

**ROLF
BOLDREWOOD**

THE GHOST
CAMP

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The Ghost Camp / or the Avengers:*

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CHAPTER I

A wild and desolate land; dreary, even savage, to the unaccustomed eye. Forest-clothed hills towering above the faint, narrow track leading eastward, along which a man had been leading a tired horse; he was now resting against a granite boulder. A dark, mist-enshrouded day, during which the continuous driving showers had soaked through an overcoat, now become so heavy that he carried it across his arm. A fairly heavy valise, above a pair of blankets, was strapped in front of his saddle.

He was prepared for bush travelling – although his term of “colonial experience,” judging from his ruddy cheek and general get-up, had been limited. A rift in the over-hanging cloud-wrack, through which the low sunrays broke with a sudden gleam, showed a darksome mountain range to the south, with summit and sides, snow-clad and dazzling white.

The wayfarer stood up and stared at the apparition: “a good omen,” thought he, “perhaps a true landmark. The fellows at the

mail-change told me to steer in a general way for the highest snow peak, which they called 'the Bogong,' or some such name. Though this track seems better marked, these mountain roads, as they call them – goat paths would be the better name – for there is not a wheel mark to be seen – one needs the foot of a chamois and the eye of our friend up there." Here he looked upward, where one of the great birds of prey, half hawk, half eagle, as the pioneers decided, floated with moveless wing above crag and hollow. Then rising with an effort, and taking the bridle rein, he began to lead the weary horse up the rocky ascent. "Poor old Gilpin!" he soliloquised, "you are more knocked up than I am – and yet you have the look of a clever cob – such as we should have fancied in England for a roadster, or a covert hack. But roads *are* roads there, while in this benighted land, people either don't know how to make them, or seem to do their cross-country work without them. I wonder if I shall fall in with bed and board to-night. The last was rough, but sufficing – a good fire too, now I think of it, and precious cold it was. Well, come along, John! I must bustle you a bit when we get to the top of this everlasting hill – truly biblical in that respect. What a lonesome place it is, now that the sun has gone under again! I suppose there's no one within fifty miles – Hulloo!"

This exclamation was called forth by the appearance of a horseman at no great distance – along the line of track. Man and horse were motionless, though so near that he wondered he had not observed them before. The rider's face, which was towards

him, bore, as far as he could judge, an expression of keenest attention.

“Wonder if he is a bushranger?” thought the traveller; “ought to have brought one of my revolvers; but everybody told me that there were none ‘out’ now; that I was as safe as if I was in England – safer, in fact, than ‘south the water’ in the little village. However, I shall soon know.”

Before he had time to decide seriously, the horseman came towards him. He saw a slight, dark, wiry individual, something above the middle height, sunburned, and almost blackened as to such portions of his neck and face as could be perceived for an abundant beard and moustache. The horse, blood-looking, and in hard condition, presented a striking contrast to his own leg-weary, disconsolate animal. The traveller thought him capable of fast and far performances. His sure and easy gait, as he stepped freely along the rocky path, stamped him as “mountain-bred,” or, if not “to the manner born,” having lived long enough amid these tremendous glens and rocky fastnesses, to negotiate their ladder-like declivities with ease and safety.

“Good evening!” said the stranger, civilly enough. “Going to ‘Haunted Creek?’ – a bit off the road, ar’n’t you?”

“I *was* doubtful about the track, but I thought it might lead there. I was told that it was only eight miles.”

“It’s a good fourteen, and you won’t get there to-night. Not with that horse, anyhow. But look here! I’m going to my place, a few miles off, with these cattle – if you like to give me a hand,

I can put you up for the night, and show you the way in the morning.”

“Thanks very much, really I feel much obliged to you. I was afraid I should have had to camp out, and it looks like a bad night.”

“All right,” said the bushman, for such he evidently was; “these crawlin’ cattle are brutes to straggle, and I’m lost without my dog. I’ll bring ’em up, and if you’ll keep the tail going, we’ll get along easy enough.”

“But where are they?” inquired the tourist, looking around, as if he expected to see them rise out of the earth.

“Close by,” answered the stranger, laconically, at the same time riding down the slope of the mountain with loose rein, and careless seat, as if the jumble of rocks, tree-roots, and rolling stones, was the most level high road in the world. Looking after the new acquaintance he descried a small lot of cattle perched on a rocky pinnacle, partly covered by a patch of scrub. The grass around them was high and green – but, with one exception, that of a cow munching a tussac in an undecided way, they did not appear to care about the green herbage, or tall kangaroo grass which grew around them. Had he known anything about the habits of cattle, he would have seen by their appearance that these fat beasts (for such they were) had come far and fast; were like his horse, thoroughly exhausted, and as such, indifferent to the attractions of wayside pasture.

However, with the aid of a hunting crop, which he flourished

behind them, with threatening action, the bushman soon managed to get them on to the track, and with the aid of his newly-made comrade induced them to move with a decent show of alacrity. That some were footsore, and two painfully lame, was apparent to the new assistant, also that they were well-bred animals, heavy weights, and in that state and condition which is provincially alluded to as “rolling fat.”

“Nice meat, ar’n’t they?” said the bushman; “come a good way too. Beastly rough track; I was half a mind to bring them by Wagga – but this is the shortest way – straight over the ranges. I’m butchering just now, with gold-mining for a change, but that’s mostly winter work.”

“Where do you buy your cattle?” asked the Englishman – not that he cared as to that part of the occupation, but the gold-mining seemed to him a romantic, independent way of earning a living. He was even now turning over in his mind the idea of a few months camping among these Alpine regions, with, of course, the off-chance of coming upon an untouched gold mine.

“Oh! a few here and there, in all sorts of places.” Here the stranger shot a searching glance, tinged with suspicion, towards the questioner. “I buy the chance of stray cattle now and then, and pick ’em up as I come across ’em. We’d as well jog along here, it’s better going.”

The track had become more marked. There were no wheel marks, the absence of which had surprised the traveller, since the beginning of his day’s march, but tracks of cattle and unshod

horses were numerous; while the ground being less rocky, indeed commencing to be marshy, no difficulty was found in driving the cattle briskly along it. His horse too, having “company,” had become less dilatory and despondent.

“We’re not far off, now,” said his companion, “and it’s just as well. We’ll have rain to-night – may be snow. So a roof and a fire won’t be too bad.”

To this statement the tourist cheerfully assented, his spirits rising somewhat, when another mile being passed, they turned to the north at a sharp angle to the road, and following a devious track, found themselves at the slip-rails of a small but well-fenced paddock, into which the cattle were turned, and permitted to stray at will. Fastening the slip rails with scrupulous care, and following the line of fence for a hundred yards, they came to a hut built of slabs, and neatly roofed with sheets of the stringy bark tree (*Eucalyptus obliqua*) where his guide unsaddled, and motioned to the guest to do likewise. As also to put the saddle against the wall of the hut, with the stuffing outward. “That’ll dry ’em a bit,” he said; “mine’s wet enough anyhow. Just bring your horse after me.”

Passing through a hand gate, he released his horse, first, however, putting on a pair of hobbles; “the feed’s good,” he said, “but this moke’s just out of the bush, and rather flash – he might jump the fence in the night, so it’s best to make sure. Yours won’t care about anything but filling his belly, not to-night anyhow, so he can go loose. Now we’ll see about a fire, and boil the billy for

tea. Come along in."

Entering the hut, which though small, was neat and clean; it was seen to contain two rooms, the inner one apparently used as a bedroom, there being two bed-places, on each of which was a rude mattress covered with a blanket. A store of brushwood and dry billets had been placed in a corner, from which a fire was soon blazing in the rude stone chimney, while a camp kettle (provincially a "billy") was on the way to boil without loss of time.

A good-sized piece of corned beef, part of a round, with half a "damper" loaf being extracted from a cupboard or locker, was placed on the rude slab table; after which pannikins and tin plates, with knives and forks, provided from the same receptacle, were brought forth, completing the preparations for a meal that the guest believed he was likely to relish.

"Oh! I nearly forgot," said the traveller, as his entertainer, dropping a handful of tea into the "billy," now at the boil, and stirring it with a twig, put on the lid. "I brought a flask, it's very fair whisky, and a tot won't hurt either of us, after a long day and a wet one." Going to his coat, he brought out a flask, and nearly filling the tin cup which was closed over the upper part, offered it to his host. He, rather to the surprise of the Englishman, hesitated and motioned as if to refuse, but on second thoughts smiled in a mysterious way, and taking the tin cup, nodded, and saying "Well, here's fortune!" tossed it off. Blount took one of the pannikins, and pouring out a moderate allowance, filled it up

with the clear spring water, and drank it by instalments.

“I must say I feel better after that,” he observed, “and if a dram needs an excuse, a long, cold ride, stiff legs, and a wetting ought to be sufficient.”

“They don’t look about for excuses up here,” said his new acquaintance, “and some takes a deal more than is good for them. I don’t hold with that, but a nip or two’s neither here nor there, particular after a long day. Help yourself to the meat and damper, you see your supper.”

The traveller needed no second invitation; he did not, like the clerk of Copmanhurst, plunge his fingers into the venison pasty, there being neither venison nor pasty, but after cutting off several slices of the excellent round of beef which had apparently sustained previous assaults, he made good time, with the aid of a well-baked “damper,” and an occasional reference to a pannikin of hot tea, so that as their appetites declined, more leisure was afforded for conversation.

“And now,” he said, after filling up a second pannikin of tea, and lighting his pipe, “I’m sure I’m very much obliged to you, as I hear the rain coming down, and the wind rising. May I ask whose hospitality I’m enjoying? I’m Valentine Blount of Langley in Herefordshire. Not long out, as I dare say you have noticed. Just travelling about to have a look at the country.”

“My name’s John Carter,” said the bushman, with apparent frankness, as he confronted Blount’s steady eye, “but I’m better known from here to Omeo, as ‘Little River Jack’; there’s lots of

people knows me by that name, that don't know me by any other."

"And what do you do when you get gold – take it to Melbourne to sell?"

"There's no call to do that. Melbourne's a good way off, and it takes time to get there. But there's always gold buyers about townships, that are on for a little business. They give a trifle under market price, but they pay cash, and it suits us mountain chaps to deal that way. Sometimes I'm a buyer myself, along with the cattle-dealing. Look here!" As he spoke, he detached a leather pouch from his belt, looking like one that stockriders wear for carrying pipe and tobacco, which he threw on the table. The grog had inclined to confidences and relaxed his attitude of caution. Blount lifted it, rather surprised at its weight. "This is gold, isn't it?"

"Yes! a good sample too. Worth four pound an ounce. Like to look at it?"

"Very much. I don't know that I've ever seen gold in the raw state before."

"Well, here it is – the real thing, and no mistake. Right if a chap could only get enough of it." Here he opened the mouth of the pouch, which seemed three parts full, and pouring some of it on a tin plate, awaited Blount's remarks.

As the precious metal, partly in dust, partly in larger fragments, rattled on the plate, Blount looked on with deep interest, and then, on being invited so to do, handled it with the air of a man to whom a new and astonishing object is presented

for the first time.

“So,” he said musingly, “here is one of the great lures which have moved the world since the dawn of history. Love, war, and ambition, have been subservient to it. Priests and philosophers, kings and queens, the court beauty and the Prime Minister, have vainly struggled against its influence. But – ” he broke off with a laugh, as he noted his companion’s look of wonder, “here am I, another example of its fascination, moralising in a mountain hut and mystifying my worthy entertainer.”

“And now, my friend!” he inquired, relapsing into the manner of everyday life, “what may be the market value of this heavy little parcel?”

“Well – I put it at fifty ounces, or thereabouts,” said Mr. “Little River Jack,” carefully pouring back the contents of the pouch, to the last grain; “at, say four pound an ounce, it’s worth a couple of hundred notes, though *we* sha’n’t get that price for it. But at Melbourne mint, it’s worth every shilling, maybe a trifle more.” Before closing the pouch, he took out a small nugget of, perhaps, half an ounce in weight, and saying, “You’re welcome to this. It’ll make a decent scarf pin,” handed it to Mr. Blount.

But that gentleman declined it, saying, “Thanks, very much, but I’d rather not.” Then, seeing that the owner seemed hurt, even resentful, qualified the refusal by saying, “But if you would do me a service, which I should value far more, you might introduce me to some party of miners, with whom I could work for a month or two, and learn, perhaps, how to get a few ounces by

my own exertions. I think I should like the work. It must be very interesting.”

“It’s that interesting,” said the bushman, all signs of annoyance clearing from his countenance, “that once a man takes to it he never quits it till he makes a fortune or dies so poor that the Government has to bury him. I’ve known many a man that used a cheque book as big as a school slate, and could draw for a hundred thousand or more, drop it all in a few years, and be found dead in a worse ‘humpy’ than this, where he’d been living alone for years.”

“Strange to have been rich by his own handiwork, and not to be able to keep something for his old age,” said Blount; “how is it to be accounted for?”

“By luck, d – d hard luck!” said John Carter, whom the subject seemed to have excited. “Every miner’s a born gambler; if he don’t do it with cards, he puts his earnings, his time, his life blood, as one might say, on the chance of a claim turning out well. It’s good luck, and not hard work, that gives him a ‘golden hole,’ where he can’t help digging up gold like potatoes, and it’s luck, bad luck, that turns him out a beggar from every ‘show’ for years, till he hasn’t got a shirt to his back. Why do I stick to it, you’ll say? Because I’m a fool, always have been, always will be, I expect. But I like the game, and I can’t leave it for the life of me. However, that says nothing. I’m no worse than others. I can just keep myself and my horse, while there’s an old mate of mine living in London and Paris, and swelling it about with the best!

You'd like to have a look in, you say? Well, you stop at Bunjil for a week, till I come back from Bago; it's a good inn, clean and comfortable, and the girl there, if I tell her, will look after you; see you have a fire too, these cold nights. Are you on?"

"Yes! most decidedly," replied Blount, with great heartiness. "A mountain hotel should be a new experience."

"Then it's a bargain. I'm going down the river for a few days. When I get back, I'll pick you up at Bunjil, and we'll go to a place such as you never seen before, and might never have dropped on as long as you lived, if you hadn't met me, accidental like. And now we'd as well turn in. I expect some chaps that's bought the cattle, and they won't be here later than daylight." Accepting another glass of whisky as nightcap, and subsequently removing merely his boots and breeches, both of which he placed before the fire, but at a safe distance, Mr. "Little River Jack" "turned in" as he expressed it, and was shortly wrapped in the embrace of the kind deity who favours the dwellers in the Waste, though often rejecting the advances of the luxurious inhabitants of cities. Mr. Blount delayed his retirement, as he smoked before the still glowing "back log" and dwelt upon the adventures of the day.

"How that fellow must enjoy his slumbers!" thought he. "In the saddle before daylight, as he told me; up and down these rocky fastnesses – fifteen hours of slow, monotonous work, more wearying than any amount of fast going – and now, by his unlaboured breathing, sleeping like a tired child; his narrow world – its few cares – its honest, if sometimes exhausting

labours, as completely shut out as if he was in another planet. Envidable mortal! I should like to change places with him.”

After expressing this imprudent desire, as indeed are often those of men, who, unacquainted with the conditions surrounding untried modes of life, believe that they could attain happiness by merely exchanging positions, Mr. Blount undressed before the fire, and bestowed himself upon the unoccupied couch, where he speedily fell asleep, just as he had imagined himself extracting large lumps of gold from a vein of virgin quartz, in a romantic fern-shaded ravine, discovered by himself.

