

**ROLF
BOLDREWOOD**

PLAIN LIVING

Rolf Boldrewood

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Rolf Boldrewood

Plain Living / A Bush Idyll

CHAPTER I

Mr. Stamford was riding slowly, wearily homeward in the late autumnal twilight along the dusty track which led to the Windähgil station. The life of a pastoral tenant of the Crown in Australia is, for the most part, free, pleasant, and devoid of the cares which assail so mordantly the heart of modern man in cities.

But striking exceptions to this rule are furnished periodically. “A dry season,” in the bush vernacular, supervenes. In the drear months which follow, “the flower fadeth, the grass withereth” as in the olden Pharaoh days. The waters are “forgotten of the footstep”; the flocks and herds which, in the years of plenty, afford so liberal an income, so untrammelled an existence to their proprietor, are apt to perish if not removed. Prudence and energy may serve to modify such a calamity. No human foresight can avert it.

In such years, a revengeful person could desire his worst enemy to be an Australian squatter. For he would then behold him hardly tried, sorely tormented, a man doomed to watch his most cherished possessions daily fading before his eyes; nightly to lay his head on his pillow with the conviction that he was so much poorer since sunrise. He would mark him day by day, compelled to await the slow-advancing march of ruin – hopeless, irrevocable – which he was alike powerless to hasten or evade.

If he were a husband and a father, his anxieties would be ingeniously heightened and complicated. The privations of poverty, the social indignities which his loved ones might be fated to undergo, would be forever in his thoughts, before his eyes, darkening his melancholy days, disturbing his too scanty rest.

Such was the present position, such were the prospects, of Harold Stamford of Windähgil. As he rode slowly along on a favourite hackney – blood-like, but palpably low in condition – with bent head and corrugated brow, it needed but little penetration to note that the “iron had entered into his soul.”

Truth to tell, he had that morning received an important letter from his banker in Sydney. Not wholly unexpected; still it had destroyed the remnant of his last hope. Before its arrival he had been manfully struggling against fate. He had hoped against hope. The season might change. How magical an alteration would forty-eight hours of steady rain produce! He might be able to tide over till next shearing. The station was being worked with the strictest economy. How he grudged, indeed, the payment of their wages to the men who performed the unthankful task of cutting down the *Casuarina* and *Acacia pendula*, upon which the starving flocks were now in a great measure kept alive!

But for that abnormal expenditure, he and his boy Hubert, gallant, high-hearted fellow that he was, might make shift to do the station work themselves until next shearing. How they had worked, too, all of them! Had not the girls turned themselves into cooks and laundresses for weeks at a time! Had not his wife (delicate, refined Linda Carisforth – who would have thought to see a broom in those hands?) worn herself well-nigh to death, supplementing the details of household work, when servants were inefficient, or, indeed, not to be procured! And was this to be the end of all? Of the years of patient labour, of ungrudging self-denial, of so much care and forethought, the fruit of which he had seen in the distance, a modest competence, an assured position? A well-improved freehold estate comprising the old homestead, and a portion of the fertile lands of Windähgil, once the crack station of the district, which Hubert should inherit after him.

It was hard-very hard! As he came near the comfortable, roomy cottage, and marked the orchard trees, the tiny vineyard green with trailing streamers in despite of the weary, sickening, cruel

drought, his heart swelled nigh to bursting as he thought how soon this ark of their fortunes might be reft from them.

Surely there must be some means of escape! Providence would never be so hard! God's mercy was above all. In it he would trust until the actual moment of doom. And yet, as he marked the desolate, dusty waste across which the melancholy flocks feebly paced; as he saw on every side the carcasses of animals that had succumbed to long remorseless famine; as he watched the red sun sinking below the hard, unclouded sky, a sense of despair fell like lead upon his heart, and he groaned aloud.

"Hallo, governor!" cried out a cheery voice from a clump of timber which he had approached without observing, "you and old Sindbad look pretty well told out! I thought you were going to ride over me and the team, in your very brown study. But joking apart, dear old dad, you look awfully down on it. Times are bad, and it's never going to rain again, is it? But we can't afford to have you throwing up the sponge. *Fortuna favet fortibus*, that's our heraldic motto. Why, there are lots of chances, and any amount of fortunes, going begging yet."

"Would you point out one or two of them, Master Hubert?" said his father, relaxing his features as he looked with an air of pride on the well-built youngster, who stood with bare throat and sun-bronzed, sinewy arms beside a dray upon which was a high-piled load of firewood.

"Well, let us see! if the worst comes to the worst, you and I must clear out, governor, and take up this new Kimberley country. I've got ten years' work in me right off the reel." Here the boy raised his head, and stretched his wide, yet graceful shoulders; "and so have you, dad, if you wouldn't fret so over what can't be helped. You'd better get home, though, mother's been expecting you this hour. I'll be in as soon as I've put on this last log. This load ought to keep them in firewood for a month."

"You're a good boy, Hubert. I'll ride on; don't knock any more skin off your hands than is absolutely necessary, though," pointing to a bleeding patch about half an inch square, from which the cuticle had been recently removed. "A gentleman should consider his hands, even when he is obliged to work. Besides, in this weather there is a little danger of inflammation."

"Oh, that!" said the youngster with the fine carelessness of early manhood. "Scratches don't count in the bush. I wish my clothes would heal of themselves when they get torn. It would save poor mother's everlasting stitch, stitch, a little, and her eyes too, poor dear! Now, you go on, dad, and have your bath, and make yourself comfortable before I come in. A new magazine came by post to-day, and the last *Australasian*. Laura's got such a song too. We're going to have no end of an evening, if you'll only pull yourself together a bit. Now you won't fret about this miserable season, will you? It's bad enough, of course, but it's no use lying down to it – now, is it?"

"Right, my boy; we must all do our best, and trust in God's mercy. He has helped us hitherto. It is cowardly to despair. I thank Him that I have children whom I can be proud of, whether good or ill fortune betide."

Mr. Stamford put spurs to his horse. The leg-weary brute threw up his head gamely, and, true to his blood, made shift to cover the remaining distance from the homestead at a brisk pace. As he rode into the stable yard, a figure clad in a jersey, a pair of trousers, and a bathing towel, which turned out to be an eager lad of twelve, ran up to him.

"Give me Sindbad, father; I'm just going down to the river for a swim, and I'll give him one too. It will freshen him up. I'll scrape him up a bit of lucerne, just a taste; his chaff and corn are in the manger all ready."

"Take him, Dick; but don't stay in too long. It's getting dark, and tea will soon be ready."

The boy sprang into the saddle, and, touching the old horse with his bare heels, started off on a canter over the river meadow, now comparatively cool in the growing twilight, towards a gravelly ford in which the mountain water still ran strong and clear.

With a sigh of relief, his father walked slowly forward through the garden gate and into the broad verandah of the cottage. Dropping listlessly into a great Cingalese cane chair, he looked round with an air of exhaustion and despondency. Below him was a well-grown orchard, with rows of fruit

trees, the size and spreading foliage of which showed as well great age as the fertility of the soil. The murmuring sound of the river over the rocky shallows was plainly audible. Dark-shadowed eucalypti marked its winding course. As the wearied man lay motionless on the couch, the night air from the meadow played freshly cool against his temples. Stars arose of wondrous southern brilliancy. Dark blue and cloudless, the sky was undimmed. Strange cries came from the woods. A solemn hush fell over all things. It was an hour unspeakably calm and solemn – restful to the spirit after the long, burdensome, heated day.

“Ah, me!” sighed he; “how many an evening I have enjoyed from this very spot, at this self-same hour! Is it possible that we are to be driven out even from this loved retreat?”

A sweet girlish voice suddenly awoke him from his reverie, as one of the casement windows opened, and a slight, youthful figure stood at his shoulder.

“No wonder you are ashamed, you mean old daddy! Here have mother and I been exerting ourselves this hot afternoon to provide you with a superior entertainment, quite a club dinner in its way; attired ourselves, too, in the most attractive manner – look at me, for instance – and what is our reward? Why, instead of going to dress sensibly, you sit mooning here, and everything will be spoiled.”

“My darling! I am ready for my bath, I promise you; but I am tired, and perhaps a little discouraged. I have had a long day, and seen nothing to cheer me either.”

“Poor old father! So have we all; so has mother, so has Hubert, so have I and Linda. But it’s no use giving in, is it? Now walk off, there’s a dear! You’re not so very tired, unless your constitution has broken down all of a sudden. It takes a good day to knock you up, that I know. But we must all put a good face on it – mustn’t we? – till we’re *quite* sure that the battle’s lost. The Prussians may come up yet, you know!”

He drew the girl’s face over to his own, and kissed her fondly. Laura Stamford was indeed a daughter that a father might proudly look upon, that her mother might trust to be her best aid and comfort, loving in prosperity, lightsome of heart as the bird that sings at dawn, brave in adversity, and strong to suffer for those she loved.

All innocent she of the world’s hard ways, its lurid lights, its dread shadows. Proud, pure, unselfish in every thought and feeling, all the strength of her nature went out in fondness for those darlings of her heart, the inmates of that cherished home, wherein they had never as yet known sorrow. The fateful passion which makes or mars all womanhood was for her as yet in the future. What prayers had ascended to Heaven that her choice might be blessed, her happiness assured!

“This is the time for action, no more contemplation,” she said, with a mock heroic air; “the shower bath is filled; your evening clothes are ready in the dressing-room; mother is putting the last touch to her cap, Andiamo!”

When the family met at the tea-table – a comprehensive meal which, though not claiming the rank of dinner, furnished most of its requisites – Mr. Stamford owned that life wore a brighter prospect.

His wife and daughters in tasteful, though not ostentatious, evening attire would have graced a more brilliant entertainment. The boys, cool and fresh after their swim in the river, were happy and cheerful. Hubert, correctly attired, and much benefited by his bath and toilette, had done justice to his manifest good looks.

The well-cooked, neatly served meal, with the aid of a few glasses of sound Australian Reisling, was highly restorative. All these permissible palliatives tended to recreate tone and allay nervous depression. “The banker’s letter notwithstanding, things might not be so very bad,” the squatter thought. He would go to town. He might make other arrangements. It might even rain. If the worst came to the worst, he might be able to change his account. If things altered for the better, there was no use desponding. If, again, all were lost, it were better to confront fate boldly.

