GOULD NAT

SETTLING DAY

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE LITTLE CHAP

He was riding hard and fast, the thud of his horse's hoofs resounded from the sun-baked ground. He rode for a life, the life of his child, a little chap six years old. As he urged on his mare he fancied in every moan of the wind he heard a cry of pain. His face was set and his eyes were tearless, but his heart throbbed painfully, and each pulsation seemed to increase his dread of what might happen in the homestead during his absence. In the Australian bush doctors are few and far between, and many miles have to be covered before assistance in case of sickness can be obtained.

Jim Dennis's had not been a happy life. He was practically an outcast from society, a solitary man, living in a lonely spot in the wilds of New South Wales. He had been grievously wronged, and knew it, but others did not, and the world's judgment upon him had been harsh and unjust. He hated the world, so he said, and thought he meant, it; but there was one connecting link with the past that softened his heart, and that was the little chap who lay fighting for life while he rode at a mad pace to fetch aid so necessary to save him; and the mare, with that unerring instinct which horses possess, knew she was set no ordinary task. The sun was glowing down upon man and beast, and the ground felt like hot bricks. There was no grass, for the wretched substitute in the dried shrivelled blades that nodded faintly in the wind could scarcely be designated as such.

No trees afforded a cool shade, and a stagnant water-hole or two was no temptation to drink.

Jim Dennis had several miles to go before he reached Swamp Creek, the nearest township to his lonely station.

He urged the mare on, and faster and faster she went, taxing her strength to the uttermost, and yet never faltering, her courage still high, her spirit undaunted. Her nostrils were extended and fiery red, a few faint traces of foam were on the bit, but her mouth was dry and parched as the ground she galloped over.

Her breath came in short, quick sobs, and Jim Dennis knew she would be well-nigh spent in another hour. He was not a cruel man, and he had great affection for all animals. It was mankind that he warred against, not the brute creation.

'Poor old lass,' he murmured as he patted her hot neck. 'Poor old Bess. This is a hard day's work for you old girl; but don't think me cruel. You must save his life – my little chap's life. He's dying, Bess. Do you hear – ? he's dying!' He almost shouted the last words in a long wail of agony.

The mare pricked her ears at the sound, and, noble beast that she was, stretched out in a final effort.

She almost flew over the ground and even Jim Dennis, who knew her so well, was surprised.

'She knows,' he thought. 'Good old Bess! She's never gone like this before.'

There was a singing in his ears, and a monotonous, wailing cry hovered around him.

If the little chap died he knew there was nothing left for him to live for. That small life breathed hope into him, and if it were extinguished the last flicker would go out of his heart.

In the far distance he saw a small cluster of houses, shanties would perhaps be the proper word. It was the dim outline of Swamp Creek, a miserable little place, but to Jim it seemed a haven of rest and hope.

The local doctor was a curious compound of self-conceit and good nature. He had been a ship's surgeon for many years, and if he was somewhat addicted to drink, no better hearted fellow could be found for a hundred miles round.

He was stranded in Sydney, but through the aid of a brother medico of repute he managed to establish himself at Swamp Creek, where in his bachelor state he eked out an existence.

Dr Thomas Sheridan, or, as he was familiarly known in Swamp Creek district, Dr Tom, was simply idolised by the inhabitants, and this adoration was not undeserved, for it often stood in lieu of medical fees.

Dr Tom, even when in his cups, was never known to refuse to undertake any journey, no matter how far, or in what weather, or how remote the chance of payment.

Although he did not look it, Dr Tom was by no means unskilful, and he had an iron nerve which no amount of bad, fiery liquor, could shake.

It was to Dr Tom that Jim Dennis was riding, and he felt every confidence in his being able to pull the little chap through if he could only get him there in time.

That was the all-important question: Would Dr Tom arrive in time?

Nearer and nearer the mare galloped towards the township, and the doctor, whose house stood at the edge of the village, saw them coming.

He was in a good humour. That morning he had completed a difficult operation to his entire satisfaction, although the patient had alluded to him as a 'blundering old idiot,' and wondered why such men were permitted to 'adorn' the medical profession.

