldn't we?"

"There'll be no trouble about that part of the business. There's a big drover's tent in the harness-room; 'sides, Harry has a small one he'd lend if necessary. Lemme see: what *would* we want? First an' foremost, a tent or tents, an' a packhorse to carry 'em an' the other things. Then plenty o' prog, o' course: fishing lines—there's tip-top schnapper-fishin' down the Bay, to say nothin' of jew, bream, an' whitin'. Then, the guns—we ought to get some good shootin';

both fur an' feather."

"A fryin'-pan and a camp-oven 'ud come in handy, pannikins too, and some tin plates."

"Yes, yes, we'll need those; at any rate, the fryin'-pan for the fish. Don't think there'll be any need to bother about a camp-oven: it's a plaguey thing to carry; we wouldn't use it 'cept for bread, an' we can make plenty of damper in the ashes. But I'll tell you what we must have, an' that's a couple o' small barrels an' a good few pounds o' salt."

"Why, what for?"

"Fish. We'll be down at the Bay pretty near a week, I reckon; an' as we'll catch whips o' fish, it'd be a fine chance to dry some, an' salt some as well. Mother's got two good barrels that hold about half-a-hundred-weight each; they're salmon casks. The salmon's all used, an' I reckon schnapper is as good as salmon any day. That reminds me we'll want three or four sheath-knives; they'll come in handy for scalin' an' splittin' the fish."

"I say, Sandy, when'll we start?"

"Start! Ah—well—we'll talk about that when we get leave—which, let me tell you, is pretty doubtful. 'Twouldn't take long to get ready once we have permission: a day at most. I declare I'm gettin' sleepy. Good-night, chaps."

The boys opened at short range during the breakfast hour the next morning. In other words, they pled most vigorously for permission to camp out for a week or so, according to the programme concocted the night previously. The chief objection lay in the reappearance of Ben Bolt in the district. It was all in vain that the boys insisted that even were the redoubtable 'ranger to visit their camp, which was most unlikely—he would not harm them: would, in fact, have no interest in bailing up a parcel of boys. Mr. M'Intyre showed palpable signs of yielding, and had it been left to him would have granted a reluctant permission. The insurmountable barrier, as indeed the boys knew beforehand, lay in Mrs. Mac's excessive fear. She held the fort, so to speak, against all comers.

"I'm more sorry than I can tell you, boys, to say no, but nothing you could say would alter my mind. Neither Joe's mother nor Tom's would dream of letting them go camping out while those dreadful men are about."

The pals felt the reasonableness of the refusal, and showed not a flicker of resentment, though of course their disappointment was keen.

"I say, chaps, let's put in the mornin' fishin'," suggested Joe.

The vote was unanimous, and in a few minutes, armed with rods and lines and a tomahawk—the latter for use in cutting grubs out of the honeysuckle trees—the boys were *en route* to some of the deep pools in the creek. They had a really good time with some giant perch. The dangling grubs formed an irresistible lure to these voracious denizens of the water-holes, and the fishermen had no reason

to grumble at the result. On their return home to lunch they were dumbfounded with the news shouted out by Denny as soon as they were within speaking distance, "Owld Ben's dead!—shot by the p'lice in th' ranges."

The whole household was greatly excited by the news, which had been brought by a stockman from Captain White's station. There seemed no reason to doubt the intelligence, which had come via the "bush telegraph." Hennessey's lot had picked up the 'rangers' tracks and partly surprised them in the mountains. The outlaws promptly but barely succeeded in getting away. They gradually drew away, however, from all save the Sergeant, who was on a new mount—one of the Tocal noted breed—which proved to be a "ringer."

The leader and his companion, who was a light weight, tried every dodge to shake off the pursuit, and in this they were past masters; but they had to reckon with Hennessey, who was one of the finest troopers in the force—as dare-devil a rider as Ben Bolt himself.

After some marvellous riding among the ravines and tangled mountain scrub—during which a few long-range shots had been exchanged—Hennessey began to draw upon the outlaws. Even that equine magician, Samson, was reaching his limits. The capture of this illusive freebooter seemed now a certainty, could the Sergeant hold out another ten minutes.

He was now within a hundred yards of his man. He lagged a little behind his youthful mate, who was riding the chestnut gelding looted from Wilson's station. Had he wished he could have shot the 'ranger down; but being extremely anxious to capture him alive for the bigger reward, he refrained. The only advantage Ben Bolt possessed was an intimate knowledge of the ground, by which he often gained a bit. They were now racing up a steep ravine which presently terminated abruptly at a precipice. Down this the outlaws apparently flung themselves; or so it appeared to Hennessey.

Arriving at the spot a few seconds later, the trooper perceived a winding, narrow pass. He was a stranger to the precipitous track, but both the bushrangers and their horses were familiar with it, for they slithered and scrambled down at breakneck speed: a single stumble, and man and horse would inevitably be dashed to pieces. In vain did the gallant Sergeant spur his steed towards the pass. His horse resolutely refused to face it. His chances of capture are fast diminishing to a vanishing point, as in a few minutes his prize will have escaped.

The outlaws have now reached the comparatively even ground below, distant about five hundred yards from where the trooper stood gnashing his teeth in rage, and praying that they might break their necks before they reach the bottom. Fortune favoured them, however, and they might have made good their escape without further trouble. But, instead of galloping off to safe cover, they reined up their steeds, while Ben Bolt, standing in his stirrups, shouted at the top

of his voice an insulting message for the Sub-Inspector, making at the same time an ironical bow.

While this little piece of comedy was being enacted, and just as the bushranger was in the act of bowing, the Sergeant had dismounted. Swiftly throwing his rifle to his shoulder and adjusting his sights in an eye wink, he made a hasty but true shot. The outlaw had not finished his bow ere he toppled from his steed and lay prone, shot through the heart.

Such was the news brought by the stockman, and accepted by the station folk.

"Weel, it was bound to come sooner or later. It's what happens to a' law-breakers—simply the choice of bullet or rope. It's no' for us to ca' the unfortunate and misguided mon names. If a's true, he suffered a grave injuistice at the hands o' the police when but a youth, which embittered his whole life an' gave a moral twist to his actions. We maun leave him to Ane above wha mak's nae mis-judgments."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CAMP BY THE SEA

"Bright skies of summer o'er the deep,
And soft salt air along the land,
The blue wave, lisping in its sleep,
Sinks gently on the yellow sand;
And grey-winged seagulls slowly sweep
O'er scattered bush and white-limbed tree,
Where the red cliffs like bastions stand
To front the salvos of the sea,
Now lulled by its own melody."
GEORGE ESSEX EVANS.

"And now, boys, what about the camping-out project? I see no reason why you shouldn't carry out your little plan, now all danger's removed; indeed, I should love you to have the jaunt. Who were going?"

The boys could hardly believe the good news, it was so sudden.

"Us three, and Denny, if father could spare him, mother," was Sandy's remark.

"Oh, ye can tak' the laddie. He's due for a holiday, onyway. So's Harry, for that matter. I can do wi'oot 'em for a spell."

Harry was nothing loth, and entered into the scheme with considerable enthusiasm. As an old bushman he was able to give good advice in the matter of camping-out requirements, and was later to render signal service by which a life was saved.

Behold the party, early the next morning, accoutred and ready for the road; making, as they held their steeds, quite an imposing cavalcade. Two stout roadsters were requisitioned for packing purposes; for the maternal solicitude of Mrs. Mac was both prolific and varied, judged by the articles of food and service which she forced upon the travellers.

The squatter's pawky humour found ample scope for indulgence. He expressed a hope that "the pairty would keep a guid look oot for traces o' the lost Leichhardt expeedetion; and look oot for alleegaitors when ye strike the Gulf o' Carpeentairia."

The girls, too, indulged in good-humoured banter, raising hearty laughs against the boys, in which the victims joined as lustily as any.

Said Maggie, striking a grandmotherly attitude, "There are three things I would warn you against, boys; damp socks, draughts, and earwigs. Don't leave out the flour when mixing the damper. Have you packed the tape measure, Sandy?"

"Tape measure! What in the name of Madge Wildfire do you mean?"

"Why," cried Jessie, breaking in, "to measure the giant jew fish that will snap Joe's line as he is in the very act of landing it."

"Whatcher givin' us, Jess?"

"It will also come in handy," continued the saucy girl, turning on Tom, "to record the girth, length, and throat capacity of the monster snake that you, Tom, are sure to see when roaming alone in the scrub."

"That's one for your nob, Tom!"

"Your turn next, Sandy," retorted that youth.

"Then there's the 'old-man' kangaroo that me brither Sandy will shoot at, missing by 'just an hair's-breadth,' of course, and which he will declare—when he returns to camp—to be as 'high as one of those extinct mammals that Simpson has in his natural history book'; at any rate as 'big as Bullocky Bill's off side poler.'"

"But, Miss Jessie, how wud th' bhoys put th' measure on th'——?"

"As for Dennis Kineavy," continued the sprite, "he will be sure to run into a group of mermaa-des, when diving in the deep blue sa-ay, who will be discussing

the all-important question of waist measurement. As Denny's an expert in fairies and hobgoblins, he will be appointed judge and referee."

So, amid laughter and banter, and final good-byes, the gay party start for the Bay.

Neville was prevented from joining them through important business interests in Sydney. The "call" of the bush, however, was strong and insistent, and, as he bade farewell, he announced his determination of returning at no long date to settle as a landholder.

The road to the Bay passed within a short distance of the caves, and, despite the news of the tragic end of Ben Bolt, the lads, as they jogged past the neighbourhood, were unable to rid themselves of a feeling that the outlaw still lurked about his old haunt, and felt relieved when they had left this region behind them.

The journey to the Bay proved uneventful save in one particular. In mounting a very steep incline, the cinch strap, that formed the final fastening of the pack on one of the animals, broke, whereupon the pack-saddle, being loosely girthed, worked backwards. Some of the contents, also, fell to the ground, frightening the horse, who bolted along the road, parting with sundry utensils and eatables, which lined the track for some distance at irregular intervals. The frightened steed was at length secured, the wreckage gathered and replaced—this time more securely—and the journey resumed.

The Bay is reached without further mishap or adventure. After coasting it for some little space the party cast anchor, in seamen's parlance, on a miniature promontory which jutted for a furlong or so into the waters of the Bay, forming a grassy, treeless plateau throughout its area. The advantage of this site was apparent to the group of campers, inasmuch as the foreshores of the Bay were covered for the most part with a stunted scrub that extended to the beach. The advantage was twofold: it obviated the necessity of clearing a space for the tents, and it was comparatively free from bush vermin.

To the southern part of the Bay, distant some six miles, was the Pilot Station; while towards the northern extremity, where a large creek debouched into the sea, was a camp of cedar-getters. Otherwise, in its shore vicinity, the Bay was uninhabited.