“Shall I pull through, after all?” said Mr. Stamford to himself, for the fiftieth time, as he looked over the morning papers at Batty’s Hotel, about a week after the occurrences lately referred to. In a mechanical way, his eyes and a subsection of his brain provided him with the information that, in spite of his misfortunes, the progress of Australian civilisation went on pretty much as usual. Floods in one colony, fires in another. The Messageries steamer *Caledonien* just in. The *Carthage* (P. and O.) just sailed with an aristocratic passenger list. Burglars cleverly captured. Larrikins difficult of extinction. The wheat crop fair, maize only so-so. These important items were registered in the brooding man’s duplex-acting brain after a fashion. But in one corner of that mysterious store-house, printing machine, signal-station, whatnot, *one thought* was steadily repeating itself with bell-like regularity. “What if the bank’s ultimatum is, no further advance, no further advance, no further ad – ”

After breakfast, sadly resolved, he wended his way to the palace of finance, with the potentate of which he was to undergo so momentous an interview.

Heart-sick and apprehensive as he was, he could not avoid noting with quick appreciation the sights and sounds of civilisation which pressed themselves on his senses as he walked in a leisurely manner towards the Bank of New Guinea. “What wonders and miracles daily pass before one’s eyes in a city,” he said to himself, “when one has been as long away from town as I have! What a gallery of studies to a man, after a quiet bush life, is comprised in the everyday life of a large city! What processions of humanity – what light and colour! What models of art, strength, industry! What endless romances in the faces of the very men and women that pass and repass so ceaselessly! Strange and how wonderful is all this! Glorious, too, the ocean breath that fans the pale faces of the city dwellers! What would I not give for a month’s leisure and a quiet heart in which to enjoy it all!”

The solemn chime of a turret clock struck ten. It aroused Stamford to a sense of the beginning of the commercial day, and his urgent necessity to face the enemy, whose outposts were so dangerously near his fortress.

The ponderously ornate outer door of the Bank of New Guinea had but just swung open as he passed in, preceding but by a second a portly, silk-coated personage, apparently equally anxious for an early interview. He looked disappointed as he saw Stamford make his way to the manager’s room.

For one moment he hesitated, then said: “If your business is not important, sir, perhaps you won’t mind my going in first?”

“I’m sorry to say it *is* important,” he replied, with his customary frankness; “but I will promise you not to take up a minute more of Mr. Merton’s valuable time than I can help.”

The capitalist bowed gravely as Harold Stamford passed into the fateful reception-room, of which the very air seemed to him to be full of impalpable tragedies.

The manager’s manner was pleasant and gentlemanlike. The weather, the state of the country, and the political situation were glanced at conversationally. There was no appearance of haste to approach the purely financial topic which lay so near the thoughts of both. Then the visitor took the initiative.

“I had your letter last week about my account, Mr. Merton. What is the bank going to do in my case? I came down on purpose to see you.”

The banker’s face became grave. It was the crossing of swords, *en garde* as it were. And the financial duel began.

“I trust, Mr. Stamford, that we shall be able to make satisfactory arrangements. You are an old constituent, and one in whom the bank has reposed the fullest confidence; but,” here the banker pushed up his hair, and his face assumed an altered expression, “the directors have drawn my attention to the state of your account, and I feel called upon to speak decidedly. It must be reduced.”

“But how am I to reduce it? You hold all my securities. It is idle to talk thus; pardon me if I am a little brusque, but I must sell Windāhgil – sell the old place, and clear out without a penny if I do not get time – a few months of time – from the bank! You know as well as I do that it is impossible to dispose of stations now at a reasonable price. Why, you can hardly get the value of the sheep! Look

at Wharton's Bundah Creek how it was given away the other day. Fifteen thousand good sheep, run all fenced, good brick house, frontage to a navigable river. What did it bring? Six and threepence a head. Six and threepence! With everything given in, even to his furniture, poor devil! Why, the ewe cost him twelve shillings, five years before. Sale! It was a murder, a mockery! And is Windāhgil to go like that, after all my hard work? Am I and my children to be turned out penniless because the bank refuses me another year's grace? The seasons are just as sure to change as we are to have a new moon next month. I have always paid up the interest and part of the principal regularly, have I not? I have lived upon so little too! My poor wife and children for these last long years have been so patient! Is there no mercy, not even ordinary consideration to be shown me?"

"My dear Mr. Stamford," said the manager kindly, "do not permit yourself to be excited prematurely. Whatever happens you have my fullest sympathy. If any one receives consideration from the bank, you will do so. You have done everything that an energetic, honourable man could have done. I wish I could say the same of all our constituents. But the seasons have been against you, and you must understand that, although personally I would run any fair mercantile risk for your sake, even to the extent of straining my relations with the directors, I have not the power; I must obey orders, and these are precise. If a certain policy is decided upon by those who guide the affairs of this company, I must simply carry out instructions. Yours is a hard case, a *very* hard case; but you are not alone, I can tell you in confidence."

"Is there nothing I can do?" pleaded the ruined man, instinctively beholding the last plank slipping from beneath his feet.

"Don't give in yet," said Merton kindly. "Get one of these newly-started Mortgage and Agency Companies to take up your account. They have been organised chiefly, I am informed, with a view to get a share of the pastoral loan business, which is now assuming such gigantic proportions. They are enabled to make easier terms than we can afford to do; though, after all, this station pawn business is not legitimate banking. If you have any friend who would join in the security it would, perhaps, smooth the way."

"I will try," said Stamford, a ray of hope, slender but still definite, illumining the darkness of his soul. "There may be a chance, and I thank you, Mr. Merton, for the suggestion, and your wish to aid me. Good morning!" He took his hat and passed through the waiting-room, somewhat sternly regarded by the capitalist, who promptly arose as the inner door opened. But Harold Stamford heeded him not, and threading the thronged atrium, re-entered once more the city pageant, novel and attractive to him in spite of his misery. To-day he mechanically took the seaward direction, walking far and fast until he found himself among the smaller shops and unmistakable "waterside characters" of Lower George Street. Here he remembered that there were stone stairs at which, in his boyhood's days, he had so often watched the boats return or depart on their tiny voyages. A low stone wall defended the street on that side, while permitting a view of the buildings and operations of a wharf. Beyond lay the harbour alive with sail and steam. In his face blew freshly the salt odours of the deep, the murmuring voice of the sea wave was in his ears, the magic of the ocean stole once more into his being.

In his youth he had delighted in boating, and many a day of careless, unclouded joy could he recall, passed amid the very scenes and sounds that now lay around him. Long, happy days spent in fishing when the fair wind carried the boy sailors far away through the outer bays or even through the grand portals where the sandstone pillars have borne the fret of the South Pacific deep for uncounted centuries. The long beat back against the wind, the joyous return, the pleasant evening, the dreamless slumber. He remembered it all. What a heaven of bliss, had he but known it; and what an inferno of debt, ruin, and despair seemed yawning before him now!

He leaned over the old stone wall and watched mechanically the shadow of a passing squall deepen the colour of the blue waters of the bay. After a while, his spirits rose insensibly. He even took comfort from the fact that after the sudden tempest had brooded ominously over the darkening

water, the clouds suddenly opened – the blue sky spread itself like an azure mantle over the rejoicing firmament – the golden sun reappeared, and Nature assumed the smile that is rarely far from her brow in the bright lands of the South.

“I may have another chance yet,” Stamford said to himself. “Why should I despair? Many a man now overladen with wealth has passed into a bank on such an errand as mine, uncertain whether he should return (financially) alive. Are not there Hobson, Walters, Adamson – ever so many others – who have gone through that fiery trial? I must fight the battle to the end. My Waterloo is not yet lost. ‘The Prussians may come up,’ as darling Laura said.”

Although receiving the advice of Mr. Merton, whom he personally knew and respected, mainly in good faith, he was sufficiently experienced in the ways of the world to mingle distrust with his expectations. It was not such an unknown thing with bankers to “shunt” a doubtful or unprofitable constituent upon a less wary student of finance. Might it not be so in this case? Or would not the manager of the agency company indicated regard him in that light? How hard it was to decide! However, he would try his fortune. He could do himself no more harm.

So he turned wearily from the dancing waters and the breezy bay, and retracing his steps through the crowded thoroughfare, sought the imposing freestone mansion in which were located the offices of the Austral Agency Company.

“How these money-changing establishments house themselves!” he said. “And we borrowers pay for it with our heart’s blood,” he added, bitterly. “Here goes, however!”

He was not doomed on this occasion to any lingering preparatory torture, for in that light he had come to regard all ante-chamber detentions. He accepted it as a good omen that he was informed on sending in his card, that Mr. Barrington Hope was disengaged, and would be found in his private room.

CHAPTER II

Mr. Stamford was at once strongly prepossessed in favour of the man before whom he had come prepared to make a full statement of his affairs, and to request – to all but implore – temporary accommodation. Bah! how bald a sound it had! How unpleasant the formula! And yet Harold Stamford knew that the security was sound, the interest and principal nearly as certain to be paid in full as anything can be in this uncertain world of ours. Still, such was the condition of the money market that he could not help feeling like a beggar. His pride rebelled against the attitude which he felt forced to take. Nevertheless, for the sake of the sweet, careworn face at home, the tender flowerets he loved so well, he braced himself for the ordeal.

Mr. Barrington Hope's appearance, not less than his manner, was reassuring. A tall, commanding figure of the true Anglo-Saxon type, his was a countenance in which opposing qualities seemed struggling for the mastery.

In the glint of the grey eyes, in the sympathetic smile, in the deep, soft voice there was a wealth of generosity, while the firm mouth and strongly set jaw betokened a sternness of purpose which boded ill for the adversary in any of the modern forms of the duello – personal or otherwise.

"Mr. Stamford," he said, "I have heard your name mentioned by friends. What can I do for you? But if it be not a waste of time in your case – though you squatters are not so hard-worked in town as we slaves of the desk – we might as well lunch first, if you will give me the pleasure of your company at the Excelsior. What do you say?"