Dr Tom was used to strong language, Swamp Creek was famous for it, in fact the Creek had almost a language of its own. The atmosphere probably had something to do with the warmth of the expressions used by the inhabitants.

Dr Tom looked at the mare and her rider, and said to himself:

'That's Jim Dennis. Wonder what the devil he's up to, tearing about the country like a madman in this heat. He's on a "jag," I guess. Well, he'll get no assistance here, I can do with all the "jag mixture" myself.'

Jim Dennis pulled the exhausted mare up with a jerk, and, springing out of the saddle, rushed up the steps of the doctor's house.

'He's dying, Dr Tom, the little chap's dying. Come at once. For God's sake man hurry! We haven't a moment to lose. You must save him. You can save him. You *will* save him! He's all I have in the world.'

'What, little Willie!' exclaimed Dr Tom. 'What's got hold of him?'

'Fever, or something. He's raving. Don't stand talking. Hurry up! Get out your buggy and horses. Never mind if you drive 'em to death. I'll pay for 'em. Only get there in time.'

'I'll be ready in a crack, Jim,' said Dr Tom, as he went inside, and, in a very short space of time, the buggy, with a decent pair of horses hitched to it, was at the door.

'Leave your mare here, she's dead beat,' said Dr Tom.

Away they went at full gallop, and as the doctor's buggy dashed out of the township, people looked after it and thought it must be a desperate case for him to drive his cattle at such a pace.

'Keep calm, man; keep calm, or you'll be ill yourself,' said Dr Tom.

'I can't do it, doc, the little chap may be dead,' and Jim Dennis groaned.

'Cheer up, mate, you never know what a youngster can pull through; they'll beat a man hollow. Many's the child I have seen live when a man would have died,' said Dr Tom.

There was a gleam of hope in Jim Dennis's eyes, but it quickly faded, and he said, —

'Bad luck has dogged me all my life. There's a curse upon me, and now it's fallen on the little chap.'

Dr Tom looked at him. He did not know the history of this man's life but he guessed some of it. He was a shrewd judge of character, and in his heart he believed that Jim Dennis was more sinned

against than sinning. He had heard strange stories of this lonely man, and he had more than once had a stand-up fight on his account. He liked Jim more than anyone about Swamp Creek, and he was very fond of the little chap, as Willie was called.

He meant to save the child if possible, and he had fought many a fight with grim Death and beaten him. Nothing gave Dr Tom more satisfaction than to rescue a patient from danger. It was not so much that he loved his profession as that he desired to overcome obstacles.

'Get up!' said the doctor, and laid the lash across the backs of his horses. 'It will ruin my pair, but I don't mind that. They are not accustomed to this pace.'

'You can take the best pair I have,' said Jim.

'I know that. You are not like the bulk of my patients. Cross words is the most I get from some of them,' said the doctor.

Jim Dennis smiled faintly. He knew Dr Tom did not exaggerate.

The buggy swayed from side to side and bumped up and down in a manner suggestive of an early turn over.

It was a rough country and there was only a track, made by the mail coach, which ran past Jim Dennis's place twice a week.

The doctor's buggy, however, was made to bear plenty of wear and tear, and, although it looked anything but elegant, it could stand a lot of knocking about. The last time it had been washed the Swamp Creek folk were so surprised that they turned out *en masse* to look at the unfamiliar operation. Dr Tom, who said he disliked publicity, had not since repeated the operation. The harness had several suspicions of bits of rope about it, and the horses were accustomed to do most of their own grooming by rolling in the stable yard. Altogether the turnout was not one to inspire confidence, but it was, nevertheless, a welcome sight to many a sufferer round Swamp Creek.

'We'll be there soon, Jim. Cheer up, old man. Don't let the little chap see you with a downcast face. Whom have you left with him?'

'Sal!'

'What! the half-caste?'

'Yes. She's a good sort.'

'Humph!' said the doctor.

'Who else could I leave?'

'No one, of course,' and Dr Tom applied the whip vigorously.

A cloud of dust rose around the buggy and they came to a stop; the sudden jerk nearly threw them out.

One of the horses was down. With a muttered curse, Jim Dennis jumped out and urged the animal to rise. The tired horse struggled to his feet and, as Jim sprang into the buggy, moved on again.