Two hours of daylight yet remained, and the members of the party made instant preparation for pitching camp. The necessary tent poles and pegs were speedily secured from the neighbouring scrub, and, under the direction of the experienced stockman, willing hands are busily engaged in the erection.

The bigger tent was set upon a ridge pole that rested in the forks of two upright saplings which had been firmly fixed in the ground. When the requisite number of pegs had been hammered into the ground, the tent was hauled taut by cords passed through eyelet holes at intervals along each side, and about thirty

inches from the bottom. This under section of the tent assumed a perpendicular position, forming the walls, which were secured by the same method. This formed the pals' cover, while the smaller tent sufficed for the other two. A rough shed formed of four uprights, with a brushwood roof, held the provisions and saddles.

So expeditiously were all these arrangements made that ere the darkness fell they were completed, and Denny—who was promoted to the responsible position of cook—was building a fire for tea-making purposes. Meanwhile the horses were led to a small, freshwater lagoon in the vicinity, where they were belled and short-hobbled, and left to browse on the succulent grass. The last act of preparation was that of cutting a quantity of gum bushes for bedding. No sweeter or healthier bed can be contrived than a layer of fragrant eucalyptus leaves. The beds had scarcely been made ere the welcome summons to supper came, in the Irish boy's best brogue: "Jintilmen, will yees come to ta-ay?"

There is a charm peculiar to an evening meal taken in the open. The charm is heightened in the present instance by the contiguity of the sea. The youths dine to the musical accompaniment of the rolling waves, which strike the beach in deep, muffled thunder-tone, rising crescendo fashion as they race to a finish along the shelly incline. Then, landward, are the insistent noises of the things of the forest. Ever and anon the soft tinkle-tinkle of "The horse-bell's melody remote" is to be heard as the cropping animals move over the lush grass. The illimitable dome above is alive with sparkling lights. Thus an environment is created which gives a sacramental aspect to the feast. At least it forms a romantic picture which centres in the fire-lit faces of the happy, care-free youths.

Supper ended, they eagerly discuss their projects, the while they clean their guns and fix the fishing tackle.

On the morn, at earliest dawn, they will try likely spots for fish, and have a swim in the briny. And now the slow movements of the tongue, with frequent yawns, proclaim the nightly toll which nature is wont to exact.

Ere the pale dawn is flushed the pals, sleep banished, half-dressed, tongues wagging, trudge along the beach to the rocky point of the promontory, stopping here and there at likely places to dig in the sand for whelks, which make capital bait. The water is fairly deep where the nose of the promontory marks the terminal point, and soon lines are unwound, hooks are baited, and practised hands fling the lead-weighted hempen cords far into the Bay. Fair success rewards their efforts. Sandy's line hardly reached the bottom ere he experienced the delightful thrill of a fierce tug, followed by a smart, strong rush which betokened a good fish. After a few minutes' play he landed a fine specimen of black bream, scaling over two pounds.

Sandy and Tom had varying luck with black and white bream, and flat-

head. Joe, however, was out of it. He did, indeed, have a gigantic bite soon after Sandy had captured his first fish. The line whizzed through his fingers with a rush that skinned them as he began to take a pull. When the line had reached its limit it snapped like a piece of pack-thread. The biter was either a young shark or a big jew fish. After this no fish troubled the boy. His mates struck their fish at frequent intervals, while his line remained motionless. After a time he wound up and left his companions. Retracing his steps some distance along the beach, he halted at a shelving rock that ran out into the water. It looked a likely spot, and he determined to try with a lighter line than the one he had been using. Baiting his hook with a soldier crab, he made a cast, and almost immediately had a bite, hauling in a black-back whiting. It was a good specimen, weighing at least a pound. He had good sport for about half an hour, catching in all about a dozen whiting and half a dozen soles.

The sport began to slacken about an hour after sunrise, and the pals, having captured sufficient for the day's requirement, set to work and cleaned their catches. This task finished, they have a plunge in the sparkling and cool waters of the Bay.

Meanwhile Harry attended to the horses, and did little jobs about the camp, whilst Denny devoted his attention to the preparation of the breakfast. The lads returned in due course with the spoils of the sea, and with appetites as keen as a razor. In a few minutes the pan is full of sizzling fish, which are presently transferred to a hot dish, and the pan is filled with a fresh lot.

"Goin' to try 'nuther panful, Denny?" said Tom, when the second lot had been demolished.

"Anuther pan! Howly Moses! div yees hear him! Och, thin, me bhoy, ye'd soon rise th' price ov fish. Not anuther scrap will Oi cook f'r yees. Oi've kep' th' rest f'r dinner? Sure, if we go on loike this 'twill be Fridah ivry da'; glory be!"

The morning was devoted to a go-as-you-please programme, in which there was much disporting in the water; even the juvenile pastime of building castles in the sand was not considered *infra dig*.

In the afternoon the whole party set out for Schnapper Point. It was on this spot that the fond expectations of the lads were centred. It was reputed to be the best fishing ground in the extensive Bay, and owed its name to the fact that school-schnapper frequented its vicinity. A schnapper trip—taken as a rule in a small steamer—is voted one of the finest outings by Australian sportsmen. This highly prized fish, be it said, is known variously, according to its age and changing habits. It often attains large dimensions, weighing up to thirty pounds.

None of the party had previously visited the Point. Their great concern was to find out if suitable bait could be procured in its neighbourhood. The principal bait was a small species of whiting. These, they discovered, were to be obtained

without much trouble on shelly patches along the beach.

Early next morning the campers are astir, and busily engaged in necessary preparations. After a hearty breakfast, in which the corned round and the spiced beef are conspicuous features, behold the young sports jogging along the beach towards Schnapper Point. A stoppage is made at the whiting patch, where the fishermen are kept going for an hour with very fine lines. By this time they have secured about two hundred small fish as bait.

And now, having arrived at the fishing ground, leaving Harry and Denny to attend to the horses, the pals, all eager for the promised sport, unwind their heavy schnapper lines, and prepare for the catch.

It was agreed that the boys were to fish, while Harry, who voted fishing a bore, and was devoted to the gun, would scour the adjacent scrub for birds, and the forest beyond for kangaroo; Denny having promised the boys a "foine boilin'" of kangaroo-tail soup. To quote the actual words in which he preferred his request—"If Harry wud shute wan iv thim fellas as hops wid their ta-ales, and carries their childre in their pockets,[#] Oi, wud ma-ake sich a soup as niver was."

[#] The natural pouch of the marsupial for bearing its young.

The shooter, armed with a fowling-piece and a short rifle, after attending to the horses, disappeared in the scrub in search of game. Meanwhile the fishers, having cast their lines, assume an expectant attitude.

To their great disappointment there are no bites; not even the stimulating nibble. The patience of these amateurs is sorely tried. A whole hour passes without the slightest sensation of a bite. Lines are cast and recast. The fishermen move to and fro, to no useful purpose.

"Well, of all the rotten frauds of places for fishin', this takes the bun! Dash it! we'd better have stayed at the camp an' fished there. At least we'd——"

"Howld yer whisht, bhoys!" said Denny in an excited whisper. "Oi'm jist goin' to git a boite; th' line's thrimblin' sure. Faith 'tis a Dutchman smellin' the ray-shons, Oi'm thinkin'."

"It's not a schnapper, if that's what you mean by a Dutchman. No nibblin' about a schnapper, Denny. More likely a crab."

"By Saint Michael! Joe, div yes call that a crab? Be dad, thin, it's a big sa-ay whale, or maybe one iv thim mare-mades Miss Jassie warned me aginst. Be th' hokey, th' loine's cuttin' me fingers!"

The line, which for a minute or two had given faint twitches, and a few premonitory shakes, now suddenly whizzed through the Irish boy's fingers.

"Take a pull on her, an' steady her!" cried Sandy. "You'll lose fish an' line, too, if you're not mighty smart."

Denny thereupon made a "brake" of his fingers, which steadied the fish after it had run out about fifty yards or so of the line. He began to haul it as if it were attached to a sulky calf. The fish was a heavy one, and a fighter; but what Denny lacked in skill he made up in strength. Fortunately for the angler the line was stout and new, or it would surely have snapped in the struggle. By sheer strength the fish is drawn to land.

CHAPTER XXIX

AT THE MERCY OF THE SEA-TIGER: A NARROW SHAVE

The pals watched the seaman-like efforts of Denny to land his "sa-ay whale," or "mare-made," with great curiosity.

"It's no schnapper, unless, maybe, a real boss 'un. More like a young shark," was the remark passed by Joe.

Their curiosity is soon satisfied; the fish is now in the shallows, and the next moment is drawn to the water's brink. Denny has landed a monster sting-ray.

It was the first of the kind the Irish boy had ever seen, and, as he pulled the struggling ray into the shallows and exposed its body, he was struck mute for a few seconds with astonishment, and not a little alarm, at its uncanny appearance. Dropping his line in the excitement, he half turned to the boys, and, pointing to the floundering fish, exclaimed, "Begorrah! 'tis th' div-vil himsilf. Saints presarve us, but if yen's not he'es ta-ale! Or, ma'be 'tis th' dhragon phwat Father Daly towld us about at Mass larsht Sun-day."

"He'll be a drag-off in a moment," cried Joe, making a clutch at the line, for the brute was wriggling into the deeper water. The next minute the ray was smacking the earth with his flappers, and whipping it with his tail.

"Phwat be th' crathure, anny ways, Sahndy?"

"It's a stingaree, Denny. Mind you don't touch its tail, or you will find out to your cost that it's the dragon, black angel, an' 'th' owld bhoy,' all mixed up like an Irish stew. Run for the tommy, an' we'll whip it off."

"And does it bite wid its ta-ale loike a schn-ake, bhoys?"

"No, you precious duffer! it's got a spike near the tip that it rams into you

like a needle, an' then look out! Yellow Billy trod on one once when he was havin' a bogey down below Tareela, in the river—they make a hole in the mud an' lie there—an', by jings! he was ravin' mad in twenty minutes. The doctor had to shove a syringe into his arm, and squirt laudnaum, or somethin', to quiet him down. There!" flourishing the tomahawk, "that's off, clean as a whistle!"

"My word!" continued Sandy, a moment later, "we'll keep the tail for Harry. He promised Bill Evans, the jockey, to get one for him if he could. He's goin' to ride White's horse at the Armidale races, an' he's the laziest o' mokes he reckons. Bill says it'll be only by sheer floggin' that he'll fetch him along. Says if he only had a stingaree-tail whip[#] he could do the trick."

[#] The sting-ray tail is sometimes used for this purpose. It is a cruel instrument of flagellation in the hands of an unfeeling rider.

"This is not schnapper fishin'," interjected Joe. "My word! the stingaree'll make stunnin' bait. Put a bit on your hook, Denny, it may entice 'em."