From this pleasing state of matters, he was awakened by a sound as of horse hoofs and the low growl of a dog. It was not quite dark. He sat up and listened intently. There was no illusion. He went to the hut door and looked out. Day was breaking, and through the misty dawnlight he was enabled to distinguish his host in conversation with a man on horseback, outside of the slip-rails. Presently the cattle, driven by another horseman, with whom was a dog, apparently of more than ordinary intelligence, came to the slip-rails. They made a rush as soon as they were through, as is the manner of such, on strange ground – but the second horseman promptly “wheeled” them towards the faint dawn line now becoming more distinct, and disappeared through the forest arches. Mr. Blount discerning that the day had begun, for practical purposes, proceeded to dress.

Walking over to the chimney, he found that the smouldering logs had been put together, and a cheerful blaze was beginning to

show itself. The billy, newly filled, was close to it, and by the time he had washed the upper part of his body in a tin bucket placed on a log end, outside the door, his friend of the previous night appeared with both horses, which he fastened to the paddock fence.

“Those fellows woke you up, coming for the cattle? Thought you’d sleep through it. I was going to rouse you when breakfast was ready.”

“I slept soundly in all conscience, but still I was quite ready to turn out. I suppose those were the butchers that you sold the cattle to?”

“Two of their men – it’s all the same. They stopped close by last night so as to get an early start. They’ve a good way to go, and’ll want all their time, these short days. Your horse looks different this morning. It’s wonderful what a good paddock and a night’s rest will do!”

“Yes, indeed, he does look different,” as he saddled him up, and, plucking some of the tall grass which grew abundantly around, treated him to a partial rub down. “How far is it to Bunjil, as you call it?”

“Well, not more than twenty miles, but the road’s middlin’ rough. Anyhow we’ll get there latish, and you can take it easy till I come back. I mightn’t be away more than three or four days.”

Misty, even threatening, at the commencement, the day became fine, even warm, after breakfast. Wind is rarely an accompaniment of such weather, and as the sun rode higher in

the cloudless sky, Blount thought he had rarely known a finer day. "What bracing mountain air!" he said to himself. "Recalls the Highlands; but I see no oat fields, and the peasantry are absent. These hills should rear a splendid race of men – and rosy-cheeked lasses in abundance. The roads I cannot recommend."

Mr. John Carter had admitted that the way was rough. His companion thought he had understated the case. It was well nigh impassable. When not climbing hills as steep as the side of a house, they were sliding down bridle tracks like the "Ladder of Cattaro." These Mr. Carter's horse hardly noticed; a down grade being negotiated with ease and security, while he seemed, to Blount's amazement, to step from rock to rock like a chamois. That gentleman's own horse had no such accomplishments, but blundered perilously from time to time, so that his owner was fain to lead him over the rougher passes. This rendered their progress slower than it would otherwise have been, while he was fain to look enviously at his companion, who, either smoking or discoursing on local topics, rode with careless rein, trusting implicitly, as it seemed, to his horse's intelligence.

"Here's the Divide!" he said at length, pointing to a ridge which rose almost at right angles from the accepted track. "We leave the road here, and head straight for Bunjil mountain. There he stands with his cap on! The snow's fell early this season."

As he spoke he pointed towards a mountain peak of unusual height, snow-capped, and even as to its spreading flanks, streaked with patches and lines of the same colour. The white clouds

which hung round the lofty summit – six thousand feet from earth, were soft-hued and fleecy; but their pallor was blurred and dingy compared with the silver coronet which glorified the dark-hued Titan.

“Road!” echoed Mr. Blount, “I don’t see any; what passes for it, I shall be pleased to leave. If we are to go along this ‘Divide,’ as you call it, I hope it will be pleasanter riding.”

“Well, it is a queerish track for a bit, but after Razor Back’s passed, it’s leveller like. We can raise a trot for a mile or two afore we make Bunjil township. Razor Back’s a narrer cut with a big drop both sides, as we shall have to go stiddy over.”

“The Divide,” as John Carter called it, was an improvement upon the track they quitted. It was less rocky, and passably level. There was a gradual ascent however, which Mr. Blount did not notice until he observed that the timber was becoming more sparse, while the view around them was disclosing features of a grand, even awful character. On either side the forest commenced to slope downwards, at an increasingly sharp gradient. Instead of the ordinary precipice, above which the travellers rode, on one or other side of the bridle track, having the hill on the other, there appeared to be a precipice of unknown depth on *either hand*. As the ascent became more marked, Blount perceived that the winding path led towards a pinnacle from which the view was extensive, and in a sense, dreadful, from its dizzy altitude – its abysmal depths, – and, as he began to realise, its far from improbable danger.

“This here’s what we call the leadin’ range; it follers the divide from the head waters of the Tambo; that’s where we stopped last night. It’s the only road between that side of the country and the river. If you don’t strike this ‘cut,’ and there’s not more than a score or so of us mountain chaps as knows it, it would take a man days to cross over, and then he mightn’t do it.”

“What would happen to him?” asked Blount, feeling a natural curiosity to learn more of this weird region, differing so widely from any idea that he had ever gathered from descriptions of Australia.

“Well, he’d most likely get bushed, and have to turn back, though he mightn’t find it too easy to do that, or make where he come from. In winter time, if it come on to snow, he’d never get home at all. I’ve known things happen like that. There was one poor cove last winter, as we chaps were days out searchin’ for, and then found him stiff, and dead – he’d got sleepy, and never woke up!”

While this enlivening conversation was proceeding, the man from a far country discovered that the pathway, level enough for ordinary purposes, though he and his guide were no longer riding side by side, was rapidly narrowing. What breadth it would be, when they ascended to the pinnacle above them, he began to consider with a shade of apprehension. His hackney, which Mr. Jack Carter had regarded with slightly-veiled contempt as a “flat country horse, as had never seen a rise bigger than a haystack,” evidently shared his uneasiness, inasmuch as he had stopped,

stared and trembled from time to time, at awkward places on the road, before they came to the celebrated "leading range."

In another mile they reached the pinnacle, where Blount realised the true nature and surroundings of this Alpine Pass. Such indeed it proved to be. A narrow pathway, looking down on either side, upon fathomless glens, with so abrupt a drop that it seemed as if the wind, now rising, might blow them off their exposed perch.

The trees which grew at the depths below, though in reality tall and massive eucalypts, appeared scarce larger than berry bushes.

The wedge-tailed eagles soared above and around. One pair indeed came near and gazed on them with unblenching eye, as though speculating on the duration of their sojourn. They seemed to be the natural denizens of this dizzy and perilous height, from which the vision ranged, in wondering amaze over a vast lone region, which stretched to the horizon; appearing indeed to include no inconsiderable portion of the continent.

Below, around, even to the far, misty sky-line, was a grey, green ocean, the billows of which, through the branches of mighty forest trees, were reduced by distance to a level and uniform contour. Tremendous glens, under which ran clear cold mountain streams, tinkling and rippling ever, mimic waterfalls and flashing rivulets, the long dry summer through diversified the landscape.

Silver streams crossed these plains and downs of solemn leafage, distinguishable only when the sun flashed on their

hurrying waters. These were rivers – not inconsiderable either – while companies of snow-crowned Alps stood ranged between, tier upon tier above them and the outlined rim, where earth and sky met, vast, regal, awful, as Kings of the Over-world! On guard since the birth of time, rank upon rank they stood – silent, immovable, scornful – defying the puny trespassers on their immemorial demesne. “What a land! what a vast expanse!” thought the Englishman, “rugged, untamed, but not more so than ‘Caledonia stern and wild,’ more fertile and productive, and as to extent – boundless. I see before me,” he mused, “a country larger than Sweden, capable in time of carrying a dense population; and what a breed of men it should give birth to, athletic, hardy, brave! Horsemen too, in the words of Australia’s forest poet, whom I read but of late. ‘For the horse was never saddled that the Jebungs couldn’t ride.’ Good rifle shots! What sons of the Empire should these Australian highlands rear, to do battle for Old England in the wars of the giants yet to come!”

This soliloquy, and its utterance in thought came simultaneously to a halt of a decisive nature, by reason of the conduct of Mr. Blount’s horse. This animal had been gradually acquiring a fixed distrust of the highway – all too literally – on which he was required to travel. Looking first on one side, then on the other, and apparently realising the dreadful alternative of a slip or stumble, he became unnerved and demoralised. Mr. Blount had ridden a mule over many a *mauvais pas* in Switzerland, when the sagacious animal, for reasons known

to himself, had insisted on walking on the outer edge of the roadway, over-hanging the gulf, where a crumbling ledge might cause the fall into immeasurable, glacial depths. In that situation his nerve had not faltered. "Trust to old 'Pilatus,'" said the guide; "do not interfere with him, I beseech you; he is under the immediate protection of the saints, and the holy St. Bernard." He had in such a position been cool and composed. The old mule's wise, experienced air, his sure and cautious mode of progression, had been calculated to reassure a nervous novice. But here, the case was different. His cob was evidently *not* under the protection of the saints. St. Bernard was absent, or indifferent. With the recklessness of fear, he was likely to back – to lose his balance – to hurl himself and rider over the perpendicular drop, where he would not have touched ground at a thousand feet. At this moment Jack Carter looked round. "Keep him quiet, for God's sake! till I get to you – don't stir!" As he spoke he slid from his horse, though so small was the vacant space on the ledge, that as he leaned against the shoulder of his well-trained mount, there seemed barely room for his feet. Buckling a strap to the snaffle rein, which held it in front of the saddle, and throwing the stirrup iron over, he passed to the head of the other horse, whose rein he took in a firm grasp. "Steady," he said in a voice of command, which, strangely, the shaking creature seemed to obey. "Now, Boss! you get off, and slip behind him – there's just room." Blount did as directed, and with care and steadiness, effected a movement to the rear, while Jack Carter fastened rein

and stirrup as before.

Then giving the cob a sounding slap on the quarter, he uttered a peculiar cry, and the leading horse stepped along the track at a fast amble, followed by the cob at a slow trot, in which he seemed to have recovered confidence.

“That’s a quick way out of the difficulty,” said Blount, with an air of relief. “I really didn’t know what was going to happen. But won’t they bolt when they get to the other side of this natural bridge over the bottomless pit?”

“When they get to the end of this ‘race,’ as you may call it, there’s a trap yard that we put up years back for wild horses – many a hundred’s been there before my time. Some of us mountain chaps keep it mended up. It comes in useful now and again.”

“I should think it did,” assented his companion, with decision. “But how will they get in? Will your clever horse take down the slip-rails, and put them up again?”

“Not quite that!” said the bushman smiling – “but near enough; we’ll find ’em both there, I’ll go bail!”

“How far is it?” asked Blount, with a natural desire to get clear of this picturesque, but too exciting part of the country, and to exchange it for more commonplace scenery, with better foothold.

“Only a couple of mile – so we might as well step out, as I’ve filled my pipe. Won’t you have a draw for company?”

“Not just yet, I’ll wait till we’re mounted again.” For though the invariable, inexhaustible tobacco pipe is the steadfast friend

of the Australian under all and every condition of life, Blount did not feel in the humour for it just after he had escaped, as he now began to believe, from a sudden and violent death.

“A well-trained horse! I should think he was,” he told himself; “and yet, before I left England, I was always being warned against the half-broken horses of Australia. What a hackney to be sure! – fast, easy, sure-footed, intelligent – and what sort of breaking in has he had? Mostly ridden by people whom no living horse can throw; but that is a disadvantage – as he instinctively recognises the rider he *can* throw. Well! every country has its own way of doing things; and though we Englishmen are unchangeably fixed in our own methods, we may have something to learn yet from our kinsmen in this new land.”

“I suppose there have been accidents on this peculiar track of yours?” he said, after they had walked in silence for a hundred yards or more.

“Accidents!” he replied, “I should jolly well think there have. You see, horses are like men and women, though people don’t hardly believe it. Some’s born one way, and some another; teaching don’t make much difference to ’em, nor beltin’ either. Some of ’em, like some men, are born cowards, and when they get into a narrer track with a big drop both sides of ’em, they’re that queer in the head – though it’s the *heart* that’s wrong with ’em – that they feel like pitching themselves over, just to get shut of the tremblin’ on the brink feelin’. Your horse was in a blue funk; he’d have slipped or backed over in another minute or two.

That was the matter with *him*. When he seen old Keewah skip along by himself, it put confidence like, into him.”

“You’ve known of accidents, then?”

“My word! I mind when poor Paddy Farrell went down. He and his horse both. He was leadin’ a packer, as it might be one of us now. Well, his moke was a nervous sort of brute, and just as he got to the Needle Rock, it’s a bit farther on before the road widens out, but it’s terrible narrer there, and poor Paddy was walking ahead leadin’ the brute with a green hide halter, when a hawk flies out from behind a rock and frightened the packer. He draws back with a jerk, and his hind leg goes over the edge. Paddy had the end of the halter round his wrist, and it got jammed somehow, and down goes the lot, horse and pack, and him atop of ’em. Three or four of us were out all day looking for him at the foot of the range. We knew where we’d likely find him, and sure enough there they were, he and his horse, stone dead and smashed to pieces. We took him back to Bunjil, and buried him decent in the little graveyard. We managed to fish up a prayer-book, and got ‘Gentleman Jack’ to read the service over him. My word! he *could* read no end. They said he was college taught. He could drink too, more’s the pity.”

“Does *every one* drink that lives in these parts?”

“Well, a good few. Us young ones not so bad, but if a man stays here, after a few years he always drinks, partickler if he’s seen better days.”

“Now why is that? It’s a free healthy life, with riding, shooting,

and a chance of a golden hole, as you call it. There are worse places to live in.”

“Nobody knows why, but they all do; they’ll work hard and keep sober for months. Then they get tired of having no one to talk to – nobody like themselves, I mean. They go away, and come back stone-broke, or knock it all down in Bunjil, if they’ve made a few pounds.”

“That sounds bad after working hard and risking their lives on these Devil’s Bridges. How old was this Patrick Farrell?”

“Twenty-four, his name wasn’t Patrick. It was Aloysius William, named after a saint, I’m told. The boys called him ‘Paddy’ for short. At home, I believe they called him ‘Ally.’ But Paddy he always was in these parts. It don’t matter much now. See that tall rock sticking up by the side of the road at the turn? Well, that’s where he fell; they call it ‘Paddy’s Downfall,’ among the country people to this day. We’ve only a mile to go from there.”

When Mr. Blount and his companion reached the Needle Rock, a sharp-edged monolith, the edge of which unnecessarily infringed on the perilously scanty foothold, he did not wonder at the downfall of poor Aloysius William or any other wayfarer encumbered with a horse. He recalled the “vision of sudden death” which had so nearly been realised in his own case, and shuddered as he looked over the sheer drop on to a tangled mass of “rocks and trees confusedly hurled.”

“We’ve got Bunjil Inn to make yet,” said the bushman, stepping forward briskly; “we mustn’t forget that, if we leave my

old moke too long in the yard, he'll be opening the gate or some other dodge."

In a hundred yards from the Needle Rock the track became wider, much to Mr. Blount's relief, for he was beginning to feel an uncanny fascination for the awful abyss, and to doubt whether if a storm came on, he should be able to stand erect, or be reduced to the ignoble alternative of lying on his face.

"They've passed along here all right," said the guide, casting a casual look at the path; "trust old Keewah for that, he's leadin' and your moke following close up."

Mr. Blount did not see any clear indication, and would have been quite unable to declare which animal was foremost. But he accepted in all confidence Little-River-Jack's assurance. The track, without gaining much breadth or similarity to any civilised high road, was yet superior in all respects to the chamois path they had left behind, and when his companion exclaimed, "There's the yard, and our nags in it, as safe as houses," he was relieved and grateful. The loss of a horse with a new saddle and bridle, besides his whole stock of travelling apparel, spare shoes, and other indispensable matters, would have been serious, not to say irreparable.