'Dead beat,' said Dr Tom; 'but he'll last to your place.'

In half an hour they saw Dennis's homestead in the distance, and again the lash came down on the horses' backs, wielded by Dr Tom's vigorous arm.

It was a moment of terrible suspense to Jim Dennis when the buggy pulled up, and Dr Tom, springing out with more activity than might have been expected, hurried into the cottage.

Jim was almost afraid to follow him.

If the little chap was dead he felt he could not bear the blow.

The minute or two he stood outside waiting seemed an eternity.

Then came a relief that was well-nigh as insupportable. It was Dr Tom who called out, —

'Come in, Jim, the little chap's alive. I'll pull him through. He's not so bad after all.'

'Thank God!' said Jim Dennis, whose prayers had been few and far between.

CHAPTER II
BLACK SAL

Jim Dennis's homestead was anything but an enticing place. He had built the bulk of it himself, and said it was good enough. The boards were fairly weather-beaten and the galvanised iron roof was torn at the ends by wind and rain. A small verandah in front was reached by five rickety steps, and some of the piles on which the house was built afforded a fine refuge for white ants. These insects were so industrious that one stump was a crumbling mass, so laboriously had it been honeycombed.

Around the homestead was the stable yard, a dull, dreary-looking place, consisting of two or three sheds hurriedly run up, a heap of refuse, a dirty old dog kennel, home made, a sheep pen, and a few etceteras, that men who have known such places will imagine.

For all that, however, Jim Dennis had a fair station. He had purchased it in the rough from the Government and obtained it on easy terms. All payments had been kept up and the land was his own.

Jim Dennis was never known to repudiate debts. His name was 'good' with the storekeepers for miles round, but he was more feared than respected. No one seemed able to understand him. He had an inscrutable face, and was seldom seen to smile except when the little chap was with him.

'He's a bad lot,' was the Swamp Creek opinion.

'And let me tell you, you "bounders,"' said Dr Tom, 'that half of you are not fit to black Jim Dennis's boots.'

'He never has 'em blacked, doc.'

'Then you're not fit to scrape the dirt off 'em, never mind the blacking,' was the retort.

Inside Wanabeen, the name of Jim's place, the little chap lay gasping on a camp bedstead, with the half-caste Sal crooning near him.

Sal was not so black as the aborigine, and had been brought up on a mission station. She was not a bad-looking woman, about four or five-and-twenty.

How came she there?

It happened in this wise. Sal was the offspring of a rich squatter. Her only disgrace was her birth, not to her, but to the man who begot her. She lived with the blacks on the station for several years. She grew up in wild, unrestricted freedom. She was lithe and active as any young black on the run, and her fleetness of foot had more than once stood her in good stead.

Sal had dark brown liquid eyes, a nose somewhat too large for her face, but not unprepossessing, full cheeks, a forehead well set on, small ears, thickish lips, and a mass of dark curly hair that never seemed to be out of order. She had small hands and small feet, and her supple limbs were graceful.

When the 'boss' of the station went to England to spend the money others had made for him, Sal was annexed by the mission people.

Not that these good folk meant any harm, quite the contrary, they took the girl for the good of her health and her soul.

It so happened that Sal did not know the meaning of the word soul, but it was explained to her. She thought it curious that a certain portion of her body when she died would go to regions far away. If she happened to be good her soul would revel above the blue sky in unrestricted freedom for evermore; if she by any chance turned out badly – well, there was another place where her soul would suffer torments suitable to her misdeeds.

Sal argued this matter out with herself, and commenced to take observations. She saw much in the conduct of her preceptors which caused her to wonder whether their souls were destined for the blue skies or the other place.

Having white blood in her veins, Sal had an imagination far beyond her dull, thick-skulled people. She had a mind and a will of her own. The former suggested to her that she ought to run away from the mission, and the latter carried it out. In a word, Sal 'bolted.'

For several years she wandered about with the members of her own tribe, loathing the savage, uncouth part of their nature, yet loving the liberty they enjoyed. She was a curious mixture, a compound of black and white, a study in unharmonies. Half tame, half wild, reasoning yet unreasoning, knowing good from bad, yet undecided on which side lay happiness. The chief of her tribe, King Charlie, who had dreamt the dream and seen the vision of the 'Spirit of the Lilies' and of the bursting of the cloud that turned the great western plain into a lake, understood her.