Mr. Stamford, in his misery, had taken scant heed of the hours. He was astonished to find that the morning had fled. He felt minded to decline, but in the kindly face of his possible entertainer he saw the marks of continuous mental exertion, mingled with the easily-recognised imprints of anxious responsibility. A feeling of sadness came over him, as he looked again – of pity for the ceaseless toil to which it seemed hard that a man in the flower of his prime should be doomed – that unending mental grind, of which he, in common with most men who have lived away from cities, had so cordial an abhorrence. "Poor fellow!" he said to himself, "he is not more than ten years older than Hubert, and yet what an eternity of thought seems engraven in his face. I should be sorry to see them change places, poor as we are, and may be." He thought this in the moment which he passed in fixing his eyes on the countenance of Barrington Hope. What he said, was: "I shall have much pleasure; I really did not know it was so late. My time in town, however, is scarcely so valuable as yours. So we may as well devote half an hour to the repairing of the tissue."

Mr. Stamford's wanderings in Lower George Street and the unfamiliar surroundings of the metropolis had so far overcome the poignancy of his woe as to provide him with a reasonable appetite. The *cuisine* of the Excelsior, and the flavour of a bottle of extremely sound Dalwood claret, did not appeal to his senses in vain. The well-cooked, well-served repast concluded, he felt like another man; and though distrusting his present sensations as being artificially rose-coloured, he yet regarded the possibility of life more hopefully.

"It has done me good," he said in his heart; "and it can't have done him any harm. I feel better able to stand up to hard Fate and her shrewd blows than before."

They chatted pleasantly till the return to the office, when Mr. Hope hung up his hat, and apparently removed a portion of his amiability of expression at the same time. He motioned his visitor to a chair, produced a box of cigars, which, with a grotesque mediæval matchbox, he pushed towards him. Lighting one for himself, he leaned back in his chair and said "Now then for business!"

The squatter offered a tabulated statement, originally prepared for the bank, setting forth the exact number of the livestock on Windähgil, their sexes and ages, the position and area of the run, the number of acres bought, controlled or secured; the amount of debt for which the bank held mortgage, the probable value of the whole property at current rates. Of all of which particulars Mr. Hope took

heed closely and carefully. Mr. Stamford became suddenly silent, and indeed broke down at one stage of the affair, in which he was describing the value of the improvements, and mentioning a comfortable cottage, standing amid a well-grown orchard on the bank of a river, with out-buildings of a superior nature grouped around.

Then Mr. Hope interposed. "You propose to me to take up your account, which you will remove from the Bank of New Guinea. You are aware that there is considerable risk."

("Hang it!" Mr. Stamford told himself; "I have heard that surely before. I know what you are going to say now. But why do you all, you financiers, like to keep an unlucky devil so on the tenter-hooks?")

Mr. Hope went on quietly and rather sonorously. "Yes! there has been a large amount of forced realisation going on of late. Banks are tightening fast. The rainfall of the interior has been exceptionally bad. I think it probable that the Bank of New Guinea has none too good an opinion of your account. But I always back my own theory in finance. I have great reason to believe, Mr. Stamford, that heavy rain will fall within the next month or two. I have watched the weather signs carefully of late years. I am taking – during this season, at any rate – a strong lead in wool and stock, which I expect to rise. Everything is extremely low at present – ruinously so, the season disastrously dry. But from these very dry seasons I foretell a change which must be for the better. I have much pleasure in stating that the Austral Agency Company will take up your account, Mr. Stamford, and carry you on for two years at the same rate of interest you have been paying."

Mr. Stamford made a commencement of thanking him, or at least of expressing his entire satisfaction with the new arrangement; but, curious to relate, he could not speak. The mental strain had been too great. The uncertain footing to which he had so long been clinging between ruin and comparative safety had rendered his brain dizzy.

He had been afraid to picture the next scene of the tragedy, when the fatal fiat of the Bank Autocrat should have gone forth, – the wrench of parting from the dear old place they had all loved so well. The unpretending, but still commodious dwelling to which he had brought his fond, true wife, while yet a young mother. The garden in which they had planted so many a tree, so many a flower together. The unchecked freedom of station life, with its general tone of abundance and liberality. All these surroundings and comforts were to be exchanged – if things were not arranged – for what? For a small house in town, for a lower – how much lower! – standard of life and society, perhaps even for poverty and privation, which it would cut him to the heart to see shared by those patient exiles from their pastoral Eden.

When Mr. Stamford had sufficiently recovered himself he thanked Mr. Hope with somewhat unaccustomed fervour, for he was an undemonstrative man, reserved as to his deeper feelings. But the manager of the Austral Agency Company would not accept thanks. "It may wear the appearance of a kindness, but it is not so in reality," he said. "Do not mistake me. It is a hard thing to say, but if it seemed such to me, it would be my duty not to do it. It is the merest matter of calculation. I am glad, of course, if it falls in with your convenience."

Here he looked kindly at his client – for such he had become – as if he fain would have convinced him of his stern utilitarian temperament. But, as he had remarked before, Mr. Hope's eyes and his sentiments contradicted one another.

"You have saved my home, the valued outcome of many a year's hard work – it may be my life also. That is all. And I'm not to thank you? Do not talk in so cold-blooded a manner; I cannot bear it."

"My dear sir," said Mr. Hope, with calm, half-pitying expression, "I am afraid you are not a particularly good man of business. It is as unfair to praise me now for 'carrying you on' for another year or two, as it will be to blame me for selling you up some fine day, if I am compelled to do so."

"Anyhow, it is a reprieve from execution. When shall I call again?"

“To-morrow morning, before twelve, let us say. I shall want you to sign a mortgage – a necessary evil; and if you bring me an exact amount of your indebtedness to the Bank of New Guinea, I will give you a cheque for it.”

“A cheque for it!” How magnificent was the sound. Mr. Stamford had drawn some tolerably large cheques in his time, which had been duly honoured, but of late years the cheque-drawing method had fallen much into abeyance.

Nevertheless, he felt like Aladdin, suddenly gifted with the wonderful lamp. The sense of security and the guarantee of funds, for even their moderate and necessary expenses, appeared to open to him vistas of wealth and power verging on Oriental luxury.

He lost no time; indeed he just managed to gain his bank before its enormous embossed outer door was closed, when he marched into the manager’s room with so radiant a countenance that the experienced centurion of finance saw plainly what had happened.

“Don’t trouble yourself to speak,” he said. “It’s all written on your forehead. We bankers can decipher hieroglyphs invisible to other men. ‘Want my account made up – securities ready to be delivered – release – cheque for amount in full.’ Who is the reckless *entrepreneur*?”

“The Austral Agency Company,” he replied, feeling rather cooled down by this very accurate mind-reading; “but you seem to know so much, you ought to know that too.”

“My dear fellow, I congratulate you!” Mr. Merton said, getting up and shaking him warmly by the hand. “I beg your pardon; but really, any child could see that you had been successful; and I began to think that it must have been one of Barrington Hope’s long shots. A very fine fellow, young but talented; in finance operates boldly. I don’t say he’s wrong, mind you, but rather bold. Everything will be ready for you to-morrow morning. Look in just before ten – by the private door.”

Mr. Stamford did look in. How many times had he walked to those same bank doors with an aching heart, in which the dull throb of conscious care was rarely stilled! Many times had he quitted that building with a sense of temporary relief; many times with a more acutely heightened sense of misery, and a conviction that Fate had done her worst. But never, perhaps, before had he passed those fateful portals with so marked a sense of independence and freedom as on the present occasion.

He had cast away the burden of care, at any rate for two years – two whole years! It was an eternity in his present state of overwrought feeling. He felt like a man who in old days had been bound on the rack – had counted the dread contrivances for tearing muscles and straining sinews – who had endured the first preliminary wrench, and then, at a word, was suddenly loosed.

Such was now his joyous relief from inward agony, from the internal throbs which rend the heart and strain to bursting the wondrous tissue which connects soul and sense. The man who had decreed all this was to him a king – nay, as a god. And in his prayer that night, after he had entreated humbly for the welfare of wife and children in his absence, and for his own safe return to their love and tenderness, Barrington Hope came after those beloved names, included in a petition for mercy at the hands of the All-wise.

It was not a long business that clearing of scores with the Bank of New Guinea under these exceptional circumstances. Such and such was the debit balance, a sufficiently grave one in a season when it had not rained, “to signify,” for about three years, when stock was unsalable, when money was unprecedentedly tight, but not, perhaps amounting to more than one-third of the real value of the property. Here were the mortgages. One secured upon the freehold, the other upon stock and station, furniture and effects.

“Yes!” admitted Mr. Stamford, looking over it. “It is a comprehensive document; it includes everything on the place – the house and all that therein is, every hoof of stock, hacks and harness horses, saddles and bridles – only excepting the clothes on our backs. Good God! if we had lost all! And who knows whether we may not have to give them up yet.”

“My dear Stamford,” said the banker, “you’re almost too sentimental to be a squatter, though I grant you it requires a man of no ordinary power of imagination to look forward from your dusty

pastures and dying sheep (as I am informed) to a season of waving grass and fat stock. Why only this morning, I see that on Modlah, North Queensland, they have lost eighty thousand sheep already!”

“That means they’ll have a flood in three months,” answered Stamford, forcing a laugh. “We *must* have rain. This awfully sultry weather is sure to bring it on sooner or later.”

“Ah! but when?” said Mr. Merton, corrugating his brow, as he mentally ran over the list of heavily-weighted station accounts to which this simple natural phenomenon would make so stupendous a difference. “If you or I could tell whether it would fall in torrents this year or next, it would be like – ”

“Like spotting the winner of the Melbourne Cup before the odds began to shorten – eh, Merton? Good Heavens! to think I feel in a mood to jest with my banker. That dread functionary! What is it Lever says – that quarrelling with your wife is like boxing with your doctor, who knows where to plant the blow that would, maybe, be the death of you? Such is your banker’s fatal strength.”

“I envy you your recovered spirits, my dear fellow,” said the over-worked man of figures, with a weary smile, glancing towards a pile of papers on his table. “Perhaps things will turn out well for you and all of us after all. You are not the only one, believe me, whose fate has been trembling in the balance. You don’t think it’s too pleasant for us either, do you? Well, I’ll send young Backwater down to Barrington Hope with these documents. You can go with him, and he will give a receipt for the cheque. For the rest, my congratulations and best wishes.” He pressed an electric knob, the door opened, a clerk looked in. “Tell Mr. Overdue I am at liberty now. Good bye, Stamford, and God bless you!”