However there were the two horses with their accoutrements complete, in the trap yard aforesaid. The yard was fully eight feet high, and though the saplings of which it was composed were rudely put together, they were solid and unyielding. The heavy gate of the same material showed a rude carpentry in the head

and tail pieces, the former of which was "let into the cap" or horizontal spar placed across the gate posts, and also morticed into a round upright below, sunk into the ground and projecting securely above it.

"They must have come in and shut the gate after them," remarked Blount; "how in the world did they manage that?"

"Well, you see, this gate's made pretty well on the balance to swing back to the post, where there's a sort of groove for it. It's always left half, or a quarter open. A prop's put loose agen it, which any stock coming in from that side's middlin' sure to rub, and the gate swings to. See? It may graze 'em, as they're going in, but they're likely to jump forward, into the yard. The gate swings back to the post, and they're nabbed. They can't very well open it *towards* themselves, they haven't savey for that. So they have to wait till some one comes."

This explanation was given as they were riding along a decently plain road to Bunjil township, the first appearance of which one traveller descried with much contentment.

The "Divide," before this agreeable change, had begun to alter its austere character. The ridge had spread out, the forest trees were stately and umbrageous, the track was fairly negotiable by horse and man. A fertile valley through which dashed an impetuous stream revealed itself. On the further bank stood dwellings, "real cottages," as Mr. Blount remarked, "not huts." These were in all cases surrounded by gardens, in some instances by orchards, of which the size and girth of the fruit trees bore

witness to the richness of the soil as well as of the age of the township.

The short winter day had been nearly consumed by reason of their erratic progress; so that the evening shadows had commenced to darken the valley, while the clear, crisp atmosphere betrayed to the experienced senses of Mr. Carter, every indication of what he described as "a real crackin' frost."

"We're in luck's way," he said, in continuation, "not to be struck for a camp out to-night. It's cold enough in an old man frost hereabouts, to freeze the leg off an iron pot. But this is the right shop as we're going to, for a good bed, a broiled steak for tea, and if you make friends with Sheila (she's the girl that waits at table) you won't die of cold, whatever else happens to you. Above all, the house is clean, and that's more than you can say for smarter lookin' shops. We'd as well have a spurt to finish up with." Drawing his rein, and touching his hack with careless heel, the bushman went off at a smart canter along the main street, apparently the only one in the little town, Mr. Blount's cob following suit with comparative eagerness, until they pulled up at a roomy building with a broad verandah, before which stood a sign-board, setting forth its title to consideration, as the "Prospector's Arms" by William Middleton.

Several persons stood or lounged about the verandah, who looked at them keenly as they rode up. A broad-shouldered man with a frank, open countenance, came out of a door, somewhat apart from the group. He was plainly, by appearance and bearing,

the landlord.

“So you’re back again, Jack,” said he, addressing the bushman with an air of familiar acquaintance; “didn’t know what had come o’yer. What lay are ye on now?”

“Same’s usual, moochin’ round these infernal hills and gullies ov yours. There’s a bit of a rush Black Rock way. I’m goin’ to have a look in to-morrow. This gentleman’s just from England, seein’ the country in a gineral way; he’ll stay here till I get back, and then we’ll be going down river.”

“All right, Jack!” replied the host. “*You* can show him the country, if any one can – the missus’ll see he’s took care of,” and as he spoke he searched the speaker with a swift glance as of one comprehending all that had been said, and more that was left unspoken. “Here, take these horses round, George, and make ’em right for the night.”

An elderly individual in shirt sleeves and moleskins of faded hue here came forward, and took the stranger’s horse, unbuckling valise and pack, which the landlord carried respectfully into an inner chamber, out of which a door led into a comfortable appearing bedroom; where, from the look of the accessories, he augured favourably for the night’s rest. Mr. Carter had departed with the old groom, preferring, as he said, to see his horse fed and watered before he tackled his own refreshment; “grub” was the word he used, which appeared to be fully understood of the people, if but vaguely explanatory to Mr. Blount.

That gentleman, pensively examining his wardrobe, reflected

meanwhile by how narrow a chance the articles spread out before him had been saved from wreck, so to speak, and total loss, when a knock came to the door, and a feminine voice requested to know whether he would like supper at six o'clock or later. Taking counsel of his inward monitor, he adopted the hour named.

The voice murmured, "Your hot water, sir," and ceased speaking.

He opened the door, and was just in time to see a female form disappear from the room.

"We are beginning to get civilised," he thought, as he possessed himself of the hot water jug, and refreshed accordingly. After which he discarded his riding gear in favour of shoes and suitable continuations. While awaiting the hour of reflection, he took out of his valise a pocket edition of Browning, and was about to glance at it when the clock struck six.

Entering the parlour, for such it evidently was, he was agreeably surprised with the appearance of affairs. A clean cloth covered the solid cedar table, on which was a hot dish – flanked by another which held potatoes. A fire of glowing logs was cheerful to behold, nor was the "neat-handed Phyllis" wanting to complete the tableau. A very good-looking young woman, with a complexion of English, rather than Australian colouring, removed the dish covers, and stood at attention.

Here the wayfarer was destined to receive fresh information relative to the social observances of Australian society. "You have only laid covers for one," said he to the maid. "My friend,

Mr. Carter, is not going to do without his dinner surely?"

"Oh! Jack!" said the damsel, indifferently; "he won't come in here, he's at the second table with the coachman and the drovers. This is the gentlemen's room."

"How very curious!" he exclaimed. "I thought every one was alike in this part of the world; all free and equal, that sort of thing. I shouldn't the least mind spending the evening with er – John Carter – or any other respectable miner."

The girl looked him over before she spoke. "Well, Mr. Blount (Jack said that was your name), *you* mightn't, though you're just from England, but other people might. When the police magistrate, the Goldfields Warden, and the District Surveyor come round, they always stay here, and the down river squatters. They wouldn't like it, you may be sure, nor you either, perhaps, if the room was pretty full."

He smiled, as he answered, "So this is an aristocratic country, I perceive, in spite of the newspaper froth about a democratic government. Well, I must take time, and learn the country's ways. I shall pick them up by degrees, I suppose."

"No fear!" said the damsel. "It'll all come in time, not but there's places at the back where all sorts sit down together and smoke and drink no end. But not at Bunjil. Would you like some apple-pie to follow, there's plenty of cream?"

Mr. Blount would. "Apple-pie reminds one of Devonshire, and our boyhood – especially the cream," thought he. "What fun I should have thought this adventure a few years ago. Not that it's

altogether without interest now. It's a novelty, at any rate."

CHAPTER II

Mr. Blount, as he sat before the fire, enjoying his final pipe before retiring for the night, was free to confess that he had rarely spent a more satisfactory evening – even in the far-famed, old-fashioned, road-side inns of old England. The night was cold – Carter's forecast had been accurate. It was a hard frost, such as his short stay in a coast city had not acquainted him with. The wide bush fire-place, with a couple of back logs, threw out a luxurious warmth, before which, in a comfortable arm-chair, he had been reading the weekly paper with interest.

The well-cooked, juicy steak, the crisp potatoes, the apple-pie with bounteous cream, constituted a meal which a keen-edged appetite rendered sufficient for all present needs. The difficult ride and too hazardous adventure constituted a fair day's work – being indeed sufficiently fatiguing to justify rest without bordering on exhaustion. It was a case of *jam satis*.

He looked forward to an enjoyable night's sleep, was even aware of a growing sense of relief that he was not required to take the road next morning. The cob would be better for a few days' rest, before doing more mountain work. He would like also to ramble about this neighbourhood, and see what the farms and sluicing claims were like. And a better base of operations than the Bunjil Hotel, no man need desire.

He had gone to the stable with Carter, as became a prudent

horse-owner, where he had seen the cob comfortably bedded down for the night with a plenteous supply of sweet-smelling oaten hay before him, and an unstinted feed of maize in the manger.

“They’re all right for the night,” said Carter. “Your nag will be the better for a bit of a turn round to-morrow afternoon, just to keep his legs from swellin’. I’ll be off about sunrise, and back again the fourth day, or early the next. They’ll look after you here, till then.”

Mr. Blount was of opinion that he could look after himself from what he had seen of the establishment, and said so, but “was nevertheless much obliged to him for getting him such good quarters.” So to bed, as Mr. Pepys hath it, but before doing so, he rang the bell, and questioned Sheila – for that was her name, as he had ascertained by direct inquiry – as to the bath arrangements.

“I shall want a cold bath at half-past seven – a shower bath, for choice. Is there one?”

“Oh, yes – but very few go in for it this time of year. The P.M. does, when he comes round, and the Goldfields Warden. It’s one of those baths that you fill and draw up over your head. Then you pull a string.”

“That will do very well.”

“All right – I’ll tell George; but won’t it be very cold? It’s a hard frost to-night.”

“No – the colder it is, the warmer you feel after it.”

“Well, good-night, sir! Breakfast at half-past eight o’clock. Is

that right? Would you like sausages, boiled eggs and toast?"

"Yes! nothing could be better. My appetite seems improving already."

The Kookaburra chorus, and the flute accompaniment of the magpies in the neighbouring tree tops, awakened Mr. Blount, who had not so much as turned round in bed since about five minutes after he had deposited himself between the clean lavender-scented sheets. Looking out, he faintly discerned the dawn light, and also that the face of the country was as white as if it had been snowing. He heard voices in the verandah, and saw Little-River-Jack's horse led out, looking as fresh as paint. That gentleman, lighting his pipe carefully, mounted and started off at a fast amble up the road which skirted the range, and led towards a gap in the hills. Mr. Blount thought it would be as well to wait until Sheila had the fire well under way, by which he intended to toast himself after the arctic discipline of the shower bath, with the thermometer at 28 degrees Fahrenheit.

The bi-weekly mail had providentially arrived at breakfast time, bringing in its bags the local district newspaper, and a metropolitan weekly which skimmed the cream from the cables and telegrams of the day. This was sufficiently interesting to hold him to the arm-chair, in slippered ease, for the greater part of an hour, while he lingered over his second cup of tea.

His boots, renovated from travel stains and mud, standing ready, he determined on a stroll, and took counsel with Sheila, as to a favourable locality.

The damsel was respectful, but conversed with him on terms of perfect conversational equality. She had also been fairly educated, and was free from vulgarity of tone or accent. To him, straight from the old country, a distinctly unfamiliar type worth studying.

“Where would you advise me to go for a walk?” he said. “It’s good walking weather, and I can’t sit in the house this fine morning, though you have made such a lovely fire.”

“I should go up the creek, and have a look at the sluicing claim. People say it’s worth seeing. You can’t miss it if you follow up stream, and you’ll hear the ‘water gun’ a mile before you come to it.”

“‘Water gun?’ What ever is that?”

“Oh! it’s the name of a big hose with a four-inch nozzle at the end. They lead the water for the race into it, and then turn it against the creek bank; that undermines tons of the stuff they want to sluice – you’ll hear it coming down like a house falling!”

“And what becomes of it then?”

“Oh! it goes into the tail-race, and after that it’s led into the riffles and troughs – the water keeps driving along, and they’ve some way of washing the clay and gravel out, and leaving the gold behind.”

“And does it pay well?”

“They say so. It only costs a penny a ton to wash, or something like that. It’s the cheapest way the stuff can be treated. Our boys saw it used in California, and brought it over here.”

So, after taking a last fond look at the cob, and wishing he could exchange him for Keewah, but doubting if any amount of boot would induce Carter to part with his favourite, he set out along the bank of the river and faced the uplands.

His boots were thick, his heart was light – the sun illumined the frost-white trunks, and diamond-sprayed branches of the pines and eucalypts – the air was keen and bracing. “What a glorious thing it is to be alive on a day like this,” he told himself. “How glad I am that I decided to leave Melbourne!” As he stepped along with all the elasticity of youth’s high health and boundless optimism, he marked the features of the land. There were wheel-tracks on this road, which he was pleased to note. Though the soil was rich, and also damp at the base of the hills and on the flats, it was sound, so that with reasonable care he was enabled to keep his feet dry. He saw pools from which the wild duck flew on his approach. A blue crane, the heron of Australia (*Ardea*) rose from the reeds; while from time to time the wallaroo (the kangaroo of the mountain-side) put in appearance to his great delight.

The sun came out, glorifying the wide and varied landscape and the cloudless azure against which the snow-covered mountain summits glittered like silver coronets. Birds of unknown note and plumage called and chirped. All Nature, recovering from the cold and darkness of the night, made haste to greet the brilliant apparition of the sun god.

Keeping within sight of the creek – the course of which he

was pledged to follow – he became aware of a dull monotonous sound, which he somehow connected with machinery. It was varied by occasional reports like muffled blasts, as of the fall of heavy bodies. “That is the sluicing claim,” he told himself, “and I shall see the wonderful ‘water gun,’ which Sheila told me of. Quite an adventure!” The claim was farther off than he at first judged, but after climbing with stout heart a “stey brae,” he looked down on the sluicing appliances, and marvelled at the inventive ingenuity which the gold industry had developed. Before him was a ravine down which a torrent of water was rushing with great force and rapidity, bearing along in its course clay, gravel, quartz, and even boulders of respectable size.

He was civilly received by the claim-holders; the manager – an ex-Californian miner – remarking, “Yes, sir, I’m a ‘forty-niner,’ – worked at Suttor’s Mill first year gold was struck there. This is a pretty big thing, though it ain’t a circumstance to some I’ve seen in Arizona and Colorado. This water’s led five hundred feet from these workings. See it play on the face of the hill-side yonder – reckon we’ve cut it away two hundred feet from grass.”

Mr. Blount looked with amazement at the thin, vicious, thread of water, which, directed against the lower and middle strata of the mass of ferruginous slate, had laid bare the alluvium through which ran an ancient river, silted up and overlaid for centuries. The course of this long dead and buried stream could be traced by the water-worn boulders and the smoothness of the rocks which had formed its bed. Where he stood, there had been a fall

of forty feet as shown by the formation of the rocky channel.

The manager civilly directed the "gunner" to lower the weapon, and aim it at a spot nearer to where Blount was standing. He much marvelled to see the stones torn from the "face" and sent flying in the air, creating a fair-sized geyser where the water smote the cliff. In this fashion of undermining hundreds of tons are brought down from time to time, to be driven by the roaring torrent into the "tail-race," whence they pass into the "sluice-box," and so on to the creek, leaving the gold behind in the riffle bars.

"I suppose it's not an expensive way of treating the ore in the rough?" queried Blount.

"I reckon not. Cheapest way on airth. The labour we pay at present only comes to one man to a thousand yards. This company has been paying dividends for fifteen years!"

Mr. Blount thanked the obliging American, who, like all respectable miners, was well-mannered to strangers, the sole exception being in the case of a party that have "struck gold" in a secluded spot, and naturally do not desire all the world to know about it. But even they are less rude than evasive.

He looked at his watch and decided that he had not more than enough time to get back to Bunjil in time for lunch. So he shook hands with Mr. Hiram Endicott and set out for that nucleus of civilisation.

Making rather better time on the return journey, he arrived much pleased with himself, considering that he

had accomplished an important advance in bush-craft and mineralogy.

Sheila welcomed him in a clean print dress, with a smiling face, but expressed a faint surprise at his safe return, and at his having found the road to the sluice-working, and back.

“Why! how could I lose the way?” he demanded, justly indignant. “Was not the creek a sufficiently safe guide?”

“Oh! it can be done,” answered the girl archly. “There was a gentleman followed the creek the wrong way, and got among the ranges before he found out his mistake; and another one – he was a newspaper editor – thought he’d make a near cut, found himself miles lower down, and didn’t get back before dark. My word! how hungry he was, and cross too!”