He protected her and saved her from danger.

King Charlie had a metal plate suspended from his neck, which covered his hard, black, hairy chest – in the shape of a half moon – and on this plate was written the 'order of the garter' of his tribe. King Charlie loved Sal, and she ruled him, as women have ruled those who love them since the day that Adam fell.

There came a time, when the land was parched and food was scarce, when the wandering camp split up and some went one way, some another.

Sal found a resting place at Wanabeen. She crawled, half dead, to the foot of the steps of Jim Dennis's homestead, and, panting, lay down to die.

She stretched out her scantily-clothed limbs and pillowed her black curly head on her shrunken arms.

She commenced to think about her soul and wonder when it would leave her body, and whether it would soar to that bright blue, hot, pitiless sky above. Then she fell asleep, and when Jim Dennis came out of his cottage with the little chap in his arms he stumbled over her.

Jim Dennis did not curse or swear or tell this outcast to 'get out.'

He put the little chap down, who was then three years old, and picked up the sleeping woman. He carried her on to the verandah – he was a big, powerful fellow – and then he went inside, dragged out his own mattress and put her on to it.

The little chap watched him with wondering eyes, and commenced to make three-year-old remarks, such as 'Who's that, daddy? Pitty woman. Whoo's seepy, daddy,' and so on.

Jim Dennis brought water and moistened her lips. Then he stood watching her.

Sal slept right through the night, and when she came round in the morning she saw Jim Dennis before her with the child in his arms. She rubbed her eyes and looked at them. Then she explained what had happened, and Jim said, —

'You can stay here and look after the little chap. Will you?'

Her big brown eyes glistened, and, weak as she was she stretched out her hands for the child.

Jim put him down, and, after a moment's hesitation, he toddled towards her.

From that day, three years ago, black Sal had been devoted to the little boy. In her wild, half-tamed way she loved him more than anything on earth.

It was Sal who sat at the child's bedside when Jim Dennis rode out to Swamp Creek for Dr Tom. The woman watched every movement of the little face, every quiver of the body. Each moan from his lips pierced her like a knife. The child was not her own, and yet she loved him, and worshipped with a dog-like devotion the big man who was his father.

Sal would willingly have submitted to any torture could she by so doing have saved the child a moment's pain.

During the long weary hours when Jim Dennis was absent she felt as though something in her body must snap.

Then she heard, with her keen ears, the low, dull thud of the horses' hoofs, and she knew they were coming, and that help was at hand. She did not leave the bedside to look out, she would not

have done that for worlds. When Dr Tom came into the room she gave a gasp, and watched him as he looked at the child. She saw hope in his face and caught his hand.

Dr Tom pressed it and said, —

'Come in, Jim, the little chap's alive. I'll pull him through. It's not so bad after all.'

All that night Dr Tom fought for the child's life, and the dark woman and Jim Dennis looked on in silent agony.

With the first streaks of dawn a change came over the child. It was as though the coming day had ushered in new life and hope.

For two days Dr Tom remained at Wanabeen, and at the end of that time the boy's life was out of danger.

The tension relapsed, Jim Dennis said, —

'I have a lot to thank you for, doctor. You have saved him, and he is dearer to me than my own life. I shall never forget it. There may come a time when I can be of service to you, and then you must not be afraid to ask what you will of Jim Dennis.'

Dr Tom was not a sentimental man, but even his hard, rough-used nature felt the delicacy of the situation.

'It has given me more pleasure to save that child's life than I ever experienced before. Jim Dennis, you're a brick.'

Jim smiled as he replied, 'Swamp Creek thinks I'm a shocking bad lot.'

'Then Swamp Creek can go to – '

'Hold hard, doc.'

'Let 'em say anything against you in my presence, that's all,' said Dr Tom.

'You are quite sure he is out of danger?' asked Jim.

'Certain. I'll leave all the necessary medicine and tell Sal what to do. She's like a mother to him.'

A dark cloud gathered on Jim Dennis's face, and Dr Tom saw it.

'Jim, my man, where is the lad's mother?'