Sandy cut off a slice from the flapper and baited Denny's hook with it. The line had hardly reached the bottom ere it was seized by a fish—a monster. The fish did not rush, he bored; the resistance was of a sullen nature. Joe came to Denny's help, and between them they drew the fish to land. It proved to be a huge rock cod, or groper, as it is more commonly called, scaling close upon a hundredweight.

"A jolly groper, by dad! We're in luck all right," exclaimed Tom. "We'll have groper steak for supper to-night; besides, we can pickle one half of this cove and dry the other."

Their luck had changed in more respects than one. The ray and the groper seemed to be avants courier for the school-schnapper, which now began to bite freely.

For the next two hours the boys were kept well employed, landing near upon forty fish, varying from three to twelve pounds in weight. The tide now began to ebb, and after that there were no more bites. It was just as well, for by this time they had caught as many fish as they could cure. Counting the groper, they had nigh upon three hundredweight. The weight of these when scaled and cleaned would be reduced by at least one-fourth, leaving about two hundred and fifty pounds of choice fish.

"What's bes' thing to do now, Joe?"

"W-e-l-l—er—I dunno. Oh, I say, how'd a jolly swim go down?"

"Spiffin'! A swim, a feed, an' then start cleanin' the fish an' gettin' 'em

ready for smokin' an' saltin'. 'Bout noon I reckon it is."

"Come on, Denny," cried Joe, as they walked down to a sloping beach a little back from the Point; "come an' have a dip in the briny."

"Bedad, thin, that same will Oi not. 'Twu'd be threadin' on wan iv these stinkin'-rays Oi'd be. Oi can seem to feel th' brute's dirty pisen fangs already in me leg. No, no, thanks be, Oi'm not takin' th' wather tra-atement at prisint. Oi'll go an' start the foire so as to be ready f'r yees; that is, if th' sharks div not ma-ake mince-ma-ate of yees."

Was it a premonition which caused a cold, tingling thrill to run along Joe's nervous system, from tip to toe; to be followed by the creeps, which made goose-flesh of his smooth skin? Disagreeable as the sensation is to the lad for the time, it lasts but for a moment, and in less than no time, so to speak, he is revelling in the glories of the crisp, emerald-tinted wavelets of the Bay.

It should be stated that Schnapper Point did not extend into the Bay at right angles to the beach. It inclined northward, and at the spot where the boys were bathing was not more than two hundred yards from the beach.

"Say, chaps," shouted Joe, who was some distance out, "I'm going to swim over to the main beach."

So saying, he swam slowly towards the other side, enjoying to its fullest extent the luxury of the exercise. He had covered about a third of the distance when he heard a great commotion behind him.

Denny, who had been attending to the fire, had his attention attracted by a moving object in the sea. Gazing intently thereon for a moment, he left his occupation and ran swiftly towards the boys.

"Look, bhoys! look at that gra-ate fish sa-alin' in forninst the Point. Troth, it's a monsther groper, Oi'm thinkin'! Glory! but he'es a gra-ate big bullock-groper!"

So saying, Denny came towards the boys with a puzzled air, as though his description of the object to which he was pointing did not exactly determine its species.

"Whereaway, Denny?" exclaimed Sandy, who was paddling in the surf, standing up and gazing in the direction indicated. "A bullock-groper. That's a new creature surely. Never heard——Hello! why, it's a—— Hi, hi! Joe! Joe!" shouted the lad in a wildly excited state. "Joe, there's a big shark roundin' the Point an' coming this way. Come back, quick! quick!"

Joe, who was almost on a level with the water, was unable to locate the enemy as quickly as the others. It was not until he began to tread water that his eye caught the moving object. In a flash he realised his danger, for it was a large tiger-shark, the man-eater of the sea. Not even the man-eater of the jungle, roused through the blood-lust to a killing frenzy, could be more merciless to his

victim than this cold-blooded, pitiless, silent tiger of the seas.

Terrible as was the shock, his courage survived. He conned the situation, and formed his judgment in a moment. The shark was eighty yards or so above him, swimming parallel with Schnapper Point beach, and within thirty yards or so of it. As far as he could judge the fish was ignorant of his presence, but were he to return to his companions he could not expect to escape its vigilant eyes; would be crossing its bow, so to speak; and, were it in an attacking mood, would not have the ghost of a show.

His only hope of escape lay in keeping along his course, getting to the farther shore in the smallest number of minutes possible. All this cogitation did not cover twenty seconds, and the boy resumed his swim with the utmost vigour.

Had not something happened to divert the shark from its course nothing alarming would have occurred, for Joe was rapidly widening the distance, and every stroke was improving his chances. The boys on shore, with the hope of frightening the monster away altogether, began to make a great clatter; pelting the shark at the same time. No more fatal policy could have been adopted. The only result of their tactics was to divert the shark from its course, and to drive it out in the direction of their comrade.

Almost as soon as the brute's course was changed it sighted the swimmer. This it indicated by giving two or three strong strokes with its powerful tail, and gliding at a rapid rate in the wake of the lad. Joe was made acquainted with this change of course by the frantic cries of his mates. Throwing his head over his shoulder for a moment, he saw the shark heading directly for him. He knew in that moment that unless the miraculous happened his hours were numbered, and in a few seconds—or minutes at most—his body would be mangled by this pitiless sea-tiger. Yet, although this terrible result appeared an absolute certainty to the fleeing youth, he did not lose his head, but swam with a strong and steady stroke. There is such a thing as hoping against hope. He would not surrender life; it must be torn from him. Joe's home upbringing, with his father's daily chapter and prayer, sent his thoughts heavenwards in this his moment of extreme peril: "What time I am afraid I will put my trust in Thee."

Here was the situation. Joe was about sixty yards from the beach, while the relentless pursuer was within thirty yards of him. His mates were powerless to aid him, and were racing round to the spot where he intended to land as swiftly as their legs could carry them.

The shark glided within a few yards of the lad, and then swam round him, while conning him. This the boy felt to be simply the preliminary, yet every stroke was taking him nearer the shore. The water should be even now shoaling. Might he dare to sound it? But, alas! the enemy seems to understand this, and gives a cunning look as it half-raises its body from the water, and scrutinises its

helpless victim preparatory to making its final swoop.

"God help me!" cries the youth, with a dry sob; his last moment has come. In that supreme moment—as in the case of drowning men—the whole past came before him. Home, parents, sisters, brothers, pals! There, almost within arm's-length, is his merciless foe; while there is still quite a stretch of water between him and the beach.

The great, cold-blooded, insatiable fish is poised for the final spring. A single second now, and——

Instead of falling upon its victim, the huge brute lashed the water into foam, and swam round and round in a circle. What had really happened Joe knew not. He no longer swam shorewards, but, half stupefied, watched the "flurries" of the frenzied fish as it lashed the water in rage or pain.

Then he heard a great splashing shorewards, and a voice shouting encouraging words. Turning in that direction, the boy beheld, with unutterable joy, Harry, rifle in hand, rushing through the water to him. In a few seconds the stockman is abreast Joe, the water being only up to his arm-pits. Pointing the rifle at the fish, which was circling in blind fashion, but a few yards off, the rifleman—for it was he, under God, who worked the miracle—drove a bullet through the shark's brain.

"My word! 'twas a touch-and-go, old feller!" exclaimed the man, as he put an arm round the boy—who had, in a sense, collapsed—and drew him to the shore. "There now, Joey, me brave boy. Y're all right, ain't ye? Y're not the chap ter faint, I know. Here's the others," as the rest dashed up, breathless; the Irish boy fairly crying with excitement.

They could do nothing for a while but look at Joe as he sat leaning against a mangrove—where Harry had placed him—making a brave but weak effort to smile. The reaction had set in, and the boy felt it was only by the most resolute exercise of his will that he kept from swooning.

Tom, who was blowing like the proverbial grampus, stuttered at last: "Let's m-make tr-racks h-home, b-boys. I-I'd rather be b-b-bailed up by a thousand 'r-rangers, than w-w-w-one of th-hose sea-devils. Oh! the sight of the m-monster as he r-rose to make a d-dive at p-poor Joe! Y-yes, let's c-clear."

"Clear, be hanged! What are you drivelling about, you jolly idiot?" It was just the tonic Joe needed. "We're not goin' to let a thing like this spoil our sport, not by a long shot. I'm all right. Was a bit knocked out for a few minutes, I will confess. Tell you what, boys; I'll never be nearer death till my last moment comes. That I am alive is due, first to God, an' then to ole Harry, here. 'Twas a great shot, that first one of yours. 'Nother second later an' 'twould have been too late. Ugh! don't believe I'll ever get the green glitter of the thing's eyes outer my mind. Tell you what, I'll jolly well punch the first cove that hints at goin' home.

I vote we go back an' scale an' gut the jolly fish."

"Bedad, thin, it's a plucky wan y'are, Joe, me bhoy! Y're th' mahn f'r me money ivry toime. But, ye'll not do a sthroke iv wark till yees have a feed. Faith, Oi'll do a sthreak an' get th' billy boilin' f'r a pipin' hot cup o' tay. It's what we all want; Joe in particular." Suiting his action to the word, the cook strode off in quick time to prepare the lunch.

Meanwhile the dead shark had drifted into the shallows until it stranded on the beach. The party now made a closer examination of the brute. The first shot, fired from the bank as the creature raised itself, had caught it in the throat; the second passed through the eye to the brain.

"Why, it's a tiger-shark!" exclaimed Harry; "twelve foot if he's an inch. Thought 'twas a blue-nose at fust; they're bad enough, but this joker's the worst kind that swims the sea. My word, Joe, it'd been all U P if this chap'd once got 'is teeth intil yer."

"Budgeree, budgeree, you bin shootem shark? Him murry bad p-feller. Catchem plendy black p-feller; eaten. This p-feller live longa Point plendy years."

[image]

"The huge brute lashed the water into foam, and swam round and round in a circle."—See p. 271.

The group, which had been intently gazing at the carcass, turned round in a startled manner on bearing these guttural sounds. Immediately behind them was a cluster of aboriginals, five in number, who had stolen silently upon the scene.

"Hello, Cock-eye! that you?" cried Harry, as he surveyed the blacks. "Where you bin sittin' down, eh?"

"Cedar Crik. We bin come longa here get fis' for choppers."

"Oh, the timber-getters, hey! Well, you seem ter know this ole boss. You bin see 'im afore?"

"Plendy times. Bin often try catch 'im. He kill-ee mine sister. He too much lika dingo; no take bait."

"Well, you can git even with this joker, Cock-eye. He eat your people; now you chaps gobble 'im up."

The blacks are inordinately fond of shark's flesh, and—cannibal as this sea-tiger is—no question of sentiment may stand between these primitive men and a gorge.

"I say, Harry, cut that dorsal fin off for me, there's a good man, before these

niggers tackle it. I'd like to keep that."