“Well, I’m not very hungry or even cross – but I’m going to wash my hands, after which lunch will be ready, I suppose?”

“You’ve just guessed it,” she replied. “You’ll have tea, I suppose?”

“Certainly. Whether Australia was created to develop the tea and sugar industry, or tea to provide a portable and refreshing beverage for the inhabitants to work, and travel, or even fight on, is not finally decided, but they go wondrous well together.”

After an entirely satisfactory lunch, Mr. Blount bethought him of the cob – and knowing, as do all Englishmen, that to do your duty to your neighbour when he is a horse, you must exercise him at least once a day, he sent for George, and requested that he should be brought forth. In a few moments the valuable

animal arrived, looking quite spruce and spirited, with coat much smoother and mane tidied; quite like an English covert hack, as Mr. Blount told himself. His legs had filled somewhat, but the groom assured Blount that that was nothing, and would go off.

Taking counsel of the landlord on this occasion, that worthy host said, "Would you like to see an old hand about here that could tell you a few stories about the early days?"

"Like?" answered Mr. Blount with effusion, "nothing better." It was one of his besetting virtues to know all about the denizens of any place – particularly if partly civilised – wherever he happened to sojourn for a season. It is chiefly a peculiarity of the imaginative-sympathetic nature whereby much knowledge of sorts is acquired – sometimes. But there is a reverse side to the shield.

"George! Ge-or-ge!" shouted the landlord, "catch the old mare and bring her round. Look slippy!"

George fled away like the wind, with a sieve and a bridle in his hand, and going to the corner of a small grass paddock, under false pretences induced an elderly bay mare to come up to him (there being no corn in the sieve), then he basely slipped the reins over her head and led her away captive.

The landlord reappeared with a pair of long-necked spurs buckled on to his heels, and getting swiftly into the saddle, started the old mare off at a shuffling walk. She was a character in her way. Her coat was rough, her tail was long, there was a certain amount of hair on her legs, and yes! she *was* slightly lame on the

near fore-leg. But her eye was bright, her shoulder oblique; and as she reined up at a touch of the rusty snaffle and stuck out her tail, Arab fashion, she began to show class, Mr. Blount thought.

“She’ll be all right, directly,” said the landlord, noticing Mr. Blount’s scrutiny of the leg, “I never know whether it’s rheumatism, or one of her dodges – she’s as sound as a bell after a mile.” To add to her smart appearance, she had no shoes.

They passed quickly through cornfields and meadow lands, rich in pasture, and showing signs of an occasional heavy crop. The agriculture was careless, as is chiefly the case where Nature does so much that man excuses himself for doing little. A cottage on the south side of the road surrounded by a well-cultivated orchard furnished the exception which proves the rule. Mr. Middleton opened the rough but effective gate, with a patent self-closing latch, without dismounting from his mare, who squeezed her shoulder against it, as if she thought she could open it herself. “Steady!” said her owner – “this gate’s not an uphill one – she’ll push up a gate hung to slam down hill as if she knew who made it. She does know a lot of things you wouldn’t expect of her.” Holding the gate open till Mr. Blount and the cob were safely through, he led the way to the cottage, from which issued a tall, upright, elderly man, with a distinctly military bearing.

“This is Mr. Blount, Sergeant,” said the host, “staying at my place for a day or two – just from England, as you see! I told him you knew all about this side, and the people in it – old hands, and new.”

“Ay! the people – the people!” said the old man meditatively. “The land’s a’ richt – fresh and innocent, just as God made it, but the people! the de’il made *them* on purpose to hide in these mountains and gullies, and show what manner of folk could grow up in a far country, where they were a law unto themselves.”

“There was wild work in those days before you came up, Sergeant, I believe!” asserted the landlord, tentatively.

“Ay! was there,” and the old light began to shine in the trooper’s eyes. “Battle, murder, and sudden death, every kind of villany that the wicked heart of man could plan, or his cruel hand carry out. But you’ll come ben and tak’ a cup of tea? The weather’s gey and cauld the noo.”

Mr. Blount would be only too pleased. So the horses were “hung up” to the neat fence of the garden, and the visitors walked into the spotless, neat parlour.

“Sit ye doon,” said the Sergeant – “Beenie, bring in tea, and some scones.” A fresh-coloured country damsel, who presently appeared bearing a jug of milk and the other requisites, had evidently been within hearing. “My wife and bairns are doon country,” he explained, “or she would have been prood to mak’ you welcome, sir. I’m by ma lane the noo – but she’ll be back next week, thank God; it’s awfu’ lonesome, when she’s awa.”

“You knew Coke, Chamberlain, and Armstrong, all that crowd – didn’t you, Sergeant?” queried the landlord.

“That did I – and they knew *me* before I’d done with them, murdering dogs that they were! People used to say that I’d never

die in my bed. That this one or that had sworn to shoot me – or roast me alive if they could tak’ me. But I never gave them a chance. I was young and strong in those days – as active as a mountain cat in my Hieland home, and could ride for twenty-four hours at a stretch, if I had special wark in hand. Old Donald Bane here could tell fine tales if he could talk” – pointing to a grand-looking old grey, feeding in a patch of lucerne. “The General let me have him when he was cast, that’s ten years syne. We got our pensions then, and we’re just hanging it out thegither.”

“I suppose there are no bad characters in this neighbourhood now, Sergeant?” said Blount. “Everything looks very quiet and peaceful.”

“I wouldna say that,” answered the veteran, cautiously. “There’s many a mile of rough country, between here and the Upper Sturt, and there’s apt to be rough characters to match the country. Cattle are high, too. A dozen head of fat cattle comes to over a hundred pound – that’s easy earned if they’re driven all night, and sold to butchers that have one yard at the back of a range, and another in the stringy-bark township, to take the down off.”

“Yet one wouldn’t think such things could be carried on *easily* in this part of the country – where there seem to be so many watchful eyes; but I must have a longer ride this lovely morning, so I shall be much obliged if you and our host here will dine with me at seven o’clock, when we can have leisure to talk. You’re all by yourself, Sergeant, you know, so there’s no excuse.”

The Sergeant accepted with pleasure; the host was afraid he would be too busy about the bar at the dinner hour, but would look in afterwards, before the evening was spent. So it was settled, and the recent acquaintances rode away.

“What a fine old fellow the Sergeant is!” said Blount; “how wonderfully neat and trim everything inside the house and out is kept.”

“You’ll generally notice that about a place when the owner has been in the police; the inspector blows up the troopers if there is a button off, or a boot not cleaned. You’d think they’d let a prisoner go, to hear him talk. Barracks – stable – carbine – horse – all have to be neat and clean, polished up to the nines. Once they get the habit of that they never leave it off, and after they settle down in a country place, as it might be here, they set a good example to the farmers and bush people.”

“So the police force promotes order in more ways than one – they root out dishonesty and crime as well – they’re a grand institution of the country.”

“Well, yes, they are,” assented the landlord without enthusiasm, “though they’re not all built the way the Sergeant is. I don’t say but what they’re a trifle hard on publicans now and again for selling a drink to a traveller on a Sunday. But if it’s the law, they’re bound to uphold it. We’d be a deal worse off without them, and that’s the truth.”

Blount and the landlord rode down the course of the stream with much interest, as far as the Englishman was concerned. For

the other, the landscape was a thing of course. The rich meadow land which bordered the stream – the far blue mountains – the fat bullocks and sleek horses feeding in the fields – the sheep on their way to market, were to him an ancient and settled order of things, as little provocative of curiosity as if they had existed from the foundation of the world. He had been familiar from childhood with them, or with similar stock and scenery.

But the stranger's interest and constant inquiry were unceasing. Everything was new to him. The fences, the crops, the maize, of which the tall stems were still standing in their rows, though occasionally stripped and thrown down by the pigs which were rooting among them and gleaning the smaller cobs left behind in the harvest plucking. A certain carelessness of husbandry was noticed by the critic from over sea. The hedges were mostly untrimmed, the plough too often left in the furrow; the weeds, "thick-coming carpet after rain," untouched by the scarifier; the fences broken, hedges indifferently trimmed.

"This sort of farming wouldn't go down in England."

"Perhaps not. Never was there," replied the Australian Boniface; "but these chaps are mostly so well off, that they don't mind losing a trifle this way, rather than have too many men to pay and feed. Labour's cheap in England, I'm told; here it's dear. So the farmer crowds on all he can get till harvest and shearin's past, then he pays off all hands, except an old crawler or two, to milk cows and draw wood and water. Afterwards he hires no more till ploughing begins again."

"There does seem to be a reason for that, and other things I have observed," assented Mr. Blount. "I suppose in time everything will be nearer English, or perhaps American ideas. More likely the last. Machinery for everything, and no time for decent leisurely country work."

"Yes, sir – that's about it," said Mr. Middleton, looking at his watch, "and now we've just time to get back for your lunch, and to tell my old woman that the Sergeant's coming to dine with you."

"Doesn't your mare trot?" said Blount, as they moved off, "it seems to me that Australian horses have only two paces, walk and canter. She doesn't seem lame now."

"I think sometimes it's only her villany; she's going as sound as a bell now. Yes! she can trot a bit when she likes."

The cob, a fair performer, had just started, when Mr. Middleton gave the mare's left ear a gentle screw, which induced her to alter her pace from a slow canter to a trot. "Trot, old woman!" he said, and settling to that useful pace, she caught up the cob. Mr. Blount gradually increased his pace – the old mare kept level with him, till after a dig with the spurs, and a refresher with the hunting crop, it became apparent that the cob was "on his top," in stable phrase, doing a fair ten or eleven miles an hour.

"Are ye trotting now?" said the landlord, taking the old mare by the head.

"Yes! oh, yes – and pretty fair going, isn't it?"

"Not bad, but this old cripple can do better." On which, as if she had heard the words, the old mare stretched out her neck and

passed the cob “like a shot!” as her owner afterwards stated when describing the affair to an admiring audience in the bar room.

The cob, after an ineffectual attempt to keep up, was fain to break into a hand gallop, upon which the old mare was pulled up, and the rider explained that it took a professional to beat old “Slavey”; but that owing to her uncertain temper, he had been unable to “take on” aspiring amateurs, and so missed good wagers.

“You might have ‘taken me on’ for a pound or two,” said Mr. Blount, “if you had cared to back her, for I certainly should not have thought she could have beaten my cob. She doesn’t seem built for trotting – does she?”

“She is a bit of a take down,” admitted Mr. Middleton, “but I don’t bet with gentlemen as stays in my house. Though her coat’s rough, she’s a turn better bred than she looks. Got good blood on both sides, and you can drive her in single or double harness, and ride her too, as far and as fast as you like. There’s no doubt she’s a useful animal, for you can’t put her wrong.”

“You wouldn’t care to sell her?”

“No! I couldn’t part with her. My wife and the children drive her. She’s so good all round, and quiet too; and though there’s lots of horses in the district, it’s wonderful what a time it takes to pick up a real good one.”

“Quite Arab like! I was told people would sell anything in Australia, especially horseflesh. There’s the luncheon bell! Well, I’ve had a pleasant morning, and even with the prospect of dinner

at seven o'clock, I feel equal to a modest meal, just to keep up the system. It's wonderful what an appetite I've had lately."

Mr. Blount fed cautiously, with an eye to dinner at no distant period. Sheila was much excited at the idea of the Sergeant coming to dine with him.

"He's a splendid old chap," said she. "Such tales I used to hear about him when I was a kiddie at school. Many a day when he's been out after cattle-stealers, and bushrangers, people said he'd never come back alive. He was never afraid, though, and he made them afraid of *him* before he was done."

"By the way, where did you go to school, Sheila? You speak excellent English, and you haven't any twang or drawl, like some of the colonial girls."

"Oh! at She-oak Flat. There was a State school there, and mother kept us at it pretty regular, rain or shine, no staying at home, whatever the weather was like or the roads, and we had three miles to walk, there and back."

"So you didn't go to Melbourne, or Sydney?"

"No! Never been away from Bunjil. I suppose I shall see the sea some day."

"*Never seen the sea – the sea?* You astonish me!"

"Never in my life. Do I look different or anything?"

"You look very nice, and talk very well too. I begin to think the seaside's overrated; but I must take another walk, or the landlord will think I don't do his dinner justice. What's it to be?"

"Well, a turkey poult for one thing; the rest you'll see when

the covers are taken off.”

“Quite right. It’s impertinent curiosity, I’m aware.”

“Oh! not that, but we’re going to astonish you, if we can.”

Upon this Mr. Blount put on his boots again; they had been splashed in the morning, and required drying. Crossing the creek upon a rustic bridge, which seemed to depend more upon a fallen tree than on any recognised plan of engineering, he turned his steps up stream, and faced the Alpine range. The afternoon, like the morning, was golden bright, though a hint of frost began to be felt in the clear keen air. The road was fairly good, and had been formed and macadamised in needful places.

It lay between the rushing creek on one side, towards which there was a considerable drop, and the line of foot-hills on the other, leaving just room for meeting vehicles to pass one another, though it needed the accurate driving of bush experts to ensure safety. Water-races, flumes, and open ditches crossed the road, testifying to the existence of gold-workings in the neighbourhood, while an occasional miner on his way to the township of Bunjil emerged from an unfrequented track and made towards, what was to him, the King’s Highway. Once he heard the tinkling of bells, when suddenly there came round a corner a train of thirty or forty pack-horses, with all manner of sacks and bags, and even boxes on their backs. There were a few mules also in the drove, to whom was accorded the privilege of leadership, as on any block or halt taking place, they pushed their way to the front, and set off up or down the track with decision,

as if better instructed than the rank and file.

“Ha! ‘Bell-horses, bell-horses, what time o’ day? One o’clock, two o’clock, three and away,’ as we used to say at school. Puts one in mind of Devonshire,” murmured the tourist. “Many a keg of smuggled spirits was carried on the backs of the packers, with their bells. I daresay an occasional breach of custom-house regulations has occurred now and then if the truth were told. I wouldn’t mind being quartered here at all. It’s a droll world!” Mr. Blount’s rambles and reveries came to an end half an hour after sunset, which just left him time to get back to his hostelry, make some change for dinner, and toast himself before the fire, in anticipation of the arrival of his guest. The Sergeant arrived with military punctuality, a few minutes before the hour, having donned for the occasion a well-worn, well-brushed uniform, in which he looked like a “non-com.” recommended for the Victoria Cross.

He greeted Sheila cordially and expressed a favourable opinion as to her growth, and development, since she used to play hockey and cricket with the boys at She-oak Flat. “And right weel did she play,” he continued, addressing himself to his entertainer, “she won the half-mile race too, against all comers, didn’t you, Sheila?”

“I was pretty smart then, wasn’t I, Sergeant? Do you remember fishing me out of the creek, when I slipped off the log?”

“I mind weel, I thocht you were a swimmer, till I saw ye go down, head under; so I was fain to loup into ten feet of snow

water and catch a cold that was nigh the deeth o' me. I misdooted gin ye were worth it a'! What think ye?"

The girl shook her head at him, her dark, grey eyes bright with merriment, as she tripped out of the room, to reappear with the turkey poult before referred to. "She's a grand lassie!" said the Sergeant, looking after her admiringly, "and as guid as she's bonnie. The men and women that are reared among these hills are about the finest people the land turns out! The women are aye the best, it's a pity the lads are not always sae weel guided. If there was a Hieland regiment here to draft some of thae lang-leggit lads into ilka year, it would be the making of the haill countryside."

"Very likely there will be, some day, but do you think they would stand the discipline?"