'Wait and I'll tell you on – ' he hesitated.

'On! – when?' asked Dr Tom.

'Settling Day,' said Jim.

CHAPTER III
POTTER'S SHANTY

Dr Tom remained for three days at Wanabeen.

'If there's anyone ill they know where to find me,' he said.

'They'll never come to Wanabeen for you. There's a bad name about this place,' Jim replied.

'Who's given it?'

'The police, and well – you know – others.'

'Why?'

Jim Dennis shrugged his shoulders. It was an expressive gesture, it meant so much to a man who understood him.

'You are one of the old gang, they tell me, Jim – is that true?'

'What do you mean by the old gang?'

'One of the men who stuck the beggars all up at Potter's Shanty when the coach was stopped,' said Dr Tom.

'They say that – do they?'

'Yes.'

'Then let it rest. I was there that night.'

'Were you in it, Jim? – no halves.'

'No, doc, I was not in it in the sense you mean.'

'Who put it up?'

The question was a simple one, but Jim Dennis turned round like a lion at bay, and said, —

'You – you – dare ask *me* that?'

Dr Tom felt uncomfortable.

'I don't want you to give a pal away,' he said.

Jim Dennis strode over to him and took his arm. The pressure was painful and Dr Tom winced.

'This is not an amputation case,' he said.

Jim Dennis dropped his arm and said quietly, —

'Forgive me, doc; but don't you really know the fact of that matter?'

'No, on my honour.'

'Then I am the last man to tell you.'

Dr Tom sighed and glanced out of his eyes at Jim.

That 'sticking up' case at Potter's Shanty had puzzled more than one clever man.

Now the little chap has pulled through, and death is not knocking at his door, it may be as well to relate the incident.

Potter's Shanty was a public-house, a wayside hotel, a dispensary for every kind of infernal liquor, bad and indifferent – there was no good.

The mail coach stopped at Potter's, and it was reported to the police that sometimes the mails stopped there also. Potter's was a curious old place, and lay, or, to be more correct, tried to stand, between Swamp Creek and Wanabeen. Old Potter was a relic of bygone days. He had been mixed up with the Kelly gang over the border, and at various times a hospitable Government had entertained him without his sanction.

Old Potter was a trifle of a moralist in his way. He could neither read or write; so on one occasion when he was accused of forgery he brought forward unimpeachable evidence in his favour.

The Crown had produced a mass of evidence which proved up to the hilt that old Potter was an unmitigated thief, but the prosecution went too far, as prosecutions occasionally do, and proved

too much. It was sworn on oath (Potter was particular about oaths) that old Samuel Potter had forged a signature to a bill.

'What's a bill?' asked Samuel.

The Court tittered. There were a few remarks made as to Samuel Potter's blissful ignorance.

'Do you mean to tell me you don't know what a bill is?' asked the Crown prosecutor.

'Well, that depends,' said Potter.

'What depends? Depends on what? Answer me that, sir!' thundered the irate man with the flowing wig.

'Well, it's this way, you see. If you stayed at my shanty and ran up a score, which you didn't pay, and I asked you for the amount, I'd call that a bill.'

The learned gentleman pulled his black cloak furiously and said, —

'If I owed you a bill I would pay it, provided you presented it in due form.'

'That's what I couldn't do, your worship,' said Potter.

'Why?' asked the judge.

'Because I can't read or write.'

The judge put on his spectacles, which had been reposing on his notebook, and said, as he eyed the Crown prosecutor with severity, —

'I understood this man was charged with forgery.'

The Crown prosecutor blinked, and eventually Samuel Potter was discharged.

Although it was perfectly true that Potter could neither read or write, he was a shrewd man, and his shanty had been the scene of many an illegal transaction.

Swamp Creek folk had a wholesome dread of Potter's, and the solitary mounted constable in the place knew it was wise for him to 'keep in' with old Sam.

The police magistrate for the district was also aware that Potter's Shanty was a house of ill repute, but what could he do, he was one against many?

The incident alluded to by Dr Tom was exciting enough in its way.

Ned Glenn, the driver of the coach, pulled up as usual at Potter's to refresh his horses, five of them, fairly good animals. The passengers also endeavoured to cool their parched throats, but old Sam was one too many for them. His liquors were strong and 'home made,' and so the passengers discovered.