On the previous day Mr. Stamford had betaken himself to his hotel immediately after quitting Mr. Barrington Hope’s office, and poured out his soul with fullest unreserve in a long letter to his wife, in which he had informed her of the great and glorious news, and with his usual sanguine disposition to improve on each temporary ray of sunshine, had predicted wonders in the future.

“What my present feelings are, even you, my darling Linda – sharer that you have ever been in every thought of my heart – can hardly realise. I know that you will say that only the present pressure is removed. The misfortune we have all so long, so sadly dreaded, which involves the loss of our dear old home, the poverty of our children, and woe unutterable for ourselves, may yet be slowly advancing on us. You hope I will be prudent, and take nothing for granted until it shall have been proved. I am not to relax even the smallest endeavour to right ourselves, or suffer myself to be led into any fresh expense, no matter how bright, or rather (pastoral joke of the period) how cloudy, the present outlook, till rain comes – until rains comes; even then to remember that there is lost ground to recover, much headway to make up.

“My dearest, I am as sure that you have got all these warning voices ready to put into your letter as if you phonographed them, and I recognised the low, sweet tones which have ever been for me so instinct with love and wisdom. But I feel that, on this present occasion – (I hear you interpose, ‘My dearest Harold, how often have you said so before!’) – there is no need for any extraordinary prudence. I am confident that the season will change, or that something advantageous will happen long before this new advance is likely to be called in. Mr. Hope assures me that no sudden demand will at any time be made, that all reasonable time will be given; that if the interest be but regularly paid, the Company is in a position, from their control of English capital, to give better terms than any colonial institution of the same nature. I see you shake your wise, distrustful head. My dearest, you women, who are said to be gifted with so much imagination in many ways, possess but little in matters of business. I have often told you so. This time I hope to convince you of the superior forecast of our sex.

“And now give my love to our darlings. Tell them I shall give practical expression to my fondness for them for this once, only this once; really, I must be a little extravagant. I shall probably stay down here for another week or ten days.

“Now that I am in town I may just as well enjoy myself a little, and get up a reserve fund of health and strength for future emergencies. I don’t complain, as you know, but I think I shall be all the better for another week’s sea air. I met my cousin, Bob Grandison, in the street to-day. Kind as usual, though he studiously avoided all allusion to business; wanted me to stay at Chatsworth House for a few days. I wouldn’t do that. I don’t care for Mrs. Grandison sufficiently; but I am going to a swell dinner there on Friday. And now, dearest, yours ever and always, fondly, lovingly, Harold Stamford.”

Having sent off this characteristic epistle, Mr. Stamford felt as easy in his mind as if he had provided his family with everything they could possibly want for a year. He was partially endowed with that Sheridanesque temperament which dismissed renewed acceptances as liabilities discharged, and viewed all debentures as debts of the future which a kindly Providence might be safely trusted to find means to pay.

Capable of extraordinary effort under pressure or the excitement of emergency; personally economical; temperate, and, above all, benevolent of intention towards every living creature, it must be admitted that Harold Stamford was instinctively prone frankly to enjoy the present and to take the future on trust.

Much of this joyous confidence had been “knocked out of him” – as he familiarly phrased it – by the austere course of events. He had for five years worked harder than any of his own servants. He had contented himself with but the bare necessities of food and clothing. Nothing had been purchased that could in any way be done without by that much-enduring, conscientious household, the members of which had made high resolve to do battle with remorseless Nature and unmerited misfortune.

And well indeed had all fought, all endured, during the long, dreary, dusty summers – the cloudless, mocking, rainless winters of past years. The family garrison had stood to their guns; had not given back an inch. The men had toiled and ridden, watched and worked, from earliest dawn to the still, starlit depths of many a midnight. The tenderly-nurtured mother and her fair, proud girls had cooked the dinners, washed the clothes, faithfully performed all, even the humblest, household work, with weary hands and tired eyes, for weeks and months together. Still, through all the uncongenial drudgery, their hearts had been firm with hope and the pride of fulfilled duty. And now Harold Stamford told himself that the enemy was in retreat, that the siege was about to be raised.

CHAPTER III

Mr. Stamford, having fulfilled his home duties temporarily in this liberal and satisfactory manner, felt himself at liberty to enter upon justifiable recreations with an easy conscience. He was by no means a person of luxurious tastes. But there had been always certain dainty meats, intellectually speaking, which his soul loved. These are rarely to be met with save in large cities. It had been an abiding regret with this man that his narrow circumstances had shut him out from the inner circles of art and literature. Now, he promised himself, at any rate, a taste of these long-forbidden repasts.

On this memorable afternoon he betook himself only to the sea-marge, where he lay dreaming in the shade of an overhanging fig-tree during the closing hours of day. What an unutterable luxury was it to his desert-worn soul thus to repose with the rhythmic roll of the surges in his ear – before his half-shut eyes the wondrous, ever-changing magic mirror of the ocean!

“What an alteration,” thought he, “had a single day wrought in his destiny! What a different person was he from the care-burdened, desponding man who had seen no possible outlet from the path of sorrow and disaster, at the end of which lay the grisly form of Ruin, like some fell monster watching for prey. Now the airs of Paradise were around him. The fresh salt odours of the deep, the whispering breezes which fanned his cheek, which cooled his throbbing brow, how strangely contrasted were these surroundings with the shrivelled, arid waste, the burning sun-blast, the endless monotony of pale-hued woodland, which he had so lately quitted!”

As the low sun fell beneath the horizon verge, he watched the golden wavelet and the crimson sky mingle in one supreme colour study. He heard the night wind come moaning up from misty unknown seas of the farthest South, where the hungry billow lay hushed to rest in eternal ice-fields, where dwelt the mystery and dread of polar wastes.

Then, with the darkening eve, the pageant glided into the vestibule of night and Mr. Stamford somewhat hastily arose, bethinking himself of the dining hour at Chatsworth House. He had not overmuch time to spare, but a few minutes before the appointed hour his cab deposited him beside the Pompeian mosaic which composed the floor of the portico. A wide, cool hall, gay with encaustic tiles, received him, thence to be ushered by the accurately-costumed footman into the drawing-room, already fairly astir with the expected company.

He was not an unfamiliar guest, but his present temper inclined him to consider more closely the curious inequalities of life – the various modes in which persons, not widely differing in tastes and aspirations, are socially encircled. What a contrast was there between the abounding luxury here heaped up, pressed down and running over, and the homely surroundings of his own home, from which nevertheless the danger of departure had well-nigh driven him mad. The parquet floors, the glittering treasures of the overmantels, the lounges, the dado, the friezes, the rare china, the plaques, the antique and the modern collections, each a study, the cost of which would have gone nigh to buy halt Windähgil.

When the hostess was informed by the imposing butler that dinner was served, and the guests filed into the dining-room, Mr. Stamford was nearly as much astonished by the magnificence of the repast and the concomitants thereof as if he had for the first time in his life beheld such splendours. In earlier days, now almost forgotten, such repasts had been to him sufficiently familiar. But these latter seasons of drought and despair had wholly, or in great part, excluded all thought of the pomps and vanities of life. So he smiled to himself, as he took the arm of Miss Crewit the *passée* society damsel to whom, by the fiat of Mrs. Grandison, he had been allotted, to find that his first thought was of startled surprise – his second of the habitudes which came to him as by second nature, and a conviction that he must have witnessed such presentments in a former state of existence.

All was very splendid, beyond denial. What was otherwise was aesthetically rare and almost beyond price. Antique carved furniture, mediæval royal relics, a sideboard which looked like an

Egyptian sarcophagus, contrasted effectively with the massiveness of the plate, the glory of the glass, the triumph of the matchless Sèvres dinner-service. In perfect keeping was the quiet assiduity of the attendants, the quality of the iced wines, the perfection and finish of the whole entertainment.

“Rather a contrast to the tea-table at Windāhgil!” Harold Stamford said to himself; “not but what I should have been able to do things like this if I could have held on to those Kilbride blocks for another year. Only another year!” and he sighed involuntarily. “It is very fine in its way, though I should be sorry to have to go through this ordeal every evening. Grandison doesn’t look too happy making conversation with that deaf old dowager on his right. He was brighter looking in the old working-time, when he used to drop in at Din Din, where we had a glass of whisky before bedtime with a smoke and a good talk afterwards. Bob certainly read more or less then. He begins to look puffy too; he doesn’t see much of the library now, I’m afraid, except to snore in it.”

Here his fair neighbour, who had finished her soup and sipped her sherry, began to hint an assertion of social rights.

“Don’t you think dear Josie looks a little pale and thin, though she is exquisitely dressed as usual? But I always say no girls can stand the ceaseless excitement, the wild racketing of a Sydney season. Can they, now?”

“To my eye she looks very nice, pale if you like; but you don’t expect roses and lilies with the thermometer at 80° for half the year, except when it’s at 100°.”

“Well, perhaps you’re right; but it isn’t the climate altogether in her case, I should say. It’s the fearfully exciting life girls of her *monde* seem to lead nowadays. It’s that which brings on the wrinkles. You notice her face when she turns to the light.”

“Are women worse than they used to be, do you think; or is Josie more dissipated than the rest of her age and sex?” queried Stamford.

“I don’t know that, though they do say that she is the fastest of a very fast set; and between you and me, there have been some rather queer stories about her, not that I believe a word of them. But the girls nowadays do go such awful lengths; they say and do such things, you don’t know *what* to believe.”

“Ah! well, she’s young and happy, I suppose, and makes the most of her opportunities of enjoyment. My old friend, Bob Grandison, has been lucky, and his family seem to have everything they can possibly want.”

“Everything, indeed, and more besides. (Chablis, if you please!) Then I suppose you knew Mr. Grandison when he was not quite so well off? They say he got into society rather suddenly; but I’m afraid it doesn’t do the young people quite as much good as it might. There’s the eldest son, Carlo, as they call him – he used to be Charlie when I first knew them.”

“Why, what about him? Nothing wrong, is there? He seems a fine lad.”

“Well, nothing wrong yet. Not yet; oh, no! Only he spends half his time at the club, playing billiards from morning till night, and he’s always going about with that horrid gambling Captain Maelstrom. They do say – but you won’t let it go further – that he was one of that party at loo when young Weener lost five thousand pounds, and such a scandal arose out of it.”

“Good heavens! You horrify me! A mere boy like that! It can’t be true; surely not.”