After a considerable amount of hacking, the stockman managed to separate the fin, and, leaving the blacks in undisturbed possession of the carcass, they returned to the Point, to feed, and to finish their work.

CHAPTER XXX
IN AND ABOUT THE CAMP

"O mellow air! O sunny light!
O Hope and Youth that pass away!
Inscribe in letters of delight
Upon each heart one golden day—
To be there set
When we forget
There is a joy in living yet!"
G. E. EVANS.

The fish cleaning occupied the best part of the afternoon; and when the party reached camp, about sunset, they were dog-tired; inclined for little else than supper and sleep.

"But you haven't told us how it came to pass that you were just on the spot to prevent the shark scoffing Joe," exclaimed Tom to Harry. "We didn't expect you back for hours."

"Niver had such a thing 'appen afore, I give yer my word. Lost me way in the dashed scrub; carn't understand it nohow. As a rule yer carn't lose me in a scrub; can feel me way be day or night. Instinct, they calls it. Ole Dumaresque says ter me one day, when we'd bin ridin' fer hours through heavy pine country after some strayed heifers, gettin' caught in the dark long afore we makes the homestead: 'How do you manage to tack an' criss-cross this beastly country without track or compass; not even a star to guide you? It fair beats me, my man. Why, I'd 'a' bin lost a dozen times over but fer you. You always seem ter be goin' wrong, yet always come out right.'

"'Carn't explain it, sir,' ses I. 'I jist do it.

"'It's all instinct,' ses 'e. 'It's like wot the dingoes an' blacks 'ave.'

"Instinct or no instinct, I got bushed all right ter day. There's something erbout it I carn't understand. 'Twasn't that I was careless, an' takin' no notice. I 'ad worked through the scrub a distance of four mile or so when, all of a sudden, I ses ter meself, ses I, 'Where the dickens am I?' Well, as soon as I put the question to meself I knows I was bushed, an' fer the fust time in me life I begins ter feel quite creepy like. I didn't know which way ter go. At larst I starts out in a direction that seemed the likeliest, but, somehow, I cud make no headway. Something seemed ter clog me feet, an' I was allers gettin' mixed up with vines an' brushwood.

"'Dash it all,' ses I, 'this won't do. Don't believe I'm goin' the right way, after all. Believe this ere way's leadin' me back to the Bay, an' I wants ter git through this blarmy scrub ter the forest, fer 'oppers' tails. I'll righterbout face, danged if I won't!' So round I turns, an' as soon as I started I got on fust clarss. Didn't git mixed up an' stumble as afore, but gits through the brushwood as slick as a bandicoot. 'Mus' be nearly through the belt,' ses I, after goin' fer an' hour or so. 'Mus' git the rifle ready, fer I might sight a kangy any moment now.' So I unslings the rifle from me back an' puts the gun in its place, an' stops a minit ter load 'er—the rifle I mean. I'd jist finished when I heers voices shoutin', an' then a great yellin', as if somethin' orful was 'appenin'. So orf I rushes through the scrub, an' comes out on the beach. I was knocked inter a heap, I gives yer me word; fer there before me was the sea, an' I thought I was on t'other side of the scrub altogether. Then, in a flash, I sees wot was really 'appenin'. Jist afore me very eyes was Joe. He was strugglin' in the water not more'n a hundred yards away, an' that 'er brute seemed as if it was jist a-fallin' on 'im. Why, I fired the rifle a'most without pintin' it. Somethin' seemed ter say, 'If yer waits ter aim yell be too late.' Be gosh! I'm thinkin' 'twas the Almighty Hisself directed that shot."

"If ye'd not losht your enstink, as ye calls it, ye'd be moiles an' moiles awaay at th' toime th' shark was goin' to gobble Joe up, wuddent ye?"

"In course I wud."

"Well, don't ye think th' good God had a hand in losin' ye in th' scrub?"

"It's wot yer father'd call an answer ter prayer," replied the stockman, turning to Joe as he spoke.

By this time the camp-fire—around which the group had been sitting—was burning low, and the party was quite ready for bed after the exciting and tirng adventures of the day.

The campers were astir at an early hour next morning, to make the final preparations for curing the fish. After filling both barrels, there was a quantity available for smoking. To carry out this object a sapling frame, about four feet square and seven feet high, was constructed, and enclosed with bushes, leaving an opening at the top and bottom. The fish were hung by stout cords, and a fire

kindled on the earth inside the curing shed. Some green wood was used with the dry, to produce a fair, volume of smoke; and so the curing went on apace.

Leaving Denny in charge of the camp, the others spent the afternoon shooting over a chain of lagoons that lay back from the beach a couple of miles or so. The ducks were plentiful, and they returned to the camp well laden. They passed the two following days shooting and fishing, both fins and feathers being exceedingly plentiful. By this time they judged the fish to be cured, and packed it in a maize bag.

"Tell you what, boys! S'pose we ride over to the Pilot Station to-day? It'll be a change, won't it?"

The others received Joe's suggestion with ready approval, and before long were racing along the beach towards the Pilot Station. This was situated at the mouth of the river, and consisted of the residences of the pilot and the boat's crew.

It should be said that at the mouth of every Australian river flowing into the Pacific is a sand-bar. These sand barriers frequently shift their position, owing to tidal and other ocean influences. This makes entrance and exit to be a somewhat dangerous proceeding, and many a craft has come to grief on these treacherous sands. To reduce this danger to a minimum a pilot station exists at each river entrance. The pilot is generally a sea-captain with a large experience of these treacherous bars. It is his duty, weather permitting, to take daily soundings so as to locate the exact position of the bank, and by means of signals to apprise incoming and outgoing vessels of the position and depth of water on the bar; also, when required, to pilot the vessel over the dangerous spot.

Captain Craig, the pilot, was an old salt, with nearly half a century's experience of the eastern rivers of Australia. He received the boys very kindly, and, after offering them refreshment, took them to the signal station and lookout. When he had explained the methods of signalling, he allowed them to look through a very fine telescope. He was justly proud of this instrument, it having been presented to him by a company of passengers for his gallantry and seamanship in extricating his vessel from a rocky shore in a hurricane.

The time had now arrived for taking the bar soundings. Much to the boys' delight Captain Craig invited them to accompany him in the life-boat, and a few minutes later the crew were pulling the party from the miniature cove to the bar.

The water here, owing to the bar formation, was generally in a turbulent condition. Although it was a calm day, they found the boat exceedingly lively as she moved to and fro over the bar while soundings were being taken. They experienced sundry disagreeable qualms, and a certain screwed-up feeling in the region of the "bread-basket." The clacking tongues of the youngsters grew suspiciously quiet, and Tom's ruddy cheeks paled to an exceedingly bilious com-

plexion. Had you quizzed these boys upon their sickly looks, they would have protested with might and main against the insinuation of mal-de-mer. Nevertheless they were mighty glad when the pilot, after half an hour's sounding, having accomplished his purpose, turned the boat's nose in the direction of home. Once out of the troubled waters, the sick feeling passed away, and at the solicitation of the lads "for a pull," the pilot good-naturedly allowed them to row to the landing-place.

Before leaving, the pals recited the story of the shark adventure, ending in the death of the tiger shark. Captain Craig listened with great interest, and not a little excitement, to this narration.

"You have had the narrowest of escapes, Joe Blain, and have very much to be thankful for," exclaimed he. "That shark was a most notorious character. He has roamed the Bay for years and years, and has destroyed many human lives. Innumerable efforts for his capture have been put forth by the fishermen, and by my own men, but in vain. Often sighted and fished for, he has resisted the many lures set for him. Again and again, when enclosed in their nets, he has broken through, and has long been their despair. Now, however, thanks to a good Providence, and to the clever shot of your friend here, this dreadful man-eater has been removed." Advancing to the stockman, the pilot shook him warmly by the hand, and thanked him in the name of the community.

As the party rode home in the cool of the evening, they decided to break camp next morning, in order to carry out their original intention of paying a visit to the old diggings.

CHAPTER XXXI

OFF TO THE GOLD DIGGINGS

"The mountain air is cool and fresh,
Unclouded skies bend o'er us,
Broad placers, rich in hidden gold,
Lie temptingly before us."
SWIFT.

Tents were struck, and the campers' impedimenta securely fastened to the pack-

saddles, in the grey dawn of the following morning—the party having breakfasted by starlight.

The gold diggings about to be visited was situated in the ranges, equidistant from Bullaroi and the Bay. The route from the Bay lay along the homeward track as far as the caves. At this point the trail turned due north—winding among the rugged country to the site of the mining camp, which, in its palmy days, covered a flat that lay between some precipitous hills and a swiftly flowing mountain stream.

The diggings in question was deserted, save by a few fossikers, or gully-rakers, as they were generally called—men who earned a precarious living by following up the dry gullies, and picking out wash dirt from between the rocks; or else dry-blowing likely spots of the surface. The lure of gold—so common to all—fed the imagination of these men. They became nomads; lived in the most primitive ways; faced and endured untold hardships; and, if not cheerful, were always hopeful. They saw visions and dreamed dreams—of gold. The years passed, age pressed heavily, eyesight grew dim, and limbs palsied with weakness: but even when broken down and encompassed with infirmity, their very senility sustained its spirits upon visions of the rich find that was surely coming—to-morrow.

When the diggings "broke out," and the rush "set in," the flat was white with tents, the population running into four figures. It was an alluvial diggings; that is, the gold was washed from the earth, and not crushed from the quartz. In the flush days of Rocky Gully, rich "pockets" of gold were struck, and huge fortunes made. Life then, in the character of its splendours and pleasures, was barbaric. Lucky diggers, with the spending lust upon them, ordered champagne baths, lit their pipes with five-pound notes, shod their horses with plates of gold, squandered their suddenly acquired riches on camp wantons, and among the harpies of the gambling hells. There were many exceptions to this foolish course, 'tis true; but such is the mental intoxication consequent upon a lucky find, and the sudden acquisition of wealth, that the majority of lucky diggers succumb, and in a few weeks or months, shorn of their possessions, either blow out their brains in remorse, or challenge fortune once more upon the same or some other goldfield.

Rocky Gully was now a worked-out diggings, and its population had long ago drifted away to other fields. Naught remained to remind one of its glory now but a few tumbledown houses, and the wood skeletons of iron buildings, together with countless heaps of empty tins and other refuse. Naught, that is, save a dozen or so of fossikers, who were distributed over the field; each having his area, into which the others never intruded.

How was it, then, that the Bullaroi party should have included a trip to the deserted mining camp in their programme of sport and adventure? There

was nothing inviting in the region so far as game was concerned; nor was there the rough excitements of a live diggings. The truth is, it was the outcome of a suggestion of Harry. The stockman had a yarn he was very fond of relating, which included some tragic incidents associated with Rocky Gully. As a youth he lived there in its "boom" days, and towards the close of his stay there he was mates with Humpy Bob. Humpy Bob was an eccentric character, well known on a dozen goldfields, whose shrewdness as a gold finder was countervailed by his incredible folly in spending his riches. On one occasion, when he had struck a "pocket," from which he drew over a thousand ounces, he began a carouse which continued until the last penny was spent.