It so happened that on this journey the young manager of the Swamp Creek branch of the Nation's Bank was on his way to the headquarters for the Western District at Bourke. He carried with him a considerable sum of money, much in gold, more in notes.

It was his way of doing it. He thought that by not giving notice of the fact, publicity would be avoided, and that he might escape observation. Thirty or forty years ago things were very different in Australia to what they are now, and coaches were run in districts where the trains may now be seen daily.

Jim Dennis was at Potter's Shanty the night the coach stopped and the manager of the Nation's Bank was robbed.

A month after the robbery he cashed a note for five pounds in the Swamp Creek Hotel, and this same note was proved to have been in the possession of the manager of the Nation's Bank on the day of the robbery at Potter's. There was no direct evidence to prove Jim Dennis had any hand in the business, but in those days suspicion once fastened on to a man was difficult to get rid of. The majority of the people in the district believed Jim Dennis had a hand in the robbery, in fact was the instigator of it, and Sam Potter encouraged the impression.

Between Potter and Jim Dennis a continual war had been waged ever since, and, what made matters worse, Ned Glenn, the coach driver, sided with the owner of Wanabeen. Ned Glenn was no fool. He had driven the coach between Swamp Creek and Bourke for several years. He knew every inch of the road, or, to be more correct, the track, and no man could frighten a box-seat passenger out

of his senses better than Ned. He was a weather-beaten old fellow, with a face like cracked parchment, merry little twinkling eyes that were suggestive of unlimited fun and roguery.

Ned Glenn was a character. He had figured, even in those early days, as a prominent man – a full page all to himself – in the *Sydney Lantern*. In this remarkable sheet Ned Glenn was depicted as a kind of Claude Duval on the box seat of his coach. Passengers were notified to 'beware of the driver,' and Ned's pockets were bulging out with stolen notes and various articles of attire alleged to have been the property of his passengers.

Ned was advised by the local lawyer at Swamp Creek that he had a good action against the paper and would recover heavy damages.

'And who'll get 'em?' said Ned.

'You will,' replied the lawyer.

'And what about your share?' asked Ned.

'I shall expect some recompense,' said the legal luminary.

Ned winked his near side eye and thought they had better let the matter slide. To tell the honest truth, Ned Glenn was rather proud of figuring in the *Lantern*. He had seen the Premier occupying the front page, also the Governor, and even if reflections were cast upon his character by the sketch, it was good to be in such company.

'And the hartist's signed his name to it,' said Ned, proudly, as he produced the crumpled up journal for the benefit of the 'bagman,' who occupied the box seat. Ned Glenn was a thick-and-thin supporter of Jim Dennis and Dr Tom, not to mention the little chap, and Sal. If the whole of the members of the ministry had been on his coach, Ned would have pulled up at Wanabeen.

It so came about that the night Dr Tom was to leave Wanabeen Ned's coach was due.

The doctor and Jim Dennis were standing on the verandah, and saw him tooling his team along at a shambling gallop.

'Funny thing we should be talking about that affair at Potter's,' said the doctor. 'Here's Ned's coach.'

'He'll pull up here, he always does,' said Jim. 'I'll go and get him a drink ready. I feel quite light-hearted now the little chap is better – thanks to you, doc.'

Jim Dennis passed inside, and before he came out again Ned Glenn had pulled up his horses in front of the homestead.

There were no passengers; he merely had the mail and some luggage.

'Hullo, doctor, what are you doing here?' sang out Ned in his cheery voice.

'Jim's youngster has been very ill. I've been here these three days.'

'Eh, Gad! What! the little chap?' exclaimed Ned, as he scrambled down.

'Yes, the little chap; but he's out of danger now,' said the doctor.

'Where's Jim?'

'Gone inside to get you a drink.'

Ned Glenn left the mails, the coach and the horses to look after themselves. His old-fashioned figure glided round the side of the homestead, and when he saw Jim Dennis he said, —

'He's all right, eh, Jim? We can't afford to lose him. There never was such a child.'

'Yes, Ned, he's safe, thanks to Dr Tom; but he's had a tough time of it.'