“I heard it on good authority, I assure you, and other stories too, which I can’t repeat – really too shocking to talk about. See how *empresse* he is with that Mrs. Loreleigh! What men see in that women I really can’t think.”

“My old friend had both sense and right feeling once upon a time,” said Stamford. “He can’t be so weak as to allow all this.”

“He does all he can, poor old gentleman; but Mrs. Grandison is so absurdly vain about Carlo’s good looks, and the fine friends he goes about with, that she can’t see any danger. Lord Edgar Wildgrave and that Sir Harry Falconer who was here last year (you know they do say that Josie broke her heart about Lord Edgar, and that makes her so reckless). But I know his father is very uneasy

about him, and well he may be. I'm afraid Ned bids fair to follow in his brother's footsteps. Thanks – I will take an olive.”

“What a wretched state of things!” groaned Mr. Stamford, almost audibly. “I must hope, for the sake of my friend's family, that matters may be exaggerated.”

“I wish they are, with all my heart,” said the candid friend. “They always have such delicious fruit here, haven't they? I must say they do things well at Chatsworth House. I always enjoy a dinner here. I see Mrs. Grandison making a move. Thanks!”

And so Miss Crewitt followed the retreating file of ladies that, headed by Mrs. Grandison's stately form, quitted the dining-room, leaving Mr. Stamford much disordered with the unpleasant nature of the ideas which he had perforce absorbed with his dinner. He could not forgive his late neighbour for introducing them into his system.

“Confounded, venomous, ungrateful cat!” he said in his righteous wrath. “How she enjoyed every mouthful of her dinner, pouring out malice and all uncharitableness the while! Serves Mrs. Grandison right, all the same. If she'd picked me out a nice girl, or a good motherly dame, I should not have heard all this scandal about her household. But what a frightful pity it seems! I must talk to Grandison about it.”

At this stage Mr. Stamford was aroused by his host's voice. “Why, Harold, old man, where have you got to? Close up, now the women are gone. Bring your chair next to Carlo.”

He walked up as desired, the other guests having concentrated themselves in position nearer the head of the table, and found himself next to the heir of the house, Mr. Carlo Grandison. That young gentleman, whom he had observed during dinner talking with earnestness to a lady no longer young, but still handsome and interesting, in spite of Miss Crewitt's acidulated denial of the fact, did not trouble himself to be over agreeable to his father's old friend.

He devoted himself, however, with considerable assiduity to the decanters as they passed, and drank more wine in half an hour than Mr. Stamford had ever known Hubert to consume in a month.

He did talk after a while, but his conversation was mainly about the last Melbourne Cup, upon which he admitted that he had wagered heavily, and “dropped in for,” to use his own expression, “a beastly facer.”

“Was not that imprudent?” asked Mr. Stamford, as he looked sadly at the young man's flushed face. “Don't you think it a pity to lose more than you can afford?”

“Oh! the governor had to stand the racket, of course,” he said, filling his glass; “and a dashed row he made about it – very bad form, I told him – just as if a thousand or two mattered to him. Do you know what we stood to win?”

“Well, but you didn't win!”

“I suppose in the bush, Mr. Stamford, you don't do much in that way,” answered the young man with aristocratic hauteur, “but Maelstrom and I, Sir Harry Falconer and another fellow, whose name I won't mention, would have pulled off forty-five thousand if that infernal First Robber hadn't gone wrong the very day of the race. Think of that! He was poisoned, I believe. If I had my will I'd hang every blessed bookmaker in the whole colony. Never mind, I'll land them next Melbourne Spring.”

“If there were no young gentlemen who backed the favourite, there would be fewer bookmakers,” replied Stamford, peaceably. “But don't you think it a waste of time devoting so much of it to horseracing?”

“What can a fellow do? There's coursing, to be sure, and they're getting up a trotting match. I make believe to do a little work in the governor's office, you know, but I'm dead beat to get through the day as it is.”

“Try a year in the bush, my dear boy. You could soon learn to manage one of your father's stations. It would be a healthy change from town life.”

“By Jove! It *would* be a change indeed! Ha, ha! ‘Right you are, says Moses.’ But I stayed at Banyule one shearing, and I give you my word I was that sick of it all that I should have suicided

if I had not been let come to town. The same everlasting grind – sheep, supers, and saltbush; rides, drives, wire fences, dams, dampers, and dingoes – day after day. At night it was worse – not a blessed thing to amuse yourself with. I used to play draughts with the book-keeper.”

“But you could surely read! Books are easy to get up, and there are always neighbours.”

“I couldn’t stand reading out there, anyhow; the books we had were all dry stuff, and the neighbours were such a deuced slow lot. Things are not too lively in Sydney, but it’s heaven compared with the bush. I want the governor to let me go to Europe. I should fancy Paris for a year or so. Take another glass of this Madeira; it’s not an everyday wine. No! Then I will, as I see the governor’s toddlin’.”

In the drawing-room matters were in a general way more satisfactory. A lady with a voice apparently borrowed from the angelic choir was singing when they entered, and Mr. Stamford, passionately fond of music, moved near the grand piano to listen. The guests disposed themselves *au plaisir*.

Master Carlo, singling out Mrs. Loreleigh, devoted himself to her for the rest of the evening, with perfect indifference to the claims of the other lady guests.

“What a lovely voice Mrs. Thrushton has!” said his hostess to Stamford, as soon as the notes of enchantment came to an end.

“Lovely indeed!” echoed he; “it is long since I have heard such a song, if ever – though my daughter Laura has a voice worth listening to. But will not Miss Grandison sing?” he said after a decent interval.

“Josie has been well taught, and few girls sing better when she likes,” said her mother with a half sigh; “but she is so capricious that I can’t always get her to perform for us. She has got into an argument with Count Zamoski, that handsome young Pole you see across the room, and she says she’s not coming away to amuse a lot of stupid people. Josie is quite a character, I assure you, and really the girls are so dreadfully self-willed nowadays, that there is no doing anything with them. But you must miss society so much in the bush! Don’t you? There are very few nice men to be found there, I have heard.”

“We are not so badly off as you suppose, Mrs. Grandison. People even there keep themselves informed of the world’s doings, and value art and literature. I often think the young people devote more time to mental culture than they do in town.”

“Indeed! I should hardly have supposed so. They can get masters so easily in town, and then again the young folks have such chances of meeting the best strangers – people of rank, for instance, and so on – that they never can dream of even *seeing*, away from town. Mr. Grandison wanted me to go into the bush when the children were young; and indeed one of his stations, Banyule, was a charming place, but I never would hear of it.”

“A town life fulfilled all your expectations, I conclude.”

“Yes, really, I think so; very nearly, that is to say. Josie has such ease of manner and is so thoroughly at home with people in every rank of life that I feel certain she will make her mark some day.”

“And your son Carlo?”

“Well, I don’t mind telling you, as an old friend, Mr. Stamford, that Mr. Grandison is uneasy about him sometimes, says he won’t settle down to anything, and is – well not really dissipated, you know, but inclined to be fast. But I tell him that will wear off as he gets older. Boys will be boys. Besides, see what an advantage it is to him to be in the society of men like Captain Maelstrom, Sir Harry Falconer, and people of that stamp.”

“I am not so sure of that, but I trust all will come right, my dear Mrs. Grandison. It is a great responsibility that we parents undertake. There is nothing in life but care and trouble, it seems to me, in one form or another. And now, as I hear the carriages coming up, I will say good night.”

Mr. Stamford went home to his hotel, much musing on the events of the evening, nor was he able to sleep, indeed, during the early portion of the night, in consequence of the uneasiness which the unsatisfactory condition of his friend's family caused him.

"Poor Grandison!" he said to himself. "More than once have I envied him his easy circumstances. I suppose it is impossible for a man laden with debt and crushed with poverty to avoid that sort of thing. But I shall never do so again. With all my troubles, if I thought Hubert and Laura were likely to become like those two young people as a natural consequence, I would not change places with him to-morrow. The boy, so early *blasé*, with evil knowledge of the world, tainted with the incurable vice of gambling, too fond of wine already, what has he to look forward to? What will he be in middle age? And the girl, selfish and frivolous, a woman of the world, when hardly out of her teens, scorning her mother's wishes, owning no law but her own pleasure, looking forward but to a marriage of wealth or rank, if her own undisciplined feelings stand not in the way! Money is good, at any rate, as far as it softens the hard places of life; but if I thought that wealth would bring such a blight upon my household, would so wither the tender blossoms of hope and faith, would undermine manly endeavour and girlish graces, I would spurn it from me to-morrow. I would –"

With which noble and sincere resolve Mr. Stamford fell asleep.

Upon awaking next morning, he was almost disposed to think that the strength of his disapproval as to the younger members of the Grandison family might only have been enthusiasm, artificially heightened by his host's extremely good wine. "That were indeed a breach of hospitality," he said to himself. "And after all, it is not, strictly speaking, my affair. I am grown rusty and precise, it may be, from living so monotonous a life in the bush, so far removed from the higher fashionable existence. Doubtless these things, which appear to me so dangerous and alarming, are only the everyday phenomena of a more artificial society. Let us hope for the best – that Carlo Grandison may tone down after a few years, and that Miss Josie's frivolity may subside into mere fashionable matronhood."

Mr. Stamford finished his breakfast with an appetite which proved either his moderation in the use of the good familiar creature over-night, or a singularly happy state of the biliary secretions. He then proceeded in a leisurely way to open his letters. Glancing at the postmark "Mooramah," the little country town near home, and recognising Hubert's bold, firm handwriting, he opened it, and read as follows: —

"My dear old Dad, – I have no doubt you are enjoying yourself quietly, but thoroughly, now that you have cleared off the Bank of New Guinea and got in with the Austral Agency Company. Mother says you are to give yourself all reasonable treats, and renew your youth if possible, but not to think you have the Bank of England to draw upon just yet.

"I told her you were to be trusted, and I have a piece of good news for you, which will bear a little extravagance on its back. I am very glad we were able to pay off that bank.

"They had no right to push you as they did. However, I suppose they can't always help it. Now for the news, if some beastly telegram has not anticipated it. We have had RAIN!

"Yes, rain in large letters! What do you think of that? Forty-eight hours of steady rain! Five inches sixty points! Didn't it come down! – cats and dogs, floods and waterspouts!