As illustrative of his folly during that spree, he purchased a general store for the sum of one thousand pounds. The same evening, in company with the drunken guests of a champagne party he had given, he proceeded to the store, deliberately fired it, and, with the other banqueters, stripped stark naked, danced a wild corrobberie while it burned.

Bob sober was the antithesis of Bob drunk. Abstemious, taciturn, industrious, solitary, with a genius for divining likely places, he followed the pursuit of gold: seldom failing to earn good wages; often winning handsome profits; occasionally making a pile.

Humpy's end came suddenly and tragically; and of this Harry was a witness.

The two men were driving a tunnel at a likely spot in the bank of a blind gully about three miles from the main camp. They worked in relays, and had driven in about a score of yards, when Harry suggested shoring it with saplings for safety. Humpy Bob, however, who was always running risks, made light of the suggestion. They had just struck a vein of promising stuff, which gave "prospects" of several grains to the dish. When it was Bob's turn to go on, Harry again suggested shoring up certain loose spots; especially one near where he had been picking, for there had been a small fall during his shift. This the other would not consent to, though his partner pleaded earnestly.

"There's a hundred to one chances against there being anything serious, mate, and I'm not goin' to waste any time in propping up the blessed tunnel. It's not worth it. We'll most likely clean it out to-morrer. So-long!"

So saying, the digger entered the drive, and was soon at his work. Harry, having nothing to do for a while, went to the tent and stretched himself on his bunk for a rest, intending to return in an hour or so to wheel out the mullock. Unfortunately he fell asleep, and hours passed by before he awoke. When he did, he jumped from his bunk and ran out to the drive, scolding himself for his negligence. The barrow was missing from its usual place, and, after a hasty search, the youth went to the tunnel's mouth and shouted to his mate. There was no

response, nor were the usual pick sounds to be heard. The light was still burning at the end of the tunnel. Hastily traversing the drive in a half-stooping position, as indeed compelled by the size of the tunnel, the youth covered about half the distance when he stumbled over the barrow, severely barking his shins. Using hot language against the carelessness of his mate at leaving the barrow in such a place, and with a half fear at the unsatisfactory look of things, he scrambled up and went on towards the end of the tunnel. He had not taken more than two steps when he again stumbled; this time over a softer substance. It was his mate!

Humpy Bob was lying unconscious, half-covered with a mass of fallen earth and rocks. Groping his way across this pile of débris, the excited and frightened youth reached the end of the drive, seized the light and returned to his mate.

Tearing frantically at the soil and stones, he liberated old Humpy, and, as gently as possible, drew him to the tunnel mouth. Then dashing to the little stream below, he brought water in a billy, and made the customary attempts to restore his stricken mate to consciousness. His utmost attempts availed not. The vital spark had fled. Not all the resources of medicine or surgery could bring light into the half-closed eyes, or life into those rapidly stiffening limbs. Humpy Bob would never again unearth a nugget, rock a cradle, appraise the value of a prospect, or get on the "razzle-dazzle" and "paint the town red."

It would seem that after working for a while, and making a heap of mullock, the digger had come out of the tunnel for Harry. Not seeing him about, the old man seized the barrow with the object of wheeling out some of the earth. He had loaded it, and was in the act of wheeling it along, when a mass of earth fell full upon his back, fracturing the spine.

Harry was greatly affected by this sad occurrence; for Humpy Bob had many good points of character, and a strong attachment had grown up between them. As soon as his mate was buried, he left the goldfield, and got a job on one of the stations.

He had often thought of revisiting this scene, for he had a feeling that good gold would be found there. Of late the desire to test the ground again had grown strong, and, when the project of the jaunt to the seaside was launched, he suggested a trip to the old diggings. The boys gladly fell in with the idea, for it furnished them with an item that gave additional spice to the outing.

The journey to the diggings was necessarily slow. The pack-horses were heavily weighted by the extra burden of the fish, and the method of progress was that shuffling gait known as the "jog." Though monotonous and tiring to the rider, it is the easiest pace for the loaded animals, and one that can be kept up all day.

"Seems a pity that we should cart this blessed fish to the diggings, Sandy. Wouldn't it be better to 'cache' it somewhere near the junction? It's giving the

horses unnecessary work, in my opinion. Let's see, it's twelve miles to the junction, an' fifteen from there to Rocky Gully. Supposin' we planted the stuff in the scrub at the junction; it'd save thirty miles of hauling, an' be no end of a gain all round."

"Good enough, Joe! What d'yer say, Harry? We could hide the barrels an' bag easy enough in the scrub."

"M-yes, perhaps so. Come ter think of it, I'm not so sure. Barrels'd be all right, but 'twon't be the dingoes' fault if they don't root out the dried fish. Tell you what, boys, plant 'em in the caves!"

"Good shot! The very thing the doctor ordered! The caves! yes. 'Twon't take us more'n a mile out of the way; an' 'twill be on the road to Bullaroi on the return trip. We can easily strike in on the west side of the cave ridge, and hide 'em in the stables. Nobody knows of that place but father an' the 'rangers; now poor ole Ben's shot——"

"Maybe it's ha-aunted, bhoys. It's juist th' sphot owld Ben'd hide his sowl in, so as to frighten awa-ay th' p'lice whin they goes rummagin' about f'r booty; loike th' carr-sthle ghosts in th' owld conthry. Bedad, thin, Oi'll be expactin' t' see th' bowld raider comin' on us out iv th' dark, his face shinin' loike th' stuff phwat matches is made ov."

"Brimstone an' treacle you're thinkin' of, ain't you, Denny? But, I say, chaps, it'll be better to hide 'em at the 'ranger's outlet; though it'll be the dickens own job to get the barrels into the cave up that slope. Wouldn't it be better, after all, to hide the stuff in the scrub, slinging the bag into a tree, high enough to be safe from the dingoes?"

So it would, and have saved a most painful experience; but having started the idea of hiding the fish in the caves, it presented an attraction that the others would not surrender. It gave a flavour of romance to the act. Now that he was dead, the bushranger's hiding-place took on a new interest; and so it came to pass that Tom found himself in a minority of one.

They found it a tough piece of work to get the barrels up the precipitous slope to the cave entrance. But, when the fish was at last stored in the forage chamber, as it was now called, and the party had remounted their horses, they could appreciate the advantage gained by relieving the pack-horses of so much dead weight.

They now made more rapid headway, and struck an accommodation house,

in the early afternoon, kept by one Jago Smith—an old acquaintance of Harry's.

CHAPTER XXXII
HOW THEY STRUCK GOLD

"There's a bonny wee spot in the mountains I love,
Where the pine trees are waving o'erhead far above,
Where the miners are happy, kindhearted, and free;
And many come here from way over the sea.
There's gold in the mountain, there's gold in each glen,
The good time is coming, have patience, brave men;
Hold on to your ledges, and soon you will see
Both money and mills coming over the sea."
C. CRAWFORD.

Jago Smith was an "old timer," as, in Colonial parlance, men with his past were called. A Londoner by birth, he was initiated when but a child into the arts and artifices of that profession which flourishes by the application of sleight-of-hand tricks to the pockets and purses of an unsuspecting public. In short, this London arab was a thief, belonging to just such a school as Dickens has portrayed in *Oliver Twist*.

His career as a collector of "wipes" was brought to a summary end through being caught full-handed in a theatre crush. A "Children's Court," or a "First Offender's Act," was unknown in the early days of the nineteenth century; consequently young Jago Smith was had up before the magistrate, committed to the Assizes, convicted to the hulks, and ultimately transported to Botany Bay to serve a term of penal servitude.

At a theatrical effort made by certain prisoners of histrionic talent at Sydney, at the tail-end of the eighteenth century, to which first Governor Philip and his wife were "graciously" invited, the following lines form part of the prologue composed for the occasion—

"From distant climes, o'er wide-spread seas, we come,
But not with much éclat or beat of drum.

True patriots all; for be it understood,
We left our country for our country's good.

No private views disgraced our generous zeal,
What urged our travels was our country's weal,
And none can doubt, but that our emigration
Has proved most useful to the British nation."

Fourteen years' penal servitude for the theft of a few pocket-handkerchiefs!

Such a sentence to-day would be regarded as a monstrous iniquity; it passed without comment in those days.

But transportation was not an unmixed evil to Jago Smith. As early as 1793 schools were started at the penal settlement, under the impression that they would be the most likely means of effecting a reformation in the morals of youthful prisoners.

Jago, with the consent of the master to whom he was assigned on landing, attended a night school, and gained some insight into the three R's.

[image]

"'We've struck it rich, I do believe,' cried the stockman."—See p. 295.

After a somewhat varied career, the ex-pickpocket, who had served his time, became a settler on Rocky Creek; and when the Rocky Gully gold rush set in he drove a very profitable trade with the diggers. In addition to raising cattle on his selection, Smith kept an accommodation house, where board and lodging was to be had. As the place was on the public road, about five miles from the diggings, it received much patronage. Jago was very proud of his signboard. It was an incontestable proof of his accomplishments in writing and spelling.

ACKOMERDASHON FUR MAN
AN BESTE SMALL BIER
SOULED HEAR GORD SIVE TH
E KWEEN J SMITH

As the party drew up to the hitching blocks, old Jago, who was lounging in an

arm-chair in the verandah, hobbled out to the front, quietly surveying the group; to whom Harry addressed himself.

"Good-evenin', Mister Smith. How are yer gettin' on these times?"

"Not gettin' any younger, you may be sure. But who be you?"

"Don't yer remember me, Jago?" replied the stockman, walking up to the old man.

"Yes; I see who it is now. You be the boy wot worked with old Humpy, an' used ter stay here when Bob had an attack of the jim-jams."

"The same, ole chap. We're goin' to put up here for the night, and intend goin' on to-morrer to where me an' Humpy worked when 'e was took. Got room for us, I s'pose?"

"Plenty o' room, me lad. Not over rushed with travellers these times. Better take your 'orses round ter the back; ye'll find the saddle-room in the old plice, an' yer can turn the neddies inter the paddock. There's plenty o' grass fer 'em."

The boys were ready for the supper of homely fare which awaited them at sunset. After supper, Harry and the old man got into a conversation, in which the former stated that he was determined to have a try at the old claim; for, though Humpy had put it about when working it that it was a "shicer," Harry, of course, knew differently. The gold-bearing stuff, it is true, was but a thin vein, but they expected it to develop into something better farther on. Old Jago informed him that no one had touched the spot, so far as he knew. Yes, he had some picks and shovels and prospecting dishes, which he had taken as payment at one time and another from hard-ups. Harry was welcome to make a selection.