"Deevil a doot on't, they're easy guided when they have gentlemen to deal with as offishers; as for scouting, and outpost duty, they're born for it. Fighting's just meat and drink to them, ance they get fair started."

"English people don't think so," said the tourist. "They've always opposed the idea of having a naval reserve here, though everybody that's lived in the country long enough to know will tell me that Sydney Harbour lads are born sailors, and if there are many of the mountain boys like my friend 'Little-River-Jack,' they should make the best light cavalry in the world."

The Sergeant bent a searching eye on the speaker. "'Little-River-Jack,' ay, I ken the callant brawly. Ride, aye, that can he, and he's a freend, ye say?"

“Well, I came here with him. He showed me the way, an I wouldn’t swear he didn’t save my life, coming over that Razor-back pinch, on the Divide, as he called it.”

“And so ye cam’ on the Divide wi’ him, ou, ay? And ye’re gangin’ awa’ wi’ him to see the country?”

“Yes! I hear he knows every inch of it from the head of the Sturt to the Lower Narran, besides the mountain gold diggings. I’m going to see one of them, with him, when he comes to-morrow. There’s nothing strange about that, is there?”

“I wadna say; he joost buys gold in a sma’ way, and bullocks, for the flesher-folk, aboot the heid o’ the river. There’s talk whiles that he’s ower sib with the O’Hara gang, but I dinna ken o’ my ain knowledge.”

“Not proven, I suppose – the Scottish verdict, eh! Sergeant?”

The dinner was a success. The soup was fair. The fish represented by a Murray cod, about five pound weight, truly excellent. The turkey poult, like most country-bred birds, incomparably plump and tender, was roasted to a turn. The other adjuncts in strict keeping with the *pièce de résistance*.

The guest declined to join his entertainer in a bottle of Reisling, preferring a glass of whisky and water. Towards the close of the entertainment the landlord was announced, who took neither wine nor whisky, excusing himself on the ground that he had already been compelled “for the good of the house” to drink with more than one customer.

“I shall have to take to a decanter of toast and water, coloured

to look like sherry. This ‘What’ll you have, Boss?’ business, is getting too hot for me lately, and the men don’t like to see you afraid to taste your own liquor. But, as long as it’s something, they don’t seem to care what it is. I’ll take a cigar, though, sir, so as to be good company.”

One of the tourist’s extra quality Flor de Habanas being lighted the conversation grew more intimate, and bordering on the confidential. The Sergeant was prevailed upon to mix a tumbler of toddy, the night being cold, and the landlord, whose tongue had been previously loosened, among the choice spirits in the second dining-room, incited the Sergeant to give the company the benefit of his reminiscences.

“It’s cold enough, and a man that came in late,” said he, “could feel the frozen grass as stiff as wire. But the Sergeant’s been out many a night as bad, with nothing but his coat to sleep in, and afraid to make a fire for fear of giving away where his camp was.”

“Ay!” said the Sergeant, and his face settled into one of grim resolve, changing not suddenly, but, as it were, stage after stage.

“I mind one chase I had after an outlawed chiel that began wi’ horse-stealing, and cattle ‘duffing’ (they ca’ it in these parts), and ended in bloodshed maist foul and deleeberate. Ye’ve heard of Sub-Inspector Dayrell?”

“Should think I had,” said the landlord. “It was before I took this house; I was at Beechworth then, but every one heard of the case. He was the officer that ‘shopped’ Ned Lawless, and a young swell from the old country. There was a girl in it too.

Eumeralla was where he arrested them, and everybody knew there was something ‘cronk’ about it.”

“The verra mon! He’s gane to his accoont, and Ned’s serving his sentence. I aye misdooted that the evidence against Lance Trevanion (that was his name, he cam’ of kenned folk in Devon,) was ‘cookit,’ and weel cookit too, for his destruction, puir laddie.”

“Then you think he was innocent?”

“As innocent as the lassie that brocht in the denner.”

“What sentence did he get?”

“Five years’ imprisonment – wi’ hard labour. But he didna sairve it. He flitted frae the hulk *Success* where they sent him after he nigh killed Warder Bracker. He was a dour man and a cruel; he’d made his boast that he’d ‘break’ Trevanion, as he called it, because he couldna get him to knuckle doon to him like ithier convicts, puir craters! So he worked him harder and harder – complained o’ him for insolence – got him to the dark cell – once and again insulted him when there was nae ithier body to hear – and one day gave him a kick, joost as he’d been a dog in his road.

“That was mair than enough. Clean mad and desperate, Trevanion rushed at him, had him doon, and him wi’ his hands in his throttle, before he could cry on the guard. His eyes were starting out of his head – he was black in the face and senseless, when a warder from outside the cell who heard the scuffle, pulled him off. Anither ten seconds, and Bracker would have been a dead man – as it was, he was that lang coming to, that the doctor

gave him up.”

“What sentence did he get? They’d have hanged him long ago?” queried the host.

“He’d have got ‘life,’ or all the same twenty years’ gaol; but Bracker had been had up for cruelty to prisoners in another gaol before, and Mr. Melrose the Comptroller and the Visiting Justice were dead against a’ kinds o’ oppression, so they ordered a thorough inquiry. Some of the prisoners swore they’d seen Bracker knocking Trevanion about. He’d been ‘dark-celled’ for weeks on bread and water. When he came out he could hardly stand up. They’d heard him swear at Trevanion and call him a loafing impostor – and other names. The evidence went clear against him. Mr. McAlpine said Bracker ought to have had a year in gaol himself, and recommended his dismissal. So he left the service, and a good thing too. I’m no sayin’ that some of the convicts o’ the early fifties were not desperate deevils, as ever stretched halter. But they were paying for their ineequities – a high price too, when they’re lockit up night and day, working the whiles with airn chains on their limbs. And they that would make *that* lot harder and heavier, had hearts like the nether millstane.”

“What became of Trevanion, after all?”

“He was sent to the hulk *Success*. No great relief, ane would think. But it was better than stone walls. He had the sea and the sky around him day and night. It made a new man of him, they say. And before the year was oot (he had plenty money, ye see), he dropped into a boat through the port hole, one dark night, just

before the awfulest storm ye ever saw. Horses were waitin' on him next day, and ye'll no hinder him frae winning to the New Rush at Tin Pot Flat Omeo, where he worked as a miner and prospector, for twa year and mair, under the name of 'Ballarat Harry.'"

"Could not the police find him?" queried the tourist. "They were said to be awfully smart in the goldfields days."

"Yes!" said the old Sergeant solemnly, "they did find him, but they could do naething till him."

"You don't say so! Well, this is a strange country. He was identified, I suppose?" said the stranger. "Why was that?"

"Because he was deid, puir laddie! We pulled him up from a shaft saxty feet deep, wi' a bullet through him, and his head split with an axe. It was Kate Lawless that found him – her husband, Larry Trevenna and the murdering spawn o' hell, Caleb Coke, had slain him for his gold – and it may be for ither reasons."

"Good God! what a tragedy! Did the scoundrels escape?"

"Coke did by turning King's evidence. But Trevenna's wife rode near a hundred miles on end to give Dayrell the office. He ran Trevenna down in Melbourne, just as he had taken his passage to England under a false name. He was found guilty, and hanged."

"Then Trevenna's wife worked the case up against her own husband? How was that?"

"Weel, aweel, I'll no deny the case was what may be tairmed compleecated – sair mixed up. Lance Trevanion had been her

sweetheart, and when she jaloused, owing to Dayrell's wiles, that he had thrown her over, she just gave the weight o' her evidence against him, on his trial for having a stolen horse in his possession, knowing it to be stolen. Then in rage and desperation, for she repented sair, when she saw what her treachery had brought on him, she married Trevenna, who used her like a dog, they say, and was aye jealous of Lance Trevanion. And her cousin Tessie Lawless, it was her that got him frae the hulk."

"Oh! another woman!" murmured Blount; "as you say, Sergeant, it is a trifle mixed up. Who was she in love with?"

"Just Lance, and nae ither. She was true as steel, and never ceased working for him night and day till she got a warder in the hulk weel bribit, and persuadit twa gentlemen that lived in Fishermen's Bend by wild-fowling to tak' him awa' in their dinghy and find a guide and twa horses that brought him to Omeo. A wild, uncanny spot it was then, I warrant ye. Then the young lady, his cousin that came frae England to marry him – "

"What do I hear, Sergeant? *Another woman* in love with the ill-fated hero; that makes *three*— in love with the same man at the same time. It sounds incredible. And were they *really* fond of him?"

"Woman's a mysterious crea-a-tion, I've aye held, since she first walkit in the gairden o' Eden," quoth the Sergeant impressively. "Either of the Lawless girls would have died for him – and gloried in it. Kate, that was his ruin, wild and undeisciplined as she was, but for the poison that Dayrell

insteeled into her, wad ha' laid her head on the block to save his. Puir Tessie *did* die for him, as ye may ca' it, for she went into Melbourne Hospital when the fever was at its fiercest, and cried that they should give her the warst cases. The puir sick diggers and sailors called her 'The Angel of the Fever Ward,' and there she wrought, and wrought, day after day, and night after night, until she catchit it hersel', and so the end came. The doctors and the ither attendants said she hadna the strength to strive against it."

"A jewel of a girl!" quoth the Englishman; "why didn't he marry her?"

"She wouldn't marry *him*," said the Sergeant. "She kenned he was promised to his cousin, a great leddy frae the auld country, who came all the way to Australia to find him, and she said he must keep his troth."

"Women seem to differ in Australia much as they do elsewhere," mused the stranger.

"And what for no?" queried the old trooper; "there's bad and good all over the world – men as weel's women – and the more you see of this country, the more you'll find it oot. If they're born unlike from the start, they're as different from one another as your cob (as ye ca' him) frae 'Little-River-Jack's' Keewah that can climb like a goat, or from Middleton's auld 'Slavey' that can gallop twenty miles before breakfast, or draw a buggy sixty miles a day at a pinch. But if we get talking horse, we'll no quit till cockcrow."

CHAPTER III

“You will tell us about Dayrell, Sergeant?” said Mr. Blount. “Is it a tale of mystery and fear?”

“It was God’s judgment upon the shedding of innocent blood,” said the Sergeant solemnly; “they’re in their graves, the haill company, the betrayer and the betrayed. The nicht’s turned dark and eerie. To say truth, I wad as lieve lay the facts before ye, in the licht o’ day. It’s a dark walk by the river oaks, and a man may weel fancy he hears whisperings, and voices of the deid in the midnight blast. I’m at your sairvice ony day before ye leave Bunjil, but I’ll be makin’ tracks the noo, wi’ your permeession, sir, and my thanks to ye. Gude nicht!”

The veteran had made up his mind, and wrapped in a horseman’s cloak such as the paternal Government of Victoria still serves out to the Mounted Police Force, he marched forth into the night. The landlord parted from him on the verandah, while Blount walked up and down for an hour, watching a storm-cloud whelming in gathering gloom the dimly outlined range, until the rain fell with tropical volume necessitating a retreat to the parlour, where the logs still sent out a grateful warmth. “The old man must have missed that downpour,” he said. “He was wise to depart in good time.”

Another meeting was arranged. “Little-River-Jack” sent word by a “sure hand,” as was the wording of a missive in pre-postal

days, that he would arrive in Bunjil on the next ensuing Saturday, ready for a daylight start on Sunday morning, if that would suit Mr. Blount's convenience.

Pursuant to his promise, the Sergeant arrived to lunch at the Bunjil Hotel on the day specified. He did not make demand for the groom, but riding into the yard, opened the stable door and put up his ancient steed, slipping the bridle back over his ears, however, but leaving it ready to be replaced at short notice.

"It's an auld habit o' mine," he said to the landlord, who now made his appearance with apologies for the absence of the groom, who was "out, getting a load of wood," he explained. "We burn a lot here in the winter – it's just as well we haven't to pay for it – but it takes old George half his time drawing it in."

"You've got some fresh horses here," said the Sergeant, his keen eye resting on three well-conditioned nags at one end of the row of stalls; "are ye gaun to have races – the Bunjil Town Plate and Publican's Purse – and are the lads that own thae flyers come to tak' pairt? Yon grey's a steeplechaser, by his looks, and the two bays are good enough for Flemington."

The landlord fidgeted a little before answering.

"They're some digging chaps that have a camp at Back Creek. They buy their beef from 'Little-River-Jack,' and he takes their gold at a price. They do a bit of trade in brumbie-shooting now and then, the hides sell well and the horse-hair – I'm told. Between that and digging they knock out a fair living."

"Nae doot," replied the Sergeant, slowly and oracularly. "If

there's aught to be won by a guid horse and a bould rider, these are the men that'll no lose it for want of a sweater or twa. What names have they?" And here the old man fixed his eye searchingly on the host.

"Two O'Haras and a Rorke," answered the host, haltingly. "So they tell me – 'Irish natives,' from Gippsland way they call themselves."

"I wadna doot," quoth the Sergeant. "Eldest brother Jemmy O'Hara, a fell chiel. But let byganes be byganes. It's ill raking up misdeeds of fouk that's maybe deid or repenting, repenting in sa-ack-cloth and ashes. It'll be one o'clock, joost chappit. I'll awa ben."

"Ay!" said the Sergeant, lunch being cleared away, and both men sitting before the replenished fire, which the proximity of Bunjil to the snow line, as well as the frost of the night before, rendered grateful, "it's e'en a tale of vengeance long delayed, but the price of bluid was paid – ay, and mair than paid, when the hour cam', and the man. I was stationed at Omeo, I mind weel, years after Larry Trevenna was hangit for the crime, as well he desairved. If one had misdooted the words of Holy Writ, there was the confirmation plain for a' men to see. 'Be sure thy sin will find thee out.' They were half brithers, it was weel kenned, word came frae hame to that effect, and little thought the author of their being that the bairn o' shame, the offspring of the reckless days of wild, ungoverned youth, was born to slay the heir of his ancient house, in a far land; to die by the hangman's cord, amid

the curses of even that strange crew amang whom his life was spent. But he was fain to ‘dree his weird,’ as in auld Scottish fashion we say; all men must fulfil their appointed destiny. It’s a hard law maybe, and I canna agree with oor Presbyterian elders, that ae man is foredoomed to sin and shame, the tither to wealth and honours, and that neither can escape the lot prepared for him frae the foundation of the warld! But whiles, when ye see the haill draama played oot, and a meestery made clear, the maist careless unbeliever must acknowledge that Heaven’s justice is done even in this warld o’ appairtent contradeections. Weel, aweel, I’m gey and loth to come to the tale deed o’ bluid, o’ the fearsome eend. Things had settled doon at Omeo after the events ye ken o’. There was a wheen duffing and horse-stealing to contend wi’! But siccan lifting of kye will there be, amang these mountains and glens, I had a’maist said till the Day of Judgment – but no to be profane, the country was quieter than it had been for years, when word came to heidquarters that Ned Lawless had broken gaol; had been seen makin’ across by Talbingo to the table-land, aboot Long Plain and Lobb’s Hole. There was an ‘auld gun’ (as we ca’ confairmed creeminals) in the lock-up, as the news came; a Monaro native, and haun and glove with a’ the moss-troopers and reivers south of the Snowy River.

“D’ye know where Inspector Dayrell is now, Sergeant?” says he, quite free and pleasant. He was only in for ‘unlawfully using’ – a maitter o’ six months’ gaol at the warst.

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t; what call have ye to be speirin’?”

“He’ll never trouble me again, Sergeant, I’m full up of anything like a big touch now; this bit of foolishness don’t count. But if you want to do Dayrell a rare good turn, tell him to clear out to New Zealand, the Islands, San Francisco – anywhere.’

“‘Why should I?’ says I. ‘And him to lose his chance of being made a Superintendent.’