"The drought has broken up. The river is tearing down a banker. You can see the grass grow already. All bother about feed and water put safely away for a year at least. Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!

"I have sent most of the sheep out back. Dams all full, but none carried away, thank goodness!

"I got the hill paddock fence finished and the weaners all into it yesterday. Didn't get home till midnight.

"The run like a batter pudding, soaked right down to the bed rock. We shall have more grass than we can use. Old Saville (Save-all, I call him!) would sell five thousand young sheep, mixed sexes. He wants to realise. If Mr. Barrington Hope, or whatever his name is, will stand it, they would pay to buy. Wire me if I can close, but of course I don't expect it.

“I think I may safely treat myself to John Richard Green’s *Making of England* and Motley’s *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, so please post them. Everything looking first-rate. Laura is writing too.

“Your loving son,
Hubert Stamford.”

Next came a letter in a neat, characteristic, legible hand, not angular-feminine, which he well knew: —

“Oh! darling Dad, – We are all gone straight out of our senses with joy. We have had such blessed and beautiful rain. The windows of Heaven have indeed been opened – where else could such a lovely downpour come from?”

“All our doubts and fears are cleared away. Hubert has been working himself to death, poor boy; off before daylight and never home till twelve or one in the morning. He says that we shall have the best season known for years, and that nothing can possibly hurt the grass for a whole twelvemonth. Besides, more rain is sure to come. They always say that though. Some water came through here and there, but it was a blessing that Hubert and the old splitter put the new roof over the kitchen before the drought broke up. The dear garden looks lovely, I have been sowing a few flower seeds – so fresh and beautiful it is already.

“I rode to one of the out-stations with Hubert yesterday, and we got such glorious ferns coming back. I am sorry to say dear mother is not over strong. The hot weather, and the old trouble, ‘no servants,’ have been too much for her. Do you think you could bring back a good, willing girl as cook and laundress – that would shift the hardest part of the work off our shoulders – and I think Linda and I could manage the house-work, and be thankful too? Try your best, that’s a good old dad!”

“I have been reading *Middlemarch* strictly in spare time, and am getting on pretty well with my German and Italian. If you could bring up two or three books, and by all means a pretty song or two, we should have nothing left to wish for. Now that the rain has come, it seems like a new world. I intend to do great things in languages next year. How about Mrs. Carlyle’s letters? From the review we saw in *The Australasian*, they must be deeply interesting. We expect you to return quite restored to your old self. Write longer letters, and I am always,

“Your loving daughter,
“Laura Stamford.”

“So far, so good, indeed,” quoth Mr. Stamford to himself. “The year has turned with a vengeance. Let me see what the *Herald’s* telegrams say. Lucky I did not look at the paper. So Hubert’s letter gives me first news. Ah! another letter. Handwriting unknown, formal, with the English postmark, too. No bad news, I hope. Though I can hardly imagine any news of importance from the old country, good or bad, now. Luckily, I am outside the pale of bad news for a while, thanks to Barrington Hope and this breaking up of the drought. What says the *Herald*?”

”Mooramah

“(From our Own Correspondent.)

“Drought broken up. Heavy, continuous rain. Six inches in forty-eight hours. Country under water. Dams full. A grand season anticipated.

“Quite right for once, ‘Our Own Correspondent,’ albeit too prone to pronounce the ‘drought broken up’ on insufficient data. But now accurately and carefully observant. I drink to him in a fresh cup of tea.

“And now for the unknown correspondent. Here we have him.”

Mr. Stamford carefully and slowly opened his letter, after examining all outward superscription and signs. Thus went the unaccustomed missive: —

”Harold Stamford, Esq.,
“Windāhgil Station, Mooramah,
“New South Wales, Australia.
”*London, 23 Capel Court,*
“*April 14, 1883.*”

“Sir, — It has become our duty to announce the fact that, consequent upon the death of your cousin, Godwin Stamford, Esq., late of Stamford Park, Berkshire, you are entitled to the sum of one hundred and seventy-three thousand four hundred and sixty-nine pounds fourteen shillings and ninepence (£173,469 14s. 9d.), with interest from date, which sum now stands to your credit in the Funds.

“You are possibly aware that your cousin’s only son, Mark Atheling Stamford, would have inherited the said sum, and other moneys and property, at the death of his father, had he not been unfortunately lost in his yacht, the *Walrus*, in a white squall in the Mediterranean, a few days before the date of this letter.

“In his will, the late Mr. Godwin Stamford named you, as next of kin, to be the legatee of this amount, in the case of the deceased Mark Atheling Stamford dying without issue. We have communicated with our agent, Mr. Worthington, of Phillip Street, Sydney, from whom you will be enabled to learn all necessary particulars. We shall feel honoured by your commands as to the disposal or investment of this said sum, or any part of it. All business with which you may think fit to entrust our firm shall have prompt attention. — We have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servants,

“*Wallingford, Richards & Stowe.*”

Mr. Stamford read the letter carefully from end to end, twice, indeed, with an unmoved countenance. He pushed it away; he walked up and down the room. Then he went into the balcony of the hotel and gazed at the people in the street. He retired to his bed-room after this, whence he did not emerge for a short space.

Returning to the table he sat calmly down, gazing at his letter, and again examining the signature, the important figures, which also had the value set forth formally in writing. Yes, there was no mistake. It was not seven thousand four hundred and sixty-nine pounds. Nothing of the kind. One hundred and seventy thousand pounds and the rest. “One hundred and seventy thousand!” He repeated the words over and over again in a calm and collected voice. Then the tears rushed to his eyes, and he laid his head on his hands and sobbed like a child.

“For what did it all mean? Nothing less than this. That he was a rich man for life. That his wife, best-beloved, tender, patient, self-sacrificing as she had always been since he took her, a fresh-hearted, beautiful girl, from her father’s house, where she had never known aught but the most loving care, the most elaborate comfort, would henceforth be enabled to enjoy all the old pleasures, even the luxuries of life, from which they had all been so long debarred. They could live in Sydney or Melbourne, as it pleased them best. They could even sojourn in London or Paris, and travel on the continent of Europe.

“The girls could have all the ‘advantages,’ as they are called, of the best teaching, the best society, change of scene, travel.

“Great Heaven! what a vista of endless bliss seemed opening before him!”

But then, as he sat and thought, another aspect of the case, dimly, shadowy, of darker colours and stranger light, seemed to pass before him.

“Would the effect of the sudden withdrawal of all necessity for effort, all reason for self-denial, be favourable to the development of these tenderly-cultured, generous but still youthful natures?”

“When the cares of this world – which up to this point had served but to elevate and ennoble – were dismissed, would ‘the deceitfulness of riches’ have power to choke the good seed?

“Would the tares multiply and flourish, overrunning the corn, and would the uprooting of them import another trouble – a difficulty which might be enlarged into a sorrow?

“Would indolence and reckless enjoyment succeed to the resolute march along the pathway of duty, to the prayerful trust in that Almighty Father who granted strength from day to day? Would the taste for simple pleasures, which now proved so satisfying, be lost irrevocably, to be succeeded, perhaps, by a dangerous craving for excitement, by satiety or indifferentism?

“What guarantee was there for this conservation of the healthful tone of body and mind when the mainsprings of all action, restraint, and self-discipline were in one hour relaxed or broken?

“Could he bear to behold the gradual degeneration which might take place, which had so manifested itself, as he had witnessed, in natures perhaps not originally inferior to their own?”

Long and anxiously did Harold Stamford ponder over these thoughts, with nearly as grave a face, as anxious a brow, as he had worn in his deepest troubles.

At length he arose with a resolved air. He left the hotel, and took his way to the office of Mr. Worthington, whom he knew well, who had been his legal adviser and the depository of all official confidences for many years past.

It was he who had drawn the deed by which the slender dowry of his wife, with some moderate addition of his own, had been settled upon her. He knew that he could be trusted implicitly with his present intentions; that the secret he intended to confide in him this day would be inviolably preserved.

This, then, was the resolution at which Harold Stamford had arrived. He would *not* abruptly alter the conditions of his family life; he would gradually and unostentatiously ameliorate the circumstances of the household. But he would defer to a future period the information that riches had succeeded to this dreaded and probable poverty. He would endeavour to maintain the standard of “plain living and high thinking,” in which his family had been reared; he would preserve it in its integrity, as far as lay in his power until, with characters fully formed, tried, and matured, his children would in all probability be enabled to withstand the allurements of luxury, the flatteries of a facile society, the insidious temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Intent upon removing such dangers from their path in life, he felt himself warranted in using the *suppressio veri* which he meditated. And he implored the blessing of God upon his endeavours to that end.

Then, again, the station? It must stand apparently upon its own foundation. What pride and joy to Hubert’s ardent nature for the next few years would it be to plot and plan, to labour and to endure, in order to compass the freedom of the beloved home from debt! Now that the rain *had* come, that the account was in good standing, he had felt so sanguine of success that it would be cruel to deprive him of the gratification he looked forward to – the privilege he so prized.

And what task would employ every faculty of mind and body more worthily, more nobly, than this one to which he had addressed himself! Hubert’s favourite quotation occurred to him —

And how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers,
And the temples of his gods?

This he was wont to declaim when his mother, meeting him as he returned from weary rides, chilled by winter frosts, burnt black well-nigh by summer suns, had many a time and oft expostulated, telling him that he would kill himself.

The tears came into the father’s eyes as he thought of these things.

“Poor Hubert! poor boy! How he has worked; how he means to work in the future! We must manage not to let him overdo things now. I daresay I shall be able to slacken the pace a little for him without his suspecting the real cause.”

As he thought of his son, sitting Centaur-like on his favourite horse, with his head up, his throat bare, courage in his eye and manly resolution in his whole bearing – wild to do anything that was self-sacrificing, dangerous, laborious, fully repaid by a smile from his mother, a kiss from Laura, a nod of approval from himself – he could not help contrasting him with Carlo Grandison, the product, as he surmised, of a life of ease – of a system where self-restraint had been rendered obsolete.

He thought of Laura’s patient labours, of her constancy to uncongenial tasks, of her fresh, unsullied bloom, and sweet, childlike nature.