This the stockman did without any delay. He took from the curious assortment of diggers' tools two picks, two short-handled shovels, two prospecting dishes, the roller and handle of a windlass, a couple of buckets, some stout rope, a length of chain, a strong hook, a crowbar, and a pound or two of blasting powder.

These he obtained as a loan, for Smith would not hear of pay. He viewed the whole thing in the light of a joke. The idea of Harry starting to work a claim with a parcel of kids who had never seen a gold shaft in their lives, with a time limit of three or four days at the most! The stockman was but humouring the fancies and ambitions of the kids. They, no doubt, expected to locate the golden nuggets in the same fashion that they would track a missing bullock on the bush, or run down a wild cat to its lair in a hollow log. Well, they would at least develop their arm muscles and have blistered hands to show their friends. So the old settler—who at the time of the rush had listened to the confident prediction of many a greenhorn, going post-haste to pick up the nuggets that were waiting for somebody to tumble over. Not so Harry; he, at least, was no greenhorn. He would give the abandoned workings a trial. It would be a novelty for the boys,

and though they mightn't get anything to boast about, would, he was confident, get enough to give each member of the party a souvenir of the visit.

Leaving the accommodation house after an early breakfast, the band of diggers, for such we must now call them, arrived at the old workings in a couple of hours, passing *en route* two or three fossikers who were working their shows. These ancients looked with a degree of astonishment upon this cluster of youths, whose very jauntiness was suggestive of a prime lark.

Arrived at the diggings, the party had a good look round. Intense solitude reigned everywhere, and save for the heaps of rusty cooking utensils and other rubbish there was little to indicate that the place had once been a busy hive of life and energy. An old signboard, written by another hand than had done Jago Smith's, was seen nailed to a tree. Its language was simple and to the point.

ROYAL HOTEL
ALL DRINKS 6c.
N.B.—Clean Glasses

Harry took a rapid survey of the situation. The place apparently had not been disturbed since the fatal accident. The old tent poles remained as he had left them, and there was no evidence of any one having camped there for years.

Proceeding to the tunnel, which, as previously described, was driven into the perpendicular bank of a deep gully, things looked pretty much as they did on that fatal day, excepting that the earth had fretted away about the tunnel mouth, and, on venturing in a short distance, the man saw that the roof had broken down, completely blocking the mine.

"Well, Harry," exclaimed Joe, when the leader emerged from the tunnel mouth, which the boys had been eagerly watching, "is it all clear? Did you go to the end?"

Didn't git half-way. Tunnel's half blocked."

"What a pity!" chorused the lads.

"Dunno 'bout that; cause, yer see, it's proof ter me no one's bin interferin.'"

"'Twon't be a heavy job to clear it out, will it?" continued Joe.

"Carn't say; depends on the amount that's fallen. But 'tain't my notion ter use the tunnel at all. Yer see, it's this way: it may take us an hour or a day to clear the rubbage outer the tunnel. When we'd done that, we'd have ter do two other things afore we could tackle the wash-dirt. Fust an' foremost, there's plenty of foul air in the far end of the drive, like wot nearly pisened you coves in the caves. Let me tell you, it's hard work clearing the stinkin' air outer a tunnel.

You can git it outer a shaft easy enough, by tyin' a bunch o' bushes onter a rope and running 'em up an' down; but it's mighty hard work clearin' a tunnel, an' orften a long job. Then, s'posin' we got it out, we'd have ter shore up the whole blessed length; for, let me tell you, I'm not goin' ter run any risks in this 'ere job. We've had fright enough over Joe an' the shark, an' I cuddent face the Boss an' the missus if anything happened to any of you here. Now, to shore up this blessed tunnel'd take a power of timber, an' ter git it an' fix it'd take a far longer time than we've got."

"Oh, I say, Harry," cried Tom in tones of deep disappointment, voicing the feelings of the group of boy diggers, "don't tell us it's all a go, an' we're to return without havin' a try! Can't you find some other spot?"

"Harry, ye spalpeen, Oi dhramed all laast night Oi was diggin' up gowlden prr-aties, an', ochone! Oi'd just stuck th' pick into a monsther iv a prr-atie, a ton weight at the laast, an' was tryin' me best to upind her wid a laver, whin owld Jago comes bangin' at th' dure. Begor! Oi was sweatin' loike a stoker whin th' owld mahn woke me. Jist give me wan little chanst, me bhoy, an' be Saint Michael Oi'll——"

"Ye'll git yer charnse, Denny, never fret. They's more ways of killin' a pig besides chokin' 'im with a lump o' butter. It never was my plan, boys, ter use the ole tunnel. There's a better way nor that. When me an' ole Humpy drove in 'ere, we wus follerin' a lead, an' ye niver can tell 'ow far yer 'ave ter go: maybe a few feet, maybe a 'undered yards afore it opens out inter a body. So we did the right thing then. Now I propose ter put down a shaft, to tap the wash-dirt jist erbout the end of the tunnel, or, maybe, a little furder up nor that. I calkerlate we'll tap it in twenty feet or so. I know the clarss of country we'll have to go through. All this bank's wot we call 'made up.' It's a formation called pudden stone. It's formed o' river wash, an' is pretty pebbly. The pebbles is the plums. We'll go through it in a couple o' days at most, an' that'd give us two days more afore we need clear orf 'ome."

The boys were delighted beyond measure at Harry's proposal, and set about rigging up the camp near the spot which the leader had selected to put down the shaft.

While the pals were doing this, Harry and Denny set to work at sinking the shaft. So expeditious were they that by night they had sunk the hole about ten feet and had rigged up the windlass. All the boys had a turn at digging, which they enjoyed immensely because of the novelty of the work. Harry and Denny, however, did the main part, while the lads manned the windlass, and hauled up the stuff from time to time, as the buckets were filled.

At daylight next morning the party were eating breakfast preparatory to a long day's work at the shaft. They had to do a good deal of blasting, for some of

the stones were too heavy to haul up, and that consumed time. It was verging on evening when, clearing up a rather heavy blast, Harry, who had gone down to fill the bucket, cried out, "Haul up quick! we've broken through. Foul air!"

On winding their comrade up, he declared that the blast had broken the ground into the tunnel, and that the foul air was coming freely into the bottom of the shaft. "We'll let it stay as it is till termorrer, an' then we'll clear it out."

The pals went to sleep that night to dream about the El Dorado which, in their imagination, they had struck. The earliest dawn found them at the shaft's mouth. Harry tied several bushes to the end of the rope, and this was rapidly lowered and raised for about a couple of hours, the condition below being tested from time to time by a lighted candle placed in a bucket and lowered to the bottom. At last it remained alight, though it burned very feebly. About half an hour after this, the candle, on being sent below again, burned brightly.

"It's all right, now, boys! We've got rid of the gas, that's a blessing. Lower away!" In a few seconds Harry was filling the buckets with the broken rock and earth. In a short time it was all cleared up, and the leader had started to drive along the line of the vein. He had not cut in more than a couple of feet when he threw down the pick and shouted up the shaft, "Hurroar, boys! I've struck a patch. Be gosh, it looks like a pocket!"

The excitement above at this good news may be better imagined than described. The vein of wash-dirt suddenly expanded into a cube of about sixty buckets of auriferous earth. It was a genuine though small pocket. Whether rich or poor could be determined only by washing.

Harry filled a bucket with the dirt, which was speedily hauled up. The next minute he was pulled to the surface, and, spreading the stuff on the ground, examined it. To the great delight of the pals, he picked out several large specks and a small nugget, scaling about half an ounce.

"It's all right, mates!" cried the stockman, now almost as excited as the boys. "We've struck it rich, I do believe. Sandy, me boy, git your nag an' a packhorse, an' streak fur Jago's as fast as yer can git, an' borry a cradle. It'd take too long ter pan this stuff—must have a cradle. But, look 'ere, don't give the show away. Tell 'im I got a few specks from a bit o' stuff I came acrost, an' that I'm jist goin' ter give it a try. He'll most likely call me a big fool, an' don't yer conterdict 'im."

A cradle, it may be said, is a machine on rockers for washing the auriferous earth. The machine is fed with the wash-dirt, a stream of water being poured on while it is rocked like a child's cradle. The heavy sand and gravel, together with the precious metal, sink to the bottom and are retained by the "ridges," whilst the earth and all light matter pass away with the water. It is finally treated in a dish so skilfully that only the pure metal is left.

While Sandy is speeding off to Jago's the rest are busy picking the pocket

and carrying it down to a flat by the side of the tiny stream which ran along the gully bottom. The work was hard, for the wash-dirt was heavy, and the buckets big; but they made fun of the hardships of bruised fingers and strained muscles, as they hauled the precious earth from the shaft mouth, and then humped it to the stream.

They had not quite finished their work ere Sandy reappeared upon the scene with the cradle. Very little grass had grown during the performance of his task.

Scarcely allowing themselves time to bolt down their midday meal, the party were grouped around the cradle, which Harry had fixed within a yard of the stream. The stockman soon made his dispositions of the forces. Joe and Tom are to lift the water and pour it on as required, while he and Sandy work the cradle. Denny is to feed the machine with the dirt.

So the work of "washing up" started. Every now and then Harry stopped the work and "cleaned up" the cradle—that is, took out the heavy golden sand which was caught in the cross-bars of the machine and emptied it in a bag, to be "panned" later. From time to time the party were gladdened by the sight of large specks, and now and then a tiny nugget of some grains' weight. The gold, for the most part, however, was fine. The work went on continuously till night closed in upon them. Though dreadfully tired, they reluctantly abandoned their work for the day, and after supper threw themselves upon their primitive beds and slept the sleep of the just.

"Be up betimes in the morning, boys," was Harry's last word.

The party had to thank a pair of laughing jackasses[#] for their early waking. Perched on the limb of a tree close to the tent, they began their morning orisons at the first paling of the stars, making such a cachinnation as to cause Tom to fly out from his bunk, crying in startled tones, "Dressin', dad; goin' for the cows this minute." While Denny was disturbed sufficiently to turn over on his side, saying in sleepy tones, "Jist repa-ate they swa-ate wurrds agin, Bridget me darlin'! an' sa-ay ye—— Howly Moses, 'tis th' owld Johnny-axes at their thricks!"

[#] Giant kingfisher.

In a few minutes the fire is burning briskly, and as soon as breakfast is demolished the lucky diggers make their way to the gully to start operations. The work was a repetition of yesterday's, and, according to Harry's calculation, they would be finished by noon if they stuck well to the job; bullock teams couldn't have drawn them from it.

After working for about an hour, Denny, who was shovelling the dirt, picked up a lump of rock, saying at the same time, "Oi'll pitch this awa-ay, anny-ways. It feels moighty heavy, though, for a sthone: 'tis as heavy as lead. Musha, but the sthones ar-re heavy hereabouts!"