“‘Superintendent be hanged!’ (it was not in Court, ye ken), and he put his heid doon low, and spak’ low and airnest.

“‘Is a step in the service worth a man’s life? You tell him from me, Monaro Joe, that if Ned Lawless isn’t dead or taken within a month, his life’s not worth a bent stirrup iron.’

“‘And the Lawless crowd broken up?’ says I. ‘Man! ye’re gettin’ dotty. Ned’s a dour body, waur after these years’ gaol. I wadna put it past him, but he’s helpless, wantin’ mates. Coke’s a cripple with the rheumatics. Kate’s awa, naebody kens where.’

“‘Ye’re a good offisher, Sergeant,’ says he, ‘but you don’t know everything. You want a year’s duffing near Lobb’s Hole to sharpen you up. But if I lay you on to something, will you get the Beak to let me down easy about this sweating racket, a bloomin’ moke, worth about two notes! I never offered him for sale, the police know that. A rotten screw, or I shouldn’t have been overhauled by that new chum Irish trooper. I was ashamed of myself, I raly was.’

“‘If ye give information of value to the depariment as regards this dangerous creeminal,’ says I, ‘I’ll no press the case.’

“‘Well – this is God’s truth,’ says he, quite solemn. ‘His sister

Kate's been livin' at Tin Pot Flat for months, under another name. They say she's off her head at times, never been right since she lost her child.'

"'Lost her child!' says I. 'Ye don't say so – the puir crater, and a fine boy he was. How cam' that?'"

"'Well, the time Kate rode to White Rock and started Dayrell after Larry Trevenna, just as he was goin' to clear out for the old country, passin' hisself off for Lance (that *was* a caper, wasn't it?), she left her boy with the stockrider's young wife at Running Creek. The girl (she was a new chum Paddy) was away for a bit, hangin' out clothes or somethin'; the poor kid got down to the creek and was drowned. Kate was stark starin' mad for forty-eight hours. Then she took the kid in front of her on the little roan mare, and never spoke till after the Coroner come and orders it to be buried.'

"'And she at Tin Pot Flat, and me nane the wiser! Any mair of the crowd?'"

"'You remember Dick? – the young brother – he that was left behind when they cleared for Balooka – he's a man grown, this years and years; well, she lives with him. And they say she goes to the shaft every day that Lance was hauled out from, to kneel down and pray. What for, God only knows. Dick's quiet, but dangerous; he's the best rider and tracker from Dargo High Plain to Bourke, and that's a big word.'

"'I ken that; I'll joost ride round, and tak' a look – he'll need watchin', and if he's joined Ned, and Kate's makin' a third,

there'll be de'il's wark ere lang.'

"That evening the tent was doon, Kate and the younger Lawless chiel gane – and nane could say when, how, or where.

"For a week, and the week after that, the wires were going all day and half the nicht. Every police station on the border of New South Wales and Victoria from Monaro to Murray Downs was noticed to look up their black tracker, and have their best horses ready. As for Dayrell, they couldna warn him that the avengers o' bluid, as nae doot they held themselves to be, were on his trail. He was richt awa amang the 'snaw leases,' (as they ca'd them – a country only habitable by man or beast frae late spring to early autumn;) on the trail o' a gang o' horse and cattle thieves that had defied the police of three colonies. They had left a record in Queensland before they crossed the New South Wales border.

"Noted men among them – ane tried for murder! A mate, suspect o' treachery, was found in a creek wi' twa bullets in's heid – there were ither evil deeds to accoont for.

"Ay, they were a dour gang – fightin' to the death. So Dayrell took five of his best men and volunteered for the capture. 'He was getting rusty,' he said, 'but would break up this gang or they should have his scalp.' These were the very words he used.

"Omeo diggings were passed on the way up. There was sure to be some one that knew *him*, wherever he went in any of the colonies.

"A tall man put his head out of a shaft on 'Tin Pot' as he rode through the Flat at the head of his troopers, and cursed him with

deleeberate maleegnity until they were out of sight. ‘Ride on, you bloody dog!’ he said – grinding his teeth – ‘you won’t reign much longer now that Ned and I can work together again, and we have your tracks. I know every foot of the road you’re bound to travel now – once you’re as far as Merrigal there’s no get away between Snowy Creek and the Jibbo. It was our rotten luck the day we first set eyes on you. We were not such a bad crowd if we’d been let alone. Tessie had half persuaded Ned to drop the cross work after we got shut of the Balooka horses. The day afore he told me he’d two minds to let ’em go on the road. Then he couldn’t have been pulled for more than illegal using, which isn’t felony. But *you* must come along and spoil everything. Lance was copped, as innocent as a child: Ned gets a stretch – it was his death sentence. I know what it’s turned *him* into. Kate’s gone mad, what with losin’ the kid – a fine little chap, so he was (I cried when I heard of it)! Larry’s hanged – serve him right.

“Lance is dead and buried, poor chap! I don’t know what’ll become of me. And what’s more I don’t care; but I’ll have revenge, blast you! before the year’s out, if I swing for it!”

“He didna ken Dick Lawless again in his digger’s dress, and there were few that he didna remember either, if it was ten years after. So he joost gaed alang blithe and gay. The sun was abune the fog that aye hangs o’er the flat till midday, or maybe disna lift at a’ like a Highland mist. He touched his horse’s rein, and the gey, weel-trained beastie gave a dance like, and shook his heid, till bit and curb chain jingled again.

“Ah! me, these things are fearsome at the doing and but little better in the telling. He wadna hae been sae blithe had he seen anither face that peered o’er the shaft just as he turned at the angle of the road and struck into a canter with his troopers ahint him. It was the face of a haggard, clean-shaved man, with hair cut close to the head, and a wild, desperate look like a hunted beast – only one miner on the field knew who the strange man was, and he would never have kent him, but for hearin’ a whisper the night before of a ‘cross cove’ having come late at night to ‘Mrs. Jones’s’ tent.

“Dead beat and half starved to boot was he, but word went round the little goldfield that it was Ned Lawless, the famous horse and cattle ‘duffer’ who’d been arrested by Inspector Dayrell, and ‘put away’ for five years.

“Miners are no joost attached to thae kind o’ folk, and for this one, believed to have stolen wash-dirt cart-horses at Ballarat, they certainly had no love, but, as for layin’ the police on the hunted wretch, even though the reward was tempting, not a man, working as they were on a poor field, but would have scorned the action, and been vara unceevil to him that suggested it. No! that was the business of the police – they were paid for it – let them run him down or any other poor devil that was ‘wanted,’ but as for helping them by so much as raising a finger, it was not in their line.

“Anyhow, an hour before dawn, one man who had reasons for airly rising thought he saw Dick with his sister, ‘Mrs. Jones,’ and

the stranger, ride down the gulley which led towards Buckley's Crossing; the woman was on a roan pony mare, which she brought with her when she came on 'Tin Pot,' a year ago. The stranger had an old grey screw Dick had bought for a note, which would let any one catch him, night or day. The fog was thick, and he couldn't say on his oath which way they went, but they took what was called the 'mountain track.'"

"A nice crowd, as they say in these parts," said Mr. Blount. "Where did they go and what did they do, Sergeant?"

"They were ready for any de'il's wark, ye may believe," said the old man, impressively, "and, as I heard frae one that daurna speak me false, they were no lang ere they were at it.

"The day after they were seen leaving 'Tin Pot,' they called at a small settler's place and took his twa best horses. He was a man that had good anes, wad win races at sma' townships.

"The wife and her sister were at hame, the man was awa'.

"They loaded up a packhorse with rations, more by token a rug and twa pairs blankets. The younger man told them the horses wad maybe stray back. He paid for the rations and the blankets, but said they must have them. It was a lonely place. The woman sat on her horse, and wadna come ben, though they asked her to have a cup of tea. She shook her head; they couldna see her face for a thick veil she wore.

"This information didna come in for some days later, when the man won hame; the women were afraid to leave the place, ye may weel believe. The raiders rode hard, maistly at nicht, keepit

aff the main road, and took ‘cuts’ when they could find them. Dick Lawless knew them a’, could amaist smell them, his mates used to say.

“They got the Inspector’s trail and never lost it; if they were off it for a while, they could always ‘cut’ it again. *They* had telegraphs plenty (bush anes) but there were nane to warn Dayrell o’ them that thirsted for his life-bluid, and were following on through the snaw, like the wolves on a Russian steppe, as the buiks tell us. He was joost ‘fey,’ in the high spirits that foretell death or misfortune, as we Hielanders believe. He had the chance o’ a capture that would ring through three colonies. It did that, but no in the way he expeckit.

“He heard tell frae a bushman, a brither o’ the man that the gang shot before he had time to do more than threaten to ‘give them away,’ that they were to be at the ‘Ghost Camp’ aboot the twentieth o’ the month. An auld fastness this, at the edge o’ broken, mountainous country, where the wild blacks cam’ to hide after killing cattle or robbing huts, when Queensland was first ta’en up by squatters. A place no that easy to ride to, maist deeficult to discover, amang the great mountain forests o’ the border. Battles had there been, between the black police and the wild native tribes that were strong and bold in the pioneer days, no kenning, puir bodies, the strength o’ ceevilised man. It was there they halted after the massacre of Wild Honey Bank, where they killed after nightfa’ the haill family, men and women, wives and weans, an awfu’ spectacle they were as they lay deid in the

hot sun, unshaded, uncovered. I was tauld it by a man, was ane of the pairty that helped bury them. The pursuers slew and spared not. Wha shall judge them after the fearsome sights they saw? There's but few of that tribe left alive, and sma' wonder.

"An eerie, waesome spot, they tell me. The gunyahs hae na been leaved in this mony a year. The few fra-aments o' the tribe conseeder it to be haunted, and winna gang near. It's a strewed wi' skulls, and skeletons of whites and blacks mingled, nane having been at the pains to bury them. The grass grows rank abune the mouldering relics o' baith races. The banes gleam white when the moon is at her full, lying matted thegither amaisht concealed by the growth of years.

"Weel, aweel! I'm just daundering on toward the eend, the sair, sorrowfu' eending o' a fearsome tale. The twa pairties, that wad be the Queensland gang, and the Sydney-side lot, were nigh hand to the 'Ghost Camp' about the same time.

"That's sayin' the three Lawless bodies had ridden night and day – picking up fresh horses for the men, as they came along. Kate rode the roan pony mare all through, a grand little crater she was, and weel she earned her name 'Wallaby,' sae ca'ed after the kangaroo beastie that wad hop frae rock to rock, like ony goat o' the cliffs.

"The Inspector reckoned that Bradfield's gang wad show up in the gloaming o' the appointed day. No kenning that they had been betrayed, they wad camp careless like. Dayrell's tracker creepit oot and lay ahint a rock while they unsaddled and turned loose

their horses. Bradfield he knew – a tall powerfu' chiel, with a big beard, a Sydney-side native, and if he wasna the best bushman in Queensland, he wasna that far aff. Of the four men with him, twa had 'done time,' and were worse after they cam' oot o' gaol, than when they gaed in. They had grog in them; they made a fire – not a black fellow's one – and talked and laughed and swore, as they didna care wha might hear them.

“So far, a' went weel. Dayrell's party lay close – made no fire – prepared to deelever attack at dawn, when dootless Bradfield's men wad be asleep or all unsuspeecious. But were they? By no manner of means. The twa Lawless brithers and Kate had won to Wandong Creek i' the nicht – Ned and Kate had lain them doon, joost dead beat and like to dee wi' sheer exhaustion. Dick stowed the horse away in the gully. It's deep, and amaist covered in wi' trees and fern. Then being a tireless crater and in hard work and training, he thocht he would tak' a wee bit look oot, to make a' safe. It was weel thocht on – though not for the police party. It wasna lang ere he heard a horse whinnie. Not the nicher o' a brumbie, either. Then cam' the tramp o' anither and the jingle o' a hobble chain. Could it be the police? He would soon know. Creeping frae tree to tree, he came on the mob. Six riding horses, and two 'packers' all with the Crown brand on. Dayrell's dark chestnut, he knew *him* again. And a light bay with two white hind fetlocks. Police horses all, well fed and groomed. Now where was the camp?

“Keeping wide and crawling from log to log, like a night-

wandering crater o' the forest, he thought he saw a glimmer o' a fire – not a small one either. What d – d fool had lighted that, with a hot trail so close? So he walkit, ye ken, till what suld ail him to come ram-sham on six sleeping men. Police in plain clothes? Never! It was Bradfield's gang, believing that Dayrell was no within a colony o' them. And now to get speech. Their revolvers were under their hands, their rifles handy ye ken. If an alarm was given it might spoil the whole plan. With two other rifles, not counting Kate (and she was a fair shot at short range), they might turn the tables on Dayrell and his blasted police.

“Keen and ready witted as are the de'il's bairns at their master's wark, Dick Lawless wasna lang in conseedering the pairt he was to play. Crawling on hands and knees, he got as near Bradfield as was wise like without awaking him. He then gave a low whistle, such as stockriders give to tell of cattle in sight.

“Who the hell's that?” growled Bradfield, awake and alert.

“All right, Jim, only Dick Lawless. Cattle going to break camp. (They had been droving in old days.) Quite like old times, isn't it?”

“Wish I was back again behind a thousand Windorah bullocks,” said the bushranger.

“I wouldn't mind either, Jim. But all that's behind us now – worse luck! Where do you think Dayrell is? Give it up? D'ye see that black ridge, with three pines on it? Well, he's there, waiting for daylight. *He's* not fool to make a fire you can see miles off. You've nearly been had, Jim. He came up on purpose to collar

you. T'other side the black ridge, he's planted men and horses, six of 'em and a packer.'

"Who's with you?"

"Just Ned and Kate. They're lying down in Wandong Creek. Kate's goin' dotty now, poor thing, but she would come with us. Thinks she'll see the last of Dayrell.'

"Strikes me it's a case of 'Just before the battle, mother,'" said Bradfield. 'I'll wake these chaps. We must have a snack and fix up the Waterloo business. It's an hour to daylight yet.'

"Thus speaking he touched the man on his left, who awoke and touched the next. Without a spoken word the five men were aroused.

"Now, chaps!' said the leader, in low but distinct tones, 'Dick Lawless is come to give in the office. He's on the job too. Dayrell's behind the black ridge, with his five fancy troopers. He's come to collar us. Dick here and Ned have come to pay off old scores. With us to help he's like enough to do it. We're nigh about equal members, not countin' Kate, but the surprise they'll get's as good as two men.'

"How's that?" asked one of the gang.

"It's this way, we'll have first go. He thinks we don't know he's here. We'll take cover, and as soon as he shows out to surprise us, we roll into him. Dick here, Ned and Kate, go at him from Wandong Creek side. That'll put the stuns on him. Ned and Dick, both dead shots, will account for Dayrell. If he goes down the other traps won't stand long. Dick, you'll have a snack? No?"

Then, so long.’

“The faint line of clearer sky was slowly making itself veesible in the east as Dayrell at the head of his troopers moved towards Bradfield’s camp. The black tracker had showed him the position. The glimmering fire did the rest. ‘Now for a rush, men, we’ll catch them asleep.’ Saddles and swags were strewn around the fire, billy and frying-pan were there, not a man to be seen. But from five rifles at short range came a volley at the troopers, well-aimed and effective, and Dayrell’s right arm fell to his side broken or disabled.

“Three shots immediately followed from the Wandong Creek timber, on the left flank of the police. Confused at finding themselves between two fires, their leader wounded – for Dayrell’s right arm still hung useless – the troopers, after a second ineffectual volley, wavered. Just then three figures appeared, standing on a rock which ran crossways to the narrow outlet by which alone could the police party mak’ retreat.