“God forbid!” he said, “that they should ever know wealth if such a transformation is likely to take place in their character. I know what they are now. It shall be my aim to preserve them in their present innocence. Let them remain unspotted from the world. I must invent a way by which fair development and mental culture may be furnished. But as to taking them away from this humble retreat where all their natural good qualities have so grown and flourished in the healthful atmosphere of home life, it were a sin to do it. I have made up my mind.” And here Mr. Stamford almost frowned as he walked along and looked as stern as it was in his nature to do.

On arriving at Mr. Worthington’s chambers, with the precious document carefully secured within his pocket book, he found that gentleman engaged. He, however, sent in his card with a request to be admitted at his leisure upon business of importance, and received a reply to the effect that if he could remain for a quarter of an hour, the principal would be at liberty.

The time seemed not so long with a tranquil mind. The days of the torture-chamber were over.

He employed it in re-considering the points of his argument, and when the door of Mr. Worthington’s private room opened, he felt his position strengthened.

“Sorry to detain you,” said the lawyer, “but it is a rule of mine to take clients as they come, great and small. Haven’t seen you for some time, Mr. Stamford. Had rain, I hear, in your country; that means everything – everything good. What can I do for you?”

CHAPTER IV

The eminent solicitor, than whom no man in his profession held more family confidences, not to say secrets in trust, here fixed a pair of keen grey eyes, not unkindly in expression, but marvellously direct and searching, upon his visitor.

“You have had a communication with reference to the subject of this letter,” said Mr. Stamford, placing it before him.

“Ah! Wallingford, Richards and Stowe – first-class men in the profession. Now you mention it, I certainly have, and I congratulate you heartily upon it. I have heard generally about your affairs, Mr. Stamford; losses and crosses, bad seasons, and so on. It has come at the right time, hasn’t it?”

“It certainly has; but, curiously, I had managed, with the aid of the grand change of season, to do without it. Now I have at once an explanation and an uncommon request to make.”

Mr. Worthington settled himself in his chair and took a pinch of snuff. “My dear sir,” said he, “pray go on. I am in the habit of hearing uncommon requests and curious explanations every day of my life.”

“Perhaps I may surprise even you a little. In the first place, does any one know of this rather exceptional legacy which I have received, or rather to which I am entitled?”

Mr. Worthington unlocked an escritoire, opened a drawer labelled “Private,” and took from it a letter in the same handwriting as the one before them. “Here is Wallingford’s letter. It has been seen by no eye but mine. It was answered by me personally. No other living soul is aware of it.”

“I have reasons, connected with my family chiefly, for not desiring to permit my accession to a fortune, for such it is, to be known by them, or by the public generally, till, at any rate, a certain number of years has passed. Can this be done?”

“Most assuredly, I can receive the money, which will then be at your disposal. No one need be a jot the wiser.”

“That’s exactly what I want you to do for me. To invest the amount securely, and to let the interest accumulate for the present. At the same time, I may, upon notice, be compelled to draw upon it.”

“That can be easily done. The interest will be lodged in the Occidental Bank – they have no directors there, by the way – to be drawn out if required, by cheque signed by you and me or my partner at my decease – must provide for everything, you know. If you require the whole, or any part, you have but to let me know, and I can send you the firm’s written guarantee that the money will be at your credit at the bank referred to, on any given day.”

“I am not likely to require the principal, but the interest I may draw upon from time to time.”

“The arrangement can be made precisely as you desire. When you authorise us on that behalf, the principal sum can be transmitted to this colony without delay. You will be able to secure seven or eight per cent. interest upon mortgage here without risk; and, as I said before, to draw, should you require, by giving reasonable notice. The course you are about to adopt is unusual; but I presume your reasons to be adequate. It is not my business to be concerned with them further than regards their legal aspect.”

“You have made my course easy, my dear sir, and relieved me of some anxiety. I wish now to give instructions for the addition of a codicil to my will, which is in your office. That being done, our business will be over.”

This truly momentous interview was at length concluded most satisfactorily, as Mr. Stamford thought. He made his way back to his hotel in a serious but not uncheerful state of mind, reserving till the following day a last interview with Mr. Barrington Hope.

On the morrow, when he betook himself to the offices of the Austral Agency Company, he smiled as he thought with what different feelings he had made his first entrance. How agitated

had been his mind with hope and fear! Scarcely daring to believe that he would receive other than the stereotyped answer to so many such requests – “Would have been happy under any other circumstances. Stock and stations unsalable. The money market in so critical a condition. The company have decided to make no further advances for the present. At another time, probably,” and so forth. He knew the formula by heart.

How fortunate for him that it had been the policy of this company, shaped by the alert and enterprising financial instinct of Barrington Hope, to entertain his proposal; to make the sorely needed advance; to float the sinking argosy; to risk loss and guarantee speculative transactions for the sake of extending the business of the company and gaining the confidence of the great pastoral interest. The bold stroke, carried out as to so many larger properties than poor, hardly-pressed Windāhgil, had been successful. The daring policy, now that the rain had come, had turned out to be wisely prescient. Capitalists began to talk of the man who, comparatively young, had shown such nerve and decision in the throes of a financial crisis – such as had just passed, thank God! The oft-quoted succour might have proceeded chiefly from a superior quality of head.

But Mr. Stamford told himself that to his dying day he should always credit Barrington Hope with those attributes of the heart which were rarely granted to meaner men.

At the present interview there were of course mutual congratulations.

“Had rain, I saw by the telegram, my dear sir. Heartily glad for your sake – indeed, for our own. Squatters fully appreciate the benefit their class receives by such a glorious change in the seasons. I wonder if they always remember their hard-worked brethren, the managers of banks and finance companies, upon whose weary brains such a weight of responsibility presses. Well, ‘to each his sufferings, all are men condemned alike to groan,’ &c.; we must bear our burdens as we best may. But this is very frivolous. It must be the rain. Nearly six inches! Enough to make any one talk nonsense. What can I do for you at present?”

Mr. Stamford shortly gave a *résumé* of Hubert’s letter, and mentioned the store sheep.

“Certainly, by all means; if, as I assume, you will have grass to spare. Buy for cash and save the discount. Would you like to telegraph? Excuse me.” He summoned a clerk. “Mr. Stamford wishes this telegram sent at once.” He had written: “Buy store sheep at once – for cash. Draw at sight. – Barrington Hope. – Hubert Stamford, Esq., Mooramah.”

“Is that right? Mr. Bowker, you will see that message sent through.” The door closed. “It is best not to lose time in these matters. Don’t you think so? Prices are rising every hour; sheep might be withdrawn.”

Mr. Stamford was quite of the same opinion, and was moreover delighted with the promptness with which the transaction was concluded.

“Shall you want more sheep before shearing? If so, don’t scruple to buy.”

“Well, we shall have more grass than we know what to do with, Hubert says,” commenced Mr. Stamford, rather aghast at this magnificent manner of buying all before him; “but I don’t know whether there is not a risk of over-stocking.”

“None whatever, I should say; take advantage of a good season when it comes, that’s the modern stock policy. Some very successful men, whose names I could tell you, always practise it. You will consult your son when you go home and let me know. But, admitting that you bought up to your carrying capacity, and sold all but your best sheep directly after shearing, you might make all safe, as they say at sea. Our Queensland constituents are buying largely to stock up new country. As your district has a good name for wool, you would have no difficulty in quitting them at a profit.”

“That makes a difference, certainly,” said Mr. Stamford, to whose mind – long a *tabula rasa* as regards speculation, having been too deeply occupied in compassing mere existence (pecuniarily speaking) – gorgeous enterprises and profits commenced to present themselves. “I will talk it over with Hubert, and let you know.”

“Certainly; wire rather than write, though; in matters of importance time is generally most precious. You are going; good bye! Most happy that our business intercourse has progressed so favourably.”

“You must permit me, my dear Mr. Hope, to say that I feel most grateful,” said Mr. Stamford, standing up and holding out his hand, “deeply grateful personally, for your kindness and courtesy, outside of any business relation whatever. No, you must not stop me. I shall feel it to my dying day, and I trust you will come and see us at our home – the home you saved for us, I shall always think – whenever you visit our part of the country.”

The hand-clasp was sincere and hearty; the interview terminated. The squatter went his way musingly down narrow, not over-straight George Street, on either side of which towering freestone buildings seemed to be uprising daily; while Barrington Hope addressed himself to a pile of letters from which he hardly raised his head until the closing of the office. As for Mr. Stamford, his day’s work was done. He mechanically thought over the store sheep question, but his face suddenly changed as he remembered in such matters he would be absolved from all anxiety or doubt in future. What rest – rest – all blessed rest of mind and body, would be his for all time to come!

Are there any disorders, sorrows, misfortunes, here below which so surely, if gradually, eat away the heart of man as those which spring from pecuniary dearth or doubt?

How the days are dimmed! How the nights are troubled! The glory of the sky, the beauty of the flower, the breath of morn, the solemn hush of midnight, Nature’s best gifts and treasures, how unheeded all, if not despised are they, when exhibited before the wretched thrall of debt!

To the galley slave in old classic days what were the purple waters of the Egean – the haunting beauty of the temple-crowned promontory? The choral dances, the flower-wreathed fanes of the Greek Isles were but mockeries to the haggard rowers of the trireme as she swept by, all too close to land. The grim jest of the old-world humorist was keenly close – that even the demons of the nethermost pit disdained to torture the luckless debtor, so wasted and dried up was every attribute of body and soul!

And was he indeed the same Harold Stamford that paced this very street wearily and so despondingly but one poor week ago? “And without the timely aid of the Austral Agency Company,” thought he, “I was even then so near to safety, to triumph! I feel like the man who clung so long to a marsh pile the long night through, in dread of drowning, and, dropping from exhaustion, found himself in four feet of water. And how wretched and despairing was I, how little hope was there in the world apparently! But for Linda and the children, I could have found it in my heart to make a quick end, in the harbour, of the misery which was becoming unendurable. It shows that a man should never despair. There are always chances. Hundreds, as poor Hubert said. But shall I ever forget Barrington Hope and his kindness? No, or may God forget me in my need. And what a grand fellow he seems to be!”

Having satisfactorily finished his soliloquy, Mr. Stamford bethought himself that he would make a parting call upon his friends, the Grandisons. He was going home in a day or two now and should be tolerably busy, he knew by experience, what with commissions and other matters which he was but too apt to put off till the last moment.