"Hey, you fool! don't throw that away. Let's see it," cried Harry, seizing the piece of rock, which was about the size of the lad's head. "Why, great jumpin' Jehosaphat! it's a bloomin' nugget. You precious duffer! if you'd thrown that away I'd 'a' pitched you down the shaft."

The pals dropped their buckets and crowded round the leader as he held the lump with both hands.

"See 'ere, this white rock's quartz, an' all these yaller veins is gold. It isn't wot you'd call a pure nugget, but by the weight of it I guess there's a power of the yaller stuff inside. 'Ere, Tom, streak up ter the tent fur a tommy an' we'll soon see."

Furnished with the tomahawk, the stockman laid the quartz nugget on a flat stone that cropped out of the ground near by, and dealt vigorous blows upon it with the head of the weapon. In this way he crushed the quartz crystal sufficiently for them to see that the gold formed a mass in the centre.

"That's all we'll do at present; we'll crush it out properly in a mortar when we get home. Guess there's full twenty ounces o' gold in 'er."

There were no more such finds in the dirt, but the last few lots yielded a good deal of coarse gold, one piece weighing about four ounces.

By nightfall they had washed out the bagged ore. There it lay on a cloth before the fire, a little heap of pure gold, and beside it the quartz nugget, so to call it.

"Call me a frog-eater if there ain't full seventy ounces o' gold in that there lot—close on three 'undered pounds' worth!"

CHAPTER XXXIII
BULLION AND BUSHRANGER

"And if you doubt the tale I tell,
Steer through the South Pacific swell,
Go where the branching coral hives
Unending strife of endless lives,

Go where the rivers roll down through the sand
Under skies that are blue in a golden land."
KIPLING.

"Pull up a moment, chaps. I want ter say a word afore we strike Jago Smith's—we'll sight it over the next ridge. No blabbin' erbout the gold. The ole cove's sure ter arsk erbout our luck. You keep mum, an' leave me ter answer 'im. He's er good ernuff sort in hes way, is ole Jago, an' me an' 'im always got on well, as 'e sort er took a fancy ter me. All the same, 'im an' Ben Bolt is, or was great friends. That's why I steered clear o' the shootin the night we stayed there. 'E might 'a' cut up rusty, like. Many's the time 'e's planted the 'ranger when the p'lice 'as been 'ot on 'is trail. 'Twuddent s'prise me a bit if the kid that wus Ben's mate wus 'idin' somewheres erbout Jago's. 'E's several good plants. At any rate, there must be no blow. Bes' be on the safe side."

In a few minutes the party sighted the accommodation house at a distance of a quarter of a mile or so. They could see the old man in the front, talking to a man who held a horse by the bridle. Even as the party sighted the pair they were themselves seen. After a few hasty words with Jago the horseman threw his bridle over the steed's neck, vaulted to the saddle, and rode away briskly.

"By George, that 'ere cove's ridin' a good nag. See the style o' 'im! 'E's a beauty, 'e is; all muscle an' spirit. If ole Ben wusn't a goner, I'd say 'twas 'im on Samson; blamed if I wuddent."

The mounted band have approached the house by this time. The owner stood awaiting them by the hitching posts. Saluting them as they rode up, he jeered good-humouredly—

"I 'opes yer left a few specks fur them fossikers, gintilmin? 'Twud be too bad to scoop the pool an' leave the old uns nothin' but mullock heaps. At any rate, ye've brought back the tools—cradle an' all. Come now, 'ow did the stuff pan out?"

"I'll tell yer wot we did git, ole man, sore bones an' blistered 'ands. Blame me, but yer soon gits outer the diggin' business. Tried that bit o' stuff I come acrost, wot the kid tole yer erbout. Waal, speakin' in confidence, we didn't git ernuff ter hire a gold escort ter fetch it erlong. We did git a bit—ernuff ter make these young coves a breast-pin apiece. But let me tell yer, one of these days I'm comin' back ter have a good prospect. Keep it close, Smith; I don't want any of these blessed gully-rakers ter smell anythin'."

"Dark it is, young feller. Yer can trust me fer not givin' the show away. Comin' in?"

"No, we're makin' fer 'ome. Just tote the tools ter where youse got 'em,

boys, an' then we'll be orf."

The lads speedily discharged, and were in the saddle again. The party was moving off when Harry said to Jago—

"Forgot ter arsk yer whether yer 'eered that Ben Bolt wus shot by Hennessey t'other day."

"Yes, I 'eered it," replied Smith dryly.

"Kid not collared yet?"

"You're more likely ter 'eer about 'im than me: so-long."

"Ole Jago's a deep un," soliloquised Harry as they rode along. "I forgot ter arsk 'im erbout the man we saw ridin' away as we came up," he remarked a few minutes later to Joe, who was riding at his side. "If that 'ere 'orse 'e wus ridin' warn't Samson, I'm a greenhorn."

"It might have been the young fellow that got away when Ben was shot. It struck me Jago was bluffin' you, Harry."

"My word, Harry," said Tom, riding up on the other side, "you bluffed ole Jago over the gold."

"Ain't so sure o' that," replied the stockman.

"No one could have done it better," broke in Joe. "You circumnavigated the truth."

"Don't know wot yer mean, my boy: unless it's somethin' in the circus line."

"Not exactly that," replied Joe laughingly; "but it reminds me of an epitaph I heard about, that was stuck on a fellow's tombstone—

HE TRIED HARD NOT TO BE A LIAR."

"Wot I said about tacklin' that ground's true ernuff, anyways," replied the stockman, with a smile. "But erbout this gold: we'll go shares, o' course. We'll divide it up inter five equal lots when we get to Bullaroi."

"No; that's not fair, Harry," said Sandy. "We must have a fair division."

"Well, wot yer call a fair division, if that's not one?" said the man shortly.

"If it was left to me to decide, I would give you half, to start with. It was your show. You did most of the work. We were more like wages men; so at the very least you should get half. Then I'd divide the other half among the rest of us in equal shares."

"Sandy's right," broke in Joe. "As far as I'm concerned, Harry'll have the lot. I'd like him to take my whack, anyway, because——"

"No, yer don't, Joe. I know wot yer goin' ter say. Think I'm mean ernuff ter take pay fer shootin' a jolly shark?"

"Oh—I—didn't—mean—it—just——"

"Joe meant it as a mark of gratitude, Harry. I think my way's best. Whatcher say?"

"Agreed!" chorus the four.

"Joe, me mahn," said Denny a little while later, as he and Blain were riding together, "cud ye tell me phwat me quarter ov a half ov th' gowld'll come to?"

"Lemme see, seventy ounces; half o' that, thirty-five; quarter of thirty-five is eight an' three-quarter ounces: yes, your share is eight an' three-quarters, Denny."

"Give it in pounds, plaase, Joe."

"Pounds! Oh, I say, you've got me there. Well, let's see. What was it Harry said they'd give us per ounce at the bank?"

"Three sivinteen an' a tanner, Joe, me bhoy. Oi tuk note ov that."

"Yes, that was the price, I 'member. Eight and three-quarter times three seventeen six—er—lemme see, that'd be—eight threes twenty-four, twen—bother it, I mean eight times seventeen an' six, that's a hundred an' ninety—no, *that's* not it. Let me put it down in me mind—one, seven, six; that's right! Well, multiply it by eight, an' leave the quarters out for a bit. That's—why, it's three hundred an'—no, it can't be that much, surely? Bust it, if I only had a pencil an' a bit o' paper I'd soon tot it up. Try again. Eight into seventeen and six is—— Blest if it isn't an interest sum, after all, Denny; an' they always sew me up."

"It's th' troth, Joe; it's th' most interastin' sum Oi iver heerd tell iv. Thry it agin, Marsther Joe; doan't let a little sum loike that ba-ate ye. 'Twas two hondered pounds ye said larrst. Make her go a little higher if yes can."

"What! two hundred pounds! Murder! 'tis shillin's I was reckoning."

"O-o-h!" exclaimed Denny, with a profound sigh. "Awaay goes me bright dra-ames! Sure, thin, 'twas buyin' th' owld family carr-sthle Oi was thinking ov, an makin' melyinaares o' me dear payrunts; maybe the Quaan wud be makin' me farther Lord Kineavy!"

"Well, you are a cure, Denny. You'll have me addressin' you as the Honourable Dennis next. Oh, I say, didn't Harry say he wouldn't be surprised if the gold fetched four pounds an ounce, it was so rich? Well, let's reckon it at four quid. Eight fours are thirty-two—that's thirty-two pounds. The three-quarters of four pounds is three. Thirty-two and three are thirty-five; thirty-five pounds. There you are, ole boss, thirty-five."

"Thirty-foive pounds! Begorrah! it's a bloomin' capertillist Oi am! Whoi, glory be! it'll do betther thin buyin' a rotten owld sthone carr-sthle made ov brick an' thatch; it'll pay for bringin' out me payrunts in th' emigrr-ashon ship. Be Saints Pathrick an' Michael, 'tis a happy bhoy Oi am at this moment! Phwat wid me savin's, an' Norah's, an' this haape ov gowld, Oi'll buy thim th' best cabin

on th' boat, and so Oi will!"

In due time the party arrived at the junction of the roads, and crossed the ridge to the cave entrance. After placing their horses in the patch of scrub near the road, they scrambled up to the opening. Lighting the candle, Sandy led the way to the forage chamber, where the fish was stored.

"You don't feel so creepy, Denny, as when you were here last," said Tom to the Irish "boy, as they followed the others into the chamber.

"It's thrue for ye, Tom. Owld Ben's not thrubblin' me to-da-ay. 'Tis only thinkin' ov me dear farther an' mauther comin' out on th' sa-ay Oi am. As for th' 'ranger, he's as dead an' dhry by this toime as the smoked fish yonder."

"Is he?" cried a loud voice from the rear.

"Howly Moses! 'tis th' 'ranger's ghost," cried the Irish boy, as a bull's-eye flashed in his face, dazzling his eyes and confusing his mind. Terror-possessed by this ghostly manifestation—for he saw naught but a bright light, preceded by an awful voice—the boy bolted. He rushed towards the chamber exit, which he barely reached ere the sharp crack of a revolver sounded, what time the panic-stricken youth staggered forward, falling with a dull thud upon the stone floor.

It need hardly be said that the other members of the group were startled out of speech and action. Not ten seconds elapsed between the cry of the man or ghost and the tragedy of the revolver shot and the fallen boy.

The moment the boy fell the others ran towards him, but before they had taken three steps the light flashed on them and a revolver covered them. Behind the lantern came a voice that more than the lantern, or even pistol, cowed them: "*Stop! Hands up!*"

[Illustration: Behind the lantern came a voice that more than the lantern, or even pistol, cowed them: "*Stop! Hands up!*" (missing from book)]

For the second time the hands of the boys went up at command. One thing was made quite clear, at any rate: this was no ghostly visitant. Ghosts didn't carry revolvers, nor was there long any mystery about this personage.