“At the second volley two troopers dropped, one mortally, the other severely, wounded. ‘Hold up your hands, if you don’t all want to be wiped out,’ shouted Bradfield.

“‘By the Lord! that’s Kate Lawless,’ said one of the troopers, pointing to a tall woman who waved a rifle and shouted defiance after the first volley was fired.

“‘And that’s Ned, or his ghost,’ said another. ‘I thought he was safe in Ballarat Gaol. How the h – l did they get here?’

“As he spoke, the two men on the rock took deliberate aim

and fired, the Inspector in return firing his revolver with the left hand.

“The clean-shaved man dropped dead, wi’ a bullet through his head; Dayrell staggered for a few seconds and making an attempt to recover himself, sank to the earth. The woman sprang down from the rock, and rushing across the line of fire raised the dying man’s head from the ground and gazed into his face, in which the signs of fast-coming death were apparent.

“‘So this is the end of Inspector Frank Dayrell,’ she said, ‘trapped like a dingo by the poor devils he was hunting down. I told you you’d repent it, if you didn’t let *us* alone. And now my words have come true; the Lawless family gang’s broke up, but the bloodhound hasn’t much life in him neither. I sha’n’t last the year out, the old lot’s close up dead and done for, that was so jolly, and worked hard and straight, when we first came on Ballarat. Pity we took to ‘cross’ work, wasn’t it? Love – as they call it –’ here she smiled a strange, sad smile, ‘then jealousy, revenge, false swearing, murder – Poor Lance! I *did* him cruel wrong, and but for you, you, Francis Dayrell, I’d never have sworn a word to harm him. It’s driven me mad – mad! do you hear, Frank Dayrell? Good-bye, till we meet in – in – the other place!’

“The firing was o’er, Dick Lawless now showed himself between the rock and the clear space where lay the dead trooper and Dayrell. The Inspector raised himself on one arm and with the last glimmer o’licht in his glazing e’en, looked full in the woman’s face, as he drawled out the words, ‘Au revoir! Kate,

pleasant journey, inner circle of mine with the left, eh?" The light faded out of his eyes with the last word, and falling back, he was dead when his head touched the ground. The woman gazed for one moment on the still face; then in obedience to a sign from her brother, walkit over to him, and, mounting their horses, they rode away into the forest thegither. The police couldna but see they were ootnummered. Their leader and one trooper dead; anither was badly wounded. Four men – one barely able to sit on a horse – were no match for six.

““See here, men,’ said Bradfield, a tall, powerful native chiel wi’ a black beard, a grand bushman, too; ‘this here battle’s over, you’re euchred, your boss expected to catch us on the hop, and he’s been took himself. He was a game chap, and we don’t owe him no grudge, nor you either, though he went a bit out of his way in leavin’ his own district to collar another officer’s game. He didn’t reckon on Ned and Dick Lawless, and it’s them that knocked over his wicket. A fair fight’s righto, but it don’t do even for a policeman to get hissself disliked.’

““I say, Jim, the horses are up; are yer goin’ to preach here till the military’s called out?”

““All right, Jack, there’s no hurry. What’s to be done with the dead men? There’s Inspector Dayrell, our poor cove, and Ned Lawless. We can’t leave ’em here.’

““The police must pack their mates,’ said the second in command, ‘we’ll take away ours. Where’s the nearest township, or graveyard, if it comes to that?’

“We can make Warradombie in twenty mile’; here spoke one of the police troopers. ‘It’s close to Grant’s head station.’

“All right, you’ve got your packers; strap on the Inspector, and that Goulburn native, and let ’em be buried decent. We’re not black fellows. We’ll carry our man, and bury him first chance. Ned must stay where he is – he’s better there than under the gaol yard. Like as not Dick and Kate’ll come back to him. They’ve not gone far. Well, you’d better load, and clear – we’ll give you a lift, as you’re short handed. Don’t sing a bigger song than you can help. Give us a day’s law, and then we don’t care what you do. We haven’t acted so bad to you.’

“No, by George, you haven’t,’ said the senior constable, ‘except killin’ the two of us, and you couldn’t help that, seein’ you was fightin’ for your lives, as the sayin’ is.’

“So the enemies (as I’m tauld) helped to raise the fallen men, and fasten them on their horses. It was a sad-looking troop, as they moved off, with their dead legs tied underneath, and at the knees, to the saddles, their heads bowed low on the horses’ necks, so that they couldna fall off. But the upper bodies, with heids swaying aboot in that dreadful guise, lookit awfu’ ghaistly. Little thocht Frank Dayrell that he wad ride his last ride in siccan a fashion. But nane can foretell his eend, nor the manner o’t.

“Bradfield’s lot cleared without loss o’ time, carrying with them their dead and wounded, until a convenient burial place was reached. This duty completed, they separated, to meet in the ‘Never Never Country,’ between Burke Town and ‘The Gulf,’ a

‘strange, vain land’ (as one has written) where ‘night is even as the day,’ and the decalogue is no that seriously regarded, as in longer settled communities.

“Although the tither outlaws wadna charge themselves with Ned Lawless’ funeral, it is no’ to be inferred that he was buried without a prayer, or that tears werena shed o’er his lonely unhallowed grave. As had been surmised, Kate and the younger brother returned after nightfall.

“It was nearly midnight, the moonrays lighted up the weird shadows of the ‘Ghost Camp,’ lately throbbing wi’ gunshots, oaths, cries and exclamations. Blood had been shed; life had been taken; now all was still and deserted looking.

“Tribe had met tribe in the old, old days, and with spear-thrust, nulla nulla and boomerang, had fought out their conflicts, waged for pride, ambition or revenge. And always to the bitter end! Then came the white invader, with his iron axes, fine clothes and magical weapons, which slew before they touched. The sheep and cattle, such delicate morsels but which except a price was paid, too often that o’ bluid – they dared na’ take. Battles then were fought in which their bravest warriors fell; or if by chance they slew stockrider or shepherd, a sair harryin’ o’ the tribe followed.

“Those days were past; and now, how strange to the elders of the tribe, the white strangers fought among themselves, wounding, killing, and carrying away captive their brithers in colour and speech. These things were hard to understand. The

rays of the lately risen moon lit up the sombre glades of the battlefield as a man and woman rode in frae the forest track, and tied up their horses. They came to the rock where the dead man lay. He had fallen back when Dayrell's bullet pierced his brain, and was lying with upturned face and dreadful staring eyes. The woman knelt by his side, and while she closed them, said, 'Poor old Ned! I never thought to lay you out in a place like this. God's curse on them that drove you to it; but *he's* gone that we have to thank for our ruin; that debt's paid, anyhow! You were always a soft-hearted chap, and none of us, when we were little, had a hard time with you. Not like some brothers, who'd knock about the poor kiddies as if they were dingo pups.'

"I've nothing to say agen him," said the man, 'he was always good to me, I'd 'a done anything for him. It's hard to see him here lying dead, and with that infernal prison crop, not even a beard on his face, and what a jolly one he used to have. Here's where the irons hurt him; I expect he tried to break out afore, and they made him work in these.'

"My God!" cried the woman, passionately; 'don't talk of it any more. I shall scream out directly, and go more off my head than I am now, and that's bad enough. To think of him that used to come out of a morning so fresh and jolly, well dressed, and always with a good horse under him, and couldn't he ride? And now to see him lying here, starved and miserable, like a beggar; it's enough to break a heart of stone –'

"It's too late now, Kate, too late; but we'd better have

taken Tessie's warning and started a square trade, carrying or something, when the digging broke out,' said the man. 'We were all strong and full of go. I could do a man's work, young as I was; the money would have run into our pockets – yes, regular run in – if we'd made a square start and stuck to it. Look at Benson and Warner, see where they are now! They couldn't read and write neither, no more than us. Then there was that infernal Larry Trevenna. Poor Lance! I *was* sorry for him. They did us all the harm in the world; Larry with his gambling ways, and Lance setting you up to think you were good enough to marry him, and putting Dayrell's back up agen the family. Our luck was dead out from start to finish, and now they're all gone except you and me. I'd better set about the grave.'

"Where'd ye get the pick and shovel?"

"Some fossicker left them outside his camp. I saw them when I went to the spring for a drink.'

"For God's sake take them back, no use making more enemies than we can help. There'll be a row if he misses 'em!"

"All right! I'll drop them as we pass,' said her brother, as he drove the pick into the hard, stony soil.

"The woman took the short mining shovel, and with feverish energy cleared the narrow shaft as often as required. An hour's work showed a cavity of the necessary width and depth, wherein the brother and sister laid the wasted body of the eldest son of the family – once its pride as the best horseman, shearer, reaper, cricketer, stockrider, and all-round athlete of the highland

district of New South Wales. The pity of it, when misdirected energies hurry the men along the fiend's highway, leading to a felon's doom, a dishonoured grave!

“The pity of it! The man now lowered into the rude sepulchre, amid that ill-omened, blood-stained wild, might, under happier circumstances, and at a later day, have been receiving the plaudits of his countrymen, the thanks of his Sovereign, as the fearless, resourceful scout, whose watchful eye had saved a squadron, or whose stubborn courage had helped to block an advance until the reinforcement came up.

“It was not to be. Sadly and silently, but for the exclamation of ‘Poor Ned! good-bye! God have mercy on your soul!’ from the woman, the brother and sister rode away into the night.

“A rude cross had been fashioned and placed in a cairn of stones piled upon the grave. ‘The moonbeam strook, and deepest night fell down upon the heath’ as the hoofstrokes died away in the distance, deepening the sombre solitude of the spot, which had long worn the appearance of a place accursed of God and man!”

The far back, and by no means busy township of Dumbool was, if not enlivened, aroused from its normal apathy (when a race meeting, or a shearer's carouse was not in full operation), by the return of a party of mounted police. The leading inhabitants, always well informed in such matters, had received notice of them passing through the district, heading towards the border. The township was not so insignificant or the two hotels so

unimportant, as not to provide “Our Own Correspondent” of the *Weekly Newsletter*. This gentleman, who was Rabbit Inspector, Acting Clerk of the Bench, Coroner, and Honorary Magistrate, held all the minor appointments, not incompatible with the ends of justice, and the dignity of the Post Office, of which he was the present acting head, the Government Official of the branch being away on leave. He performed these various duties fairly well, delegating the Postal work to the leading storekeeper, and the Bench work to a neighbouring squatter, who, coached by the senior constable, was capable of getting through a committal without blundering. But the work of Special Correspondent was the one which he really enjoyed, and on which he chiefly prided himself.

He had often murmured at the poverty of the journalistic resources of his surroundings, which afforded no field for literary ability. Even when Nature seemed kindly disposed, by reason of abnormal conditions, he was restricted in efforts to improve the occasion by the vigorously expressed local censorship of the pastoralists. Did he draw a harrowing picture of the stricken waste, denuded of pasture, and strewn with dead and dying flocks, and herds, every one was “down on him,” as he expressed it, for taking away the character of the district. Did he dilate on the vast prairies waving with luxuriant herbage, after a phenomenal rainfall, he was abused as “inviting every blooming free-selector in the colony to come out and make a chess-board of their runs, directly they had a little grass.” There was no

pleasing them. Even the editor of the *Weekly Clarion*, mindful of influential subscribers, had admonished him to be careful in good seasons, as well as bad.

He was at his wits' end, between the agricultural Scylla, and the pastoral Charybdis, so to speak. It may be imagined with what gratitude he hailed the "Tragedy of Ghost Camp," as his headline described it, in which he was likely to offend nobody excepting the Police Department, for whose feelings his public had no great consideration.

Extract from the *Weekly Newsletter and Down River Advertiser*.

"It is long since the site of this celebrated locality, once notorious for tribal fights, and dark deeds of revenge, not always stopping at cold-blooded murder, if old tales be true, has resounded with the echo of rifle shots, the oaths of the victors, the groans of the dying! Yet such has lately been the case. But a few days since a deed of blood, of long-delayed vengeance, has been enacted, recalling the more lurid incidents of pioneer days.

"We had received information of the passing of Inspector Francis Dayrell, with a party of picked troopers, on a back track, running parallel to our main stock route. They carried a light camp equipment, not halting at stations or townships and apparently desirous to avoid observation. We have in another place expressed our disapproval of this practice, holding that the ends of justice are better served by forwarding information to the local press. Had that been done in the present case, the fatal

finale might have been averted.

“Be that as it may, the *cortège* that was descried approaching our principal street at an early hour this morning, presented a very different appearance from that of the well-accounted police party that our informant noticed but two days earlier heading for the broken mountainous country at the head of the Wandong Creek. The troopers detailed for this dangerous service were led by that well-known, and, we may say, dreaded police officer, the late Inspector Francis Dayrell, the greatest daredevil, the most determined officer of the Victorian Mounted Police.

“It was quickly noted by a sharp-eyed bushman, in the neighbourhood of Host Parley’s well-kept and commodious hotel, which commands the approach to our township from the north-east, that something was wrong with the body of police now approaching the town at a funeral pace.

“The trooper who rode in front led Inspector Dayrell’s well-known charger, a matchless hackney, perfect in the *manège* in which all troop horses are trained. The inspector was badly wounded and nearly insensible, from the manner in which he bowed himself on the horse’s neck, while he swayed helplessly in the saddle. The second trooper also led a horse on which was a wounded man. Behind rode two men, one evidently so badly hurt, that he sat his horse with difficulty.

“‘They’ve been cut up bad,’ said one of the bushmen. ‘Let’s ride up and meet ’em, Jack!’ Two men waiting for the mail mounted their horses, and met the little party; from which, after

a word or two with the Sergeant, they came back full speed to the hotel, and thus imparted the melancholy news.

“Police had a brush with Bradfield’s gang from Queensland, as they thought they were going to take. Some other chaps had joined them along with Dick Lawless, and double-banked ’em. Dayrell’s killed, and a trooper – they’re the two first; Doolan’s wounded bad. The Sergeant wants a room to put the dead men in till the Coroner’s inquest’s held; he’ll have ’em buried as soon as it’s over.’

“Great excitement was naturally evoked by this statement.

“In a few minutes the police arrived at the Hotel, where they were met by Mr. Clarkson, J.P., who obligingly undertook all necessary arrangements. The Inspector and the dead trooper were laid side by side in the best bedroom, the landlord resenting a suggestion to place the corpses in an outhouse – ‘He’d have had the best room in the house if he was alive. He always paid like a prince, and I’m not going to treat him disrespectful now he’s been killed in the discharge of his duty. Them as don’t care about sleeping there after him and poor Mick Donnelly, may go somewheres else. They’ll be buried decent from *my* house, anyway.’

“The Coroner impanelled a jury without unnecessary delay; and after the Sergeant and his men had necessary rest and refreshment, that official elicited evidence which enabled him to record a verdict of ‘Wilful murder against Edward James Bradfield and Richard Lawless in the cases of Inspector Francis

Dayrell of the Victorian Mounted Police Force, and trooper Michael Joseph Donnelly, then and there lying dead.’ This formality concluded, preparations were made for the funeral to take place next morning in the graveyard appertaining to the township, which already held a number of occupants, large in proportion to the population.

“Word had been sent to the neighbouring stations, so that by noon – the hour appointed – nearly as large a concourse as at the annual race meeting had assembled. There being no resident clergyman, the service was read over both men by the Coroner, who, by the way in which he performed the duty, showed that he was not new to this sad ceremony. We have repeatedly urged upon the Government the necessity of providing increased police protection for this important and scantily defended district. May we trust now that local wants will be more promptly attended to.

“The last offices being paid to the dead the surviving troopers rode slowly away leading the spare horses, and bearing the arms and effects of their comrades with them.