The ladies were engaged. Mr. Grandison was, however, at home, and, as it turned out, not in that cheerful frame of mind which befitted so rich a man. He had the world’s goods in profusion, but as Stamford marked his anxious brow and perturbed countenance, he saw that something had gone wrong.

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” Mr. Grandison said. “I was afraid it was a young fellow just out from home – got letters to us – the Honourable Mr. Devereux; he’s not a bad chap, but I don’t feel up to talking to a youngster I never saw before and won’t see again after next week. Come into my den and have a yarn, Harold. I want to talk to you. And, I say, stop and have a quiet *tête-à-tête* dinner. They’re going out – Josie and her mother – to one of Ketten’s recitals, as they call it. I’m in no humour for musical

humbug, I can tell you. I'm worried to death about that eldest boy of mine, Carlo. Stay, like a good fellow, and you can advise me. I'm fairly puzzled."

This was a matter of charity, and old friendship besides. Stamford's heart was touched at the spectacle of his old comrade troubled and in distress. He forgot the obtrusive magnificence, and thought of the long past days when they rode together beneath burning sky or winter storm, before one had found the road to fortune and the other had taken the bye-path which had only ended in happiness. "All right, Bob," he answered. "You shall have all the help I can offer. I'm sorry you've cause to be uneasy about the boy. We must hope for the best though. Youthful imprudence is not so uncommon."

"It's worse than that," said Mr. Grandison, gloomily – with a portentous shake of his head.

CHAPTER V

Just as dinner was announced, the carriage behind the grand three hundred guinea browns – perhaps the best pair in Sydney – rolled up to the door. Mrs. Grandison and Miss Josie fluttered down the stairs a few minutes afterwards in the full glory of evening costume. As host and guest stood in the hall, the lady of the house vouchsafed a slight explanation, mingled with faint regret that the latter was not coming with them.

“You know, Mr. Stamford, this is one of that dear Ketten’s last recitals. We really could not afford to miss it – especially as our friends, the Cranberrys, will be there. Lady C. sent a private message to Josie that she *must* go. I wanted to stop, for we really are miserable about that wicked boy Carlo; but Josie said it couldn’t make any difference to him, and why should we punish ourselves because he chose to be selfish and extravagant.”

Mr. Stamford could not wholly assent to these philosophical propositions. He thought of what Laura’s pleasure in hearing the musical magnate would have been on the same evening that Hubert had been declared a defaulter as to play debts, and was socially, if not legally, under a cloud.

He simply bowed coldly. Then he saw the pained maternal expression in Mrs. Grandison’s face, in spite of her worldliness and frivolity, and his heart smote him.

“My dear Mrs. Grandison,” he said, taking her hand, “I feel for you most deeply.”

Then suddenly came a voice from the carriage, in which Miss Josie had ensconced herself. “Mamma, I shall catch cold if we wait one moment longer. Hadn’t you better postpone your interesting talk with Mr. Stamford?”

Mrs. Grandison started, and then recovering herself, shook Mr. Stamford’s hand. “You will talk it over with Robert, won’t you? You are old friends, you know. Don’t let him be too hard on poor Carlo. I’m sure he has a good heart. Pray come and see us again before you leave.”

The portly form of his hostess moved off at a swifter rate than her appearance denoted. The footman banged the carriage door, and the grand equipage rattled out over the mathematically accurate curves of the drive. The dinner gong commenced to resound after a warlike and sudden fashion, and caused Mr. Stamford to betake himself hurriedly to the drawing-room. There he found Mr. Grandison standing by the fire-place in a meditative position.

Mr. Grandison turned at his friend’s entrance. “Seen Mrs. Grandison? Has she told you about it? Well, they’re gone now, and we can talk it over quietly. Come in to dinner. I’ve no appetite, God knows! but I want something to steady my nerves.”

The dinner, somewhat restricted for the occasion, was extremely good, though his host ate little, confining himself to a cutlet and some wonderful brown sherry. Not until the dessert was placed before them and they were alone did he begin the subject which lay so near to his heart.

“Of course I know, Stamford, that young fellows like my boy can’t be expected to live in a town like Sydney upon a screwy allowance – at any rate not if they are to be seen in good company. Therefore I’ve always said to Carlo, ‘Let me see you make your mark, and live like a gentleman. That’s all I ask of you, and you sha’n’t want for a hundred or two.’ I hadn’t got it to spend when I was his age – you know that, Harold; but if I like my youngster to be a bit different in some things, that’s my own affair, isn’t it, as long as I am willing to pay for it? Well that’s all right, you say. Take some of this claret, it won’t hurt you. It’s my own importation from Bordeaux. Of course I didn’t want the boy to slave in an office, nor yet to live in the bush year after year with nothing but station hands to talk to. If Mrs. Grandison had done what I wanted her to do, while the children were young, and lived quietly at Banyule, it might have been different. There we could have had everything comfortable; nearly as good as here. It would have been better for me, and them too, I expect. But she wouldn’t see it, and that’s why we’ve always lived in town.”

“Still,” interposed Stamford, “though you have been well enough off to afford to live where you pleased, I can’t imagine why Carlo should not keep the course and run straight, even in Sydney, like other young men of his age.”

Mr. Grandison sighed and filled his glass. “Some do, and some don’t, that’s about the size of it. I don’t know why the lad shouldn’t have enjoyed himself in reason like young Norman McAllister, Jack Staunton, Neil O’Donnell, and others that we know. They’ve always had lots of money, too; they’ve been home to the Old Country and knocked about by themselves, and I never heard that they’ve got into rows or overrun the constable. How my boy should have made such a fool of himself with a father that’s always stuck well to him, I can’t think. I’m afraid we’ve thought too much of his swell friends’ names and families, and not enough of their principles. I’ve told my wife that before now.”

“But what has he done?” asked Stamford. “If it’s a matter of a few thousands, you can settle that easily enough – particularly now we’ve had rain,” continued he, introducing the pleasantry as a slight relief to his friend’s self-reproachful strain.

“Yes, of course, I can do that, thank God! rain or no rain, though it made a matter of thirty thousand profit to me on those back Dillandra blocks – more than that. I shouldn’t care if the money was all; but this is how it is. I may as well bring it straight out. It seems that Carlo and Captain Maelstrom (d – n him! – I never liked a bone in his body) and some others were playing loo last week with a young fellow whose father had just died and left him a lot of money. The stakes ran up high – a deal higher than the club committee would have allowed if they’d known about it. Well, just at first they had it all their own way. This young chap was a long way to the bad – thousands, they say. Then the luck turned, and after that they never held a card. He played a bold game, and the end of it was that Carlo and the Captain were ten thousand out, and of course neither of them able to pay up. The Captain managed to get time, but Carlo, like a fool, went straight off and said nothing about it. He was afraid to come to me, it seems, as we’d had a row last time; so he did the very worst thing he could have done and cleared out to Tasmania. We got a letter yesterday. He’s over there now.” Here Mr. Grandison fairly groaned, and looked piteously in his old friend’s face.

“Well, well! but after all,” said Mr. Stamford, “of course it’s bad enough, gambling – high stakes and folly generally; but if you pay up, things will be much as they were, and it will be a lesson to him.”

“I hope it may be, but the worst of it is,” went on Mr. Grandison, “that the whole thing came out, and there was a regular *exposé*. The young fellow, Newlands, made a disturbance when he wasn’t paid, swore he’d horsewhip Carlo whenever he met him, and went on tremendously. Then the committee of the club took it up and talked of expelling Maelstrom and him for playing for stakes above the proper limit, and if the affair’s raked up it’s possible they will. I paid up in full, of course, as soon as I could get to know the amount. Newlands apologised very properly and all that. But the mischief’s done! Carlo can’t show his face in Sydney for I don’t know how long. All our hopes about his turning steady and settling down are disappointed. It’s a round sum of money to throw away for nothing, and worse than nothing. And what to do with the boy I don’t know.”

“It certainly *is* a hard case for his parents,” said Mr. Stamford, thoughtfully. “I scarcely know what to advise. A year or two on a station, or a turn at exploring in the far north used to be thought a remedy, or, at any rate, to hold out reasonable hope of amendment by change of scene and fresh interests, but – ”

“But that wouldn’t suit Carlo. He hates bush life – can’t live away from excitement – and I’m afraid, if I sent him away against his will, he’d take to drinking, or do something worse still. I’m at my wits’ end. He seems to have got it into his head that I’m to provide for him under any circumstances, and the consequence is he never thinks of doing anything for himself.”

“How do you think travel would act upon him? He has never seen the Old World, ‘the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them.’ Surely that would rouse sufficient enthusiasm to counteract the meaner pleasures?”

“Carlo would never get further than Paris if I trusted him alone. However, I shall have to try it, I suppose. The long and the short of it will be that we shall be obliged to move *en famille*. I can’t send him by himself after what has happened.”

“I really do think it is the best thing you can do. You can afford it easily. Station property is likely to look up for a few years now. You have excellent managers, and it will most likely benefit the other young people. I don’t see any objection; indeed everything seems in favour of it.”

“Of course we can do it,” said his friend, doubtfully; “but I didn’t intend to leave for a year or two yet – until we could have entered Cecil at one of the universities, and, in fact, made other arrangements. But Carlo is the master of the situation at present – he must be, as usual, considered before everything and everybody. Well, I’m much obliged to you, Stamford; indeed I feel most grateful; it has been a great relief to my mind to be able to talk the matter over with you quietly, and I really believe this idea of yours of travel abroad will suit everybody. Mrs. Grandison and Josie will be wild with delight, I feel sure.”

“I hope you will all have reason to be satisfied with the results of the step; and now, as it is getting late, I will say good night.”

“Good night, and thank you very much, old fellow! By the way, this rain has reached your part of the world, I see; I suppose your affairs are improving a bit now – look brighter, eh!”

“I have been enabled to make satisfactory arrangements lately,” said Stamford, shortly. “I have placed my account with the Austral Agency Company and we got on very well.”

“Ah, indeed. Rising man, that Barrington Hope. I wish – but it’s no use wishing. Well, good night again! Nothing like being independent of the banks; that’s always the safest line!”

“Safest indeed,” thought his guest as he walked down the gravel drive, just in time to miss the blazing lamps and chariot wheels of Mrs. Grandison’s equipage, which bore herself and her daughter back from the hall where the *maestro*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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