"That young cove reckoned I was dead and dry as your smoked schnapper, did he? The young fool'll smoke and dry fast enough in the place I've sent him to. You infernal asses to come here! But you'll never live to tell any one; make up your minds to that."

It was in truth the bushranger himself. Of that there could be no doubt. The news of his death was either a make-up or a gross exaggeration. Here he stood, in

the flesh, in one of his most dangerous moods. A black fit was on him. Under its influence he was capable of almost any atrocity. The lads were horror-stricken. There, before them, lay the body of their comrade, the gay, witty, affectionate Denny, who but a few moments ago was in the seventh heaven of delight at the thought of bringing out his parents with the proceeds of his share of the gold; and now—it was too awful!

"Look 'ere, Ben Bolt!" exclaimed Harry, after a few seconds' silence, "you've shot an innercent boy in cold blood. You've grossly belied your reputation that you never laid a hand on woman or child. We came here with no thought of spyin' upon yer, for we believed yer to be dead. In five minits we wud 'ave gone away with our fish, none the wiser for your presence. You've not the slightest justerfication fer takin' that life, an' if yer shoots me the next minit fer it, I tell yer to yer face ye're a blaggard an' coward, an' the pity is that the news of yer bein' shot wasn't true."

Why Harry was not shot off-hand, it were hard to say. The bushranger was convulsed with rage: thrice he levelled his revolver at the brave man, and as often lowered it. At last, with a voice hoarse with passion, he said, "I'll send you along the road I've driven your mate, curse you! You think you're very game, but I'll take all that out of you before I've done with you. You'll be longing for your end hours before it comes....

"Here, boy," continued he, pointing to Tom. "Take that green-hide and tie your mates as I tell you. Look sharp, or I'll lay you alongside your mate yonder."

Thus dragooned, Tom securely tied his mates' hands behind their backs. As soon as this was accomplished, the outlaw, sticking his revolver in his belt, served Tom in the same way, and in addition trussed each victim. Having set them in a row like a group, of mummies, he addressed them—

"You'll lie here for the present. I'll deal with you later. I've got a little job to do first. That fool Hennessey's coming out this way with a couple of troopers to trap me. 'Twasn't enough that he winged my mate, he's sworn to have me inside of the week. And I swear that I'll have him inside of six hours. I'm going out now to have a look round. If you coves try any of your tricks, I'll make hell for you. I shan't be far off, you may bet."

So saying, the outlaw went out into the chamber where his horse was stabled, and led him along the passage to the cave entrance.

"I say, Harry, it was Ben Bolt that we saw at ole Jago's this mornin'."

"True. I cud 'ave taken me oath a'most that the 'orse wus Samson, but I didn't git a fair view of the bloke's face. Yes, 'twor Ben that we saw. He must 'a' got 'is information erbout Hennessey from the ole man. It's wunnerful 'ow they does git the news. I 'ope 'e don't git er charnse ter draw er bead on Hennessey. He'll 'ave ter be mighty smart ter do it. But, dear! dear! on'y ter think of poor

Denny lyin' over there—dead! I wish ter 'evven 'e'd 'a' shot me instead. Wot'll your father an' mother say, Sandy? Poor Norah, too! It'll be the killin' of 'er."

"Whisht, boys, spaake low: Oi'm not kilt ontoirely; only knocked spaachless. Oi'm betther nor tin dead Chinymen yit."

It was the sweetest sound that ever ravished the ears of the boys. Here was the blissful fact—Denny was not dead; was very much alive. If the lads did not immediately cry out with joy it was because their joy was too deep for utterance.

"Don't spaake or sthir awhoile till Oi see if th' coast's clear."

Rising quietly to his feet, the Irish boy stole along the corridor that led to the mouth of the cave. After a hasty but keen survey of the immediate neighbourhood, he returned to his companions, knife in hand, and in a few minutes had freed them.

"And are you not wounded, Denny? We never dreamed but that the villain had shot you dead. You lay just like a corpse. He was under that impression too, or he'd never have left you."

"Yez see 'twas this way: Oi was fair flabbergasted whin th' blazin' light dazzled me oiyes. Oi made shure 'twas th' 'ranger's ghost. Oi wud 'a' stood, but me ligs wuddn't. They sthreaked off loike a paddy-melon goes for a hole in th' fince—carryin' me body wid thim. Th' firsht thing Oi felt was a rock sthrikin' me fut, an' thin, begorra, somethin' whistled past me ear as Oi tumbled forrard, hittin' th' flure a nasty crack wid me head. Th' nixt thing Oi heard was owld Harry tongue-bangin' th' rapscallion ov a murtherer fur killin' me. 'Be jabers!' ses Oi to meself, 'he's kilt me ontoirely wid a shot from hes pisthol, if phwat me bowld frind ses be th' thruth. Go it, me brave bhoy! Tare an' ouns, but ye're givin' him th' coward's blow in foine style!'

"Thin Oi sees him rope yez up loike dhrapery parr-sels, an', ses Oi, 'Jist wait till yez is gone, me hairr-y breasted sna-ake!' an' wid that Oi comes to me ray-son an' knows that Oi was not dead at all, at all. Oi was jist goin' to git up an' give him a bit iv me tongue, whin the thought comes—'Lie still, ye gossoon, till he goes an' ye can liberaate yer mates!' So now we'll be even wid th' omadhaun."

"The quicker we're outer this the better!" exclaimed Harry, as soon as he was released. "There's no knowin' when the 'ranger'll return; if 'e finds us loose, 'e'll shoot us to a cert. What a pity we left our guns with the 'orses! 'Ope 'e won't find 'em. It'll be risky goin' out, as we don't know where the feller is. 'E may be close by watchin' the 'ole. The bes' thing'll be for us ter make a dash ter the scrub as soon as we're outer the cave."

"There's a much safer way than that," said Sandy. "We'll go out the way we came in when we first discovered this place. Lucky we brought a candle with us. Come along; every moment is precious."

So saying, Sandy strode in advance, the others following closely at his heels.

The party soon hit upon the passage leading to the cave opening on the other side of the ridge. In twenty minutes or so they were in the open.

Their first act was to plunge into the thick bush. This shielded them from ordinary observation. After a short confab, they concluded that the wisest thing to do was to creep along in the thickest part, in the direction of the horses. They had hardly started when the sharp crack of a rifle broke upon their ears. Stopping short, they listened eagerly; with beating hearts, it must be confessed. Again and again, shots were fired; at last they heard the pounding of hoofs, rapidly nearing them.

"'Ssh—don't move—they're on the hard road," said Harry to the nervously excited youths.

The road passed the caves about two hundred yards from where the party lay. Presently, with increasing clatter, Ben Bolt rode furiously along, and after a minute's interval, Sergeant Hennessey, accompanied by two troopers, the Sergeant leading by about fifty yards. Just as he was in the act of passing, the officer took a snap-shot at the 'ranger. In a few minutes all sight and even sound of pursued and pursuers had gone.

"No fear of Ben Bolt trubblin' us now fer a spell. 'Ope Hennessey 'll nab 'im sure this time. Let's moosey erlong, lads."

It didn't take the party long to pick up the steeds and load up the packhorses with the fish. The sun had barely set ere they were well on the last stage of the return journey.

The M'Intyres are just concluding the evening meal. The conversation chiefly centres around the campers. Mrs. M'Intyre had given many a look along the track during the afternoon, in the hope of sighting the lads. The understanding when they left was that they were to return at the end of the second week. It was now Saturday evening.

"I won't give them up till ten o'clock. I expect they have made a late start. Yes, Maggie, I own that I am a bit fidgety now that I've heard that Ben Bolt has been seen in the vicinity of the caves."

"Weel, ye can juist ease yure mind on that pint, my dear, for the Sairgeant and a pairty o' troopers are patrolling in that direection, so that there's no' the sma'est pairtical o' reesk."

"It was lucky for them, mummie, that they had started for their trip before the revised version of the engagement between the police and the bushrangers was published, for had you known of the mistake you would never have let the boys go. What are they going to do with the youth that Hennessey wounded? They say Ben Bolt's mad over it, and swears to have Hennessey's life."

"The misguided lad wull be pit on his trial as sune as the wound on his thigh permeets."

"Do you think they'll hang him, father?"

"Nae, nae, they'll no' hang the chiel; he has never ta'en life, nor is he a hardened ruffian. He stairted this wild life 'for the fun o' it,' like mony another silly laddie. The Sairgeant tells me that Jock Smith, for that's his name, is gled to be captured. His eyes hae been opened to the folly and sin that are compreehended in sic a life. Insteed o' fun, he has encountered nought but hairdship and meesery. The misguided laddie wull hae plenty o' time for repentance."

The evening calm is suddenly and noisily disturbed. The station dogs set up a great babble of barking, and Jessie, who had gone out to the front verandah, comes running in helter skelter and screaming—

"Father, mother, hear the dogs! It's the boys, I bet tuppence. Hurrah! Hurrah!——"

"Jessie, Jessie! you are certainly developing very——"

Mrs. Mac is prosing without an audience, for the girls are flying along the track to the slip-rails, accompanied by the barking dogs.

It was verging on midnight when the Bullaroi household broke up. The adventures were told with a degree of modesty to an intensely interested and at times breathless company. The spoils of the sea and the spoils of the mine were displayed to the admiration of all. Mrs. M'Intyre gave high praise to the pals for their success as fish-curers; while the gold spoke for itself, needing no expert opinion.

Mr. M'Intyre had the last word.

"Ye've advanced a big step towards yure manhood, laddies, and I'm prood o' ye the nicht. Yure conduc' under they perils by sea and land is more precious by far that yon gleeterin' gowd. A guid name is raither to be chosen than great riches. Thank the Lord for a' His mercies! Guid-nicht, bairns."

"GOOD-NIGHT ALL."

Printed by MORRISON & GIBB LIMITED, *Edinburgh*

A Word from Project Gutenberg

We will update this book if we find any errors.

This book can be found under: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/44369

The Full Project Gutenberg License

Section 1. General Terms of Use & Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

cess to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" appears, or with which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at https://www.gutenberg.org . If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this ebook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Guten-

berg™ web site (https://www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and The Project Gutenberg Trademark LLC, the owner of the

Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3. below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES – Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND – If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS,' WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PUR-

POSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY – You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need, is critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation web page at https://www.pglaf.org .

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project

Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is in Fairbanks, Alaska, with the mailing address: PO Box 750175, Fairbanks, AK 99775, but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887, email business@pglaf.org. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

For additional contact information:

Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit https://www.gutenberg.org/donate

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation meth-

ods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: https://www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For thirty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:

https://www.gutenberg.org

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.