“Kate Lawless and her brother had disappeared. Whether they had made for the farthest out settled districts of Queensland, or had found a hiding place nearer home, was not known, though rumours to either effect gained circulation.”

“And noo ye hae the haill history o’ Frank Dayrell, late Inspector o’ the Mounted Police Force o’ Victoria, no forgetting the death of Ned Lawless, who died by his hand.

“And, as the sun’s low, and we’ve, I winna say wasted the

afternoon – maybe expended wad be a mair wise-like expression – I’ll just say good e’en to you, gentlemen, and gae me ways hame. The nicht’s for frost, I’m thinkin’,” and so saying, the worthy Sergeant declining further refreshment marched off along the meadow.

An early breakfast next morning, in fact, before the frost was off the ground, awaited Mr. Blount. In some inns it would have been a comfortless repast; a half-lighted fire struggling against a pile of damp wood, and producing more smoke than heat; a grumbling man cook, not too clean of aspect, who required to know “why the blank people wanted their grub cooked by candlelight,” and so on – “he’d see ’em blanked first, if there was any more of this bloomin’ rot.” Such reflections the guest has been favoured with, in the “good old days,” before the gold had settled down to a reasonable basis of supply and demand, and the labour question – as it did subsequently – had regulated itself. Waiting, too, for half an hour longer than was necessary for your hackney to eat his oats.

Far otherwise was the bounteous, well-served repast which sent forth Blount in fit order and condition to do his journey creditably, or to perform any feats of endurance which the day’s work might exact.

Sheila had been up and about long before daylight. She had consulted the favoured guest through his chamber door, as to which of the appetising list of viands he would prefer, and when the adventurous knight sallied forth in full war paint, he found a

good fire and a tempting meal awaiting him.

"I tell you what, Sheila," he said, regarding that praiseworthy maiden with an approving smile, "this is all very fine and you ought to get a prize at the next Agricultural Show, for turning out such a breakfast, but how am I to face burnt steak and sodden damper at the diggers' camp to-morrow morning?"

The girl looked at him earnestly for a moment or two without speaking, and then with an air of half warning, half disapproval, said, "Well – if you ask me, sir, the cooking's not the worst of it in those sort of places, and I can't see for my part why a gentleman like you wants going there at all. They're very queer people at the head of the river, and they do say that the less you have to do with them the better."

"But I suppose there *are* all sorts of queer characters in this new country of yours. I didn't come from England to lead a feather-bed life. I've made up my mind to see the bush, the goldfields, and all the wild life I could come across, and I suppose Mr. Little-River-Jack is about the cleverest guide I could have."

"Well – ye – es! he's *clever* enough, but there *are* yarns about him. I don't like to tell all I've heard, because, of course, it mightn't be true. Still, if I were you, sir, I'd keep a sharp look out, and if you spotted anything that didn't look square, make some excuse and clear."

"But, my dear girl, what *is* there to watch? Do he and his friends steal cattle or rob miners of their gold? Any highway business? Why can't you speak out? I see you're anxious lest I

should get into a scrape; on account of my innocence, isn't that it? And very kind of you it is. I won't forget it, I promise you."

"I can't say any more," said the girl, evidently confused. "But be a bit careful, for God's sake, and don't take all you're told for gospel;" after which deliverance she left the room abruptly and did not appear when Mr. Blount and his guide, both mounted, were moving off. They were in high spirits, and the cob dancing with eagerness to get away. As they left the main road at an angle, Blount looked back to the hotel towards a window from which the girl was looking out. Her features wore a grave and anxious expression, and she shook her head with an air, as it seemed to him, of disapproval.

This byplay was unobserved by his companion, who was apparently scrutinising with concentrated attention the track on which he had turned.

Throwing off all misgivings, and exhilarated by the loveliness of the weather, which in that locality always succeeds a night of frost, he gave himself up to an unaffected admiration of the woodland scene. The sun now nearly an hour high had dispelled the mists, which lay upon the river meadows, and brought down in glittering drops the frost jewels sparkling on every bush and branch.

The sky of brightest blue was absolutely cloudless, the air keen and bracing; wonderfully dry and stimulating. The grass waved amid their horses' feet. The forest, entirely composed of evergreens, from the tallest eucalypt, a hundred feet to the first

branch, to the low-growing banksia, though partly sombre, was yet relieved by an occasional cypress, or sterentia. The view was grand, and apparently illimitable, from the high tableland which they soon reached. Range after range of snow-clad mountains reared their vast forms to the eastward, while beyond them again came into view a new and complete mountain world, in which companies of snow peaks and the shoulders of yet loftier tiers of mountains were distinctly, if faintly, visible. What passes, what fastnesses, what well-nigh undiscoverable hiding-places, Blount thought, might not be available amid these highlands for refugees from justice – for the transaction of secret or illegal practices!

He was aroused from such a reverie by the cheery voice of his companion, who evidently was not minded to enjoy the beauty of the morning, or the mysterious expanse of the landscape in silence. “Great country this, Mr. Blount!” he exclaimed, with patronising appreciation. “Pity we haven’t a few more men and women to the square mile. There’s work and payin’ occupation within sight” – here he waved his hand – “for a hundred years to come, if it was stocked the right way. Good soil, regular rainfall, timber, water no end, a bit coldish in winter; but look at Scotland, and see the men and women it turns out! I’d like to be Governor for ten years. What a place I’d make of it!”

“And what’s the reason you people of Australia, natives of the soil, and so on, can’t do it for yourselves, without nobles, King or Kaiser – you’ve none of *them* to blame?”

“Haven’t we? We’ve too many by a dashed sight, and that’s the

reason we can't get on. They call them Members of Parliament here, and they do nothing but talk, talk, talk."

"Oh! I see; but they're elected by the people, for the people, and so on. The people – you and your friends, that is – must have been fools to elect them. Isn't that so?"

"Of course it is. And this is how it comes; there's always a lot of fellers that like talking better than work. They palaver the real workers, who do all the graft, and carry the load, and once they're in Parliament and get their six pound a week it's good-bye to honest work for the rest of their lives. It's a deal easier to reel out any kind of rot by the yard than it is to make boots and shoes, or do carpentering, or blacksmith's work."

"H – m! should say it was. Never tried either myself; but when they get into Parliament don't they do anything?"

"Well, in a sort of way, but they're dashed slow about it. Half the time, every law has to be altered and patched and undone again. They're in no hurry, bless you! – they're not paid by the job; so the longer they are about it the more pay and 'exes' they rake in."

"What's wrong with the law about this particular neighbourhood?"

"Well, they're allowed to take up too much land for one thing. I wouldn't give more than a hundred acres, if I had my way, to any selector," said this vigorous reformer. "The soil's rich, the rainfall's certain, and the water-supply's everlastin'. What's wanted is labour – men and women, that means. It'll grow

anything, and if they'd keep to fruit, root crops, and artificial grasses, they could smother themselves with produce in a year or two. Irrigate besides. See that race? You can lead water anywhere you like in this district."

"Well, why don't they? One would think they could see the profit in it. Here it is, under their feet."

"It's this way; a man with a couple of thousand acres can keep a flock of sheep. They don't do extra well, but they grow a fleece once a year, and when wool's a decent price the family can live on it – with the help of poultry, eggs and bacon, and chops now and then. It's a poor life, and only just keeps them – hand to mouth, as it were."

"Still, they're independent."

"Oh! independent enough – the ragged girls won't go out to service. The boys loaf about on horseback and smoke half the time. If they had only a hundred acres or so, they couldn't pretend to be squatters. The men would dig more and plough more, the greater part of the area would be cultivated, they could feed their cows in winter (which *is* long and cold in these parts), fatten pigs, have an orchard (look at the apple-trees at the last place we passed), do themselves real well, and have money in the bank as well."

"We must have a republic, and make you first Dictator, I see that. Now, where does this tremendous ravine lead to?"

"It leads through Wild Horse Gully, down to the Dark River – we'd better get off and walk the next mile or two – there's a

big climb further on.”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said the traveller. “How wild horses or any other travel about here, astonishes me. Where do they come from? There were none in Australia when the first people came, I suppose?”

“Not a hoof. They’ve all been bred up from the stray horses that got away from the stations, long ago. They’re in thousands among these mountains. It takes the squatters at the heads of the rivers all their time to keep them under.”

“Do they do much harm?”

“Well, yes, a lot. They eat too much grass for one thing, and spoil more than they eat, galloping about. Then they run off the station horses, especially the mares. Once they join the wild mob, they’re never seen again. Get shot by mistake, too, now and again.”

“Why! do they shoot horses here?”

“Shoot ’em, of course! The hides and hair fetch a fairish price. Some men live by it. They make trap yards, and get as many as a hundred at a time. The squatters shoot them now and again, and pay men to do it.”

“It seems a pity. A horse is a fine animal, wild or tame, but I suppose they can’t be allowed to over-run the country.”

The Wild Horse Gully, down which they were proceeding at a slow and cautious pace, was a tortuous and narrow pathway, hemmed in by rugged precipitous mountain sides. From its nature it was impracticable for wheeled vehicles, but the tracks

of horses and cattle were recent and deeply indented. These his companion scrutinised with more than ordinary care. The horse tracks were in nearly all instances those of unshod animals, but as he pointed out, there were two sets of recent imprints on the damp red loam, of which the sharp edges and nail heads told of the blacksmith's shop as plainly as if a printed notice had been nailed to one of the adjacent tree trunks; also that a dozen heavy cattle had gone along in front of them at rather a fast pace. These last had come in on a side track, their sliding trail down the face of the mountain showing plainly how they had arrived, and, as nearly as possible, to the experienced eye of one horseman, at what hour.

The day had been tedious, even monotonous, the pace necessarily slow; the chill air of evening was beginning to be felt, when the bushman, with a sigh of relief, pointed to a thin wreath of smoke. On an open, half-cleared spot, a hut built of horizontal logs was dimly visible; a narrow eager streamlet ran close to the rude dwelling, while at their approach a pair of cattle dogs began to bark as they walked in a menacing manner towards the intruders.

CHAPTER IV

“Down, Jerry! Down, Driver!” said the bushman, “that’ll do, you’re making row enough to frighten all the cattle in the country.” By this time the guardians of the outpost had left off their clamour, and one of them, by jumping up and fawning on Blount, showed that he had gained their friendship. The older dog, not so demonstrative, had stains of blood on his mouth and chest. “Ha! Driver, you old villain, been behind those cattle yesterday? Now lie down, and let’s see if we can raise a fire and get some tea under weigh, before the boys come in.”

After unsaddling, and turning out their horses, they entered the hut, which, though not differing materially from the bush structures which Blount had already visited, was seen to be neater than usual in the internal arrangements. “Little-River-Jack” proceeded at once to business. By lighting twigs from a store of brush-wood, laid ready for such an emergency, and adding another to the smouldering logs at the back of the huge chimney he secured a cheerful blaze, calculated to warm through his shivering companion, and to provide him speedily with the comforting, universal beverage. Opening a rude locker, he took from it a tin dish containing corned beef and “damper,” also a couple of tin plates with knives and forks of democratic appearance, and a butcher’s knife which did duty for a carver.

“You see your dinner, Mr. Blount,” said he. “I daresay you’ve

got an appetite this cold day; I know I have. Help yourself, the billy's boiling, I'll put in the tea." Suiting the action to the word, he took a handful of tea out of a bag hanging by a nail in the wall, and placing a pannikin of sugar on the table, invited his guest to help himself and fall to.

"It's not quite up to the breakfast we had this morning," he said; "but I've had worse many a time; tucker like this will carry a man a long way when he's on the road or at regular work."

This statement, more or less correct, was confirmed by the performance of both wayfarers, Mr. Blount plying a remarkably good knife and fork, besides disposing of a wedge of damper, and washing the whole down with a couple of pints of hot tea.

The fire was by this time in steady glow. Stretching his legs before it, and indulging in a luxurious smoke, the tourist expressed his opinion that he had known more artistic cookery, but had never enjoyed a meal more.

Mr. John Carter, the while, had washed and replaced the plates and pannikins; also rearranged the beef and bread with a deftness telling of previous experience. This duty concluded, they awaited the return of the gold-diggers.

"They don't come in while there's light to work by," he explained; "the days are that short now, that unless you're at it early and late there ain't much to show for it."

The twilight had faded into all but complete darkness when the dogs growled in a non-committal way, as though merely to indicate human approach without resenting it. "It's my pals

comin’,” the bushman observed; and, closely following the words, footsteps were heard, and a big, bearded, roughly-dressed man entered the hut. “Hullo! Jack, you’re here, and this is the gentleman from England,” he continued, fixing a bold, penetrating glance upon Blount. “Glad to see you, sir! This is a rough shop; but we’ve got fair tucker, and firewood’s plenty. We’ll soon show you the ins and outs of gold-digging, if that’s what you want to see. Jack got you a feed, I expect; fill up the billy, old man, while we get a wash.”

Seizing a handful of rough towels, and a bag which hung near the head of the bunk in the corner to the right of the speaker, he went out into the night; while certain splashing noises told that face and hands’ cleaning was in progress.

Little more than ten minutes had elapsed, when the speaker, accompanied by three other men, re-entered the hut, and after an informal mention of names to the stranger, sat down to the table, where they went to work at the beef and damper, with strict attention to business. Mr. Blount had an opportunity while they were thus engaged of a complete inspection. Though roughly dressed, there was nothing unpleasing to the educated eye about their appearance.

They wore red or blue woollen shirts, rough tweed or moleskin trousers, and heavy miners’ boots. All had beards more or less trimmed, and wore their hair rather short than long.

Three of the party were tall, broad-shouldered, and muscular; the fourth was middle-sized, slight and active-looking. He wore

only a fair moustache, and seemed younger than the others. Commencing to make conversation at once, he was evidently regarded as the wit of the party.

“So you’re back again, Jack, old man!” he said, addressing the guide with a half-humorous, half-cynical expression. “Goin’ to and fro on the earth, seekin’ what you might – well, not devour exactly, but pick up in a free and easy, genteel sort o’ way, like the old chap we used to be so frightened of when we were kiddies. Don’t hear so much about him now, do we? Wonder why? He ain’t dead, or played out, what d’ye make of it?”

“You seem to take a lot of interest in him, Dick,” said the guide. “Been readin’ sermons, or beginnin’ to think o’ your latter end? Lots of time for that.”

“Well, not so much that way, but I’m seriously thinkin’ o’ clearin’ out o’ this part o’ the country and tryin’ another colony. It’s too dashed cold and wet here. I’m afraid of my precious health. I hear great talks of this West Australian side – Coolgardie, or something like that – where it never rains, hardly, and they’re getting gold in buckets’ full.”

“You’re doin’ middlin’ well here, Dick,” said one of the other men in a dissuasive tone of voice. “The lead’s sure to widen out as it gets deeper and junctions with the Lady Caroline. Why don’t you have patience, and see it out?”

“Well, haven’t I been waitin’ and waitin’, and now I’m full up; made up my mind to sell out. If any one here will give me twenty notes for my fourth share of the claim after this divide, I’m up

to take it.”

“I’ll buy it,” said Mr. Blount impulsively. “I should like to have a turn at real mining, and this seems a fair chance.”

“Done with you, sir; we can write out an agreement here now. You’ll have a fourth share in the hut and tools, won’t he, mates?”

The men nodded assent. “Going cheap, Jack, isn’t it?”

“Dirt cheap, and no mistake. Mr. Blount never made a better bargain. I’ll cash his cheque on Melbourne, so you can clear to-morrow, Dick, though I think you’re a fool for your pains. We’ll witness the agreement here, and he can hold your miner’s right till he gets a transfer from the Registrar at Bunjil.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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