'And pulled through,' said Ned. 'I hope I'll live to see him on the back of a cup winner for his dad before I peg out.'

CHAPTER IV
JIM'S TROUBLE

Left alone with his son, Jim Dennis watched him tenderly, and Sal looked keenly at him, with dog-like devotion gleaming out of her deep, dull, liquid eyes.

She understood what the life of this child meant to the man who had been kind to her when all others had deserted her. Her heart bled for him in his trouble, and she would willingly have given her life to spare him pain.

Jim Dennis gazed long at the child's now peaceful face. As his little head lay pillowed in peaceful slumber on one arm, the features of the sleeping boy recalled many memories.

It brought back thoughts of a woman he had loved and married, and who left him when Willie Dennis was but an infant. It was a cruel, heartless blow she struck him, and he meant some day to 'settle' an account with the man who had robbed him.

It was the old story. The life at Wanabeen was lonely and Maud Dennis was city bred. Jim Dennis had deceived her in nothing when he married her. He told her of the solitary life he led, and painted his home in anything but glowing colours. He would rather have risked losing her than deceive her.

Maud fancied she loved him, probably she did then, and said life with him would be worth living anywhere. Jim Dennis believed her, married her and took her home to Wanabeen.

For a time all went well. Then the loneliness commenced to tell upon her somewhat frivolous nature. She pined for the city, the pleasures of Sydney life, the shops, the gaiety, the dances and picnics, the admiration of men and the thousand and one other attractions that are all in all to some women. Jim Dennis saw she felt lonely and it troubled him. He was absent on the station the greater part of the day, it could not be otherwise in his life. He thought when the child was born it would cheer her and render her life more tolerable.

He was grievously mistaken. Maud was not a woman to make a devoted mother. She was too selfish, and little Willie was rather a 'bore' to her.

With a great trouble at his heart, Jim Dennis saw this, and he felt he must do something to relieve the strain. He asked her if she would like to go to Sydney for a few months for a change. Maud was delighted at the prospect, but asked, much to her husband's astonishment, what would become of the child.

'Take him with you,' said Jim. 'You cannot leave him here.'

'Surely you can find someone to mind him. I shall not be able to enjoy myself in Sydney if he is there,' was her unfeeling reply.

Jim Dennis was a man of few words.

'Leave him with me. I will take care of him,' he said, as he took the little chap in his arms and kissed him.

'I am sure you will manage all right, Jim,' she said; 'and he will be far better here than in Sydney. It is a trying journey, and the coach is such an uncomfortable one. Yes, he will be far better here.'

So Willie remained at Wanabeen, and his mother went to Sydney. It was with a sad heart, and a feeling of bitter disappointment, that Jim Dennis watched her wave her hand in farewell from the box seat of Ned Glenn's coach.

He stood on the verandah with the child in his arms, and remained there until it was out of sight. He saw her talking gaily to Ned, and she did not look back after that one farewell.

A presentiment of coming evil oppressed him. Ought he to have allowed her to go? that was the burden of his thoughts. He hardly knew what he feared. She was his wife, and he trusted her; then what harm could come of it?

He had never seen her from that day, but her face and form came vividly to mind as he looked at his child.

He received letters from her during the first month of her stay in Sydney. He was pleased with them. She was happy, the change was doing her an immense amount of good. She inquired lovingly after him and the child. As the month wore on her letters became shorter, and excuses were made that she had so much to do, and such a short time to do it in, that she must make the most of it, and so on.

In the last letter he received no mention was made of Willie, and he felt it keenly.

Then there was an interval of suspense. He waited a fortnight and no letter arrived. He could stand it no longer, and he wrote to her father asking how it was he had not heard from Maud. Was she ill? Then came the reply that seemed for days and weeks to blot out his life, and he wandered about in an aimless, half-dazed way, heedless where he went, not knowing what he was doing.

'Maud left home to return to Wanabeen a week ago,' wrote her father. 'What can have happened?'

Jim Dennis knew what had happened. His heart told him that she had left him and deserted her child. He did not answer the letter, and another came.

Maud's father wrote to say his daughter was a disgrace to her family. He heard she had gone to England, but he did not know with whom. He advised him to think of her as dead and cast her memory out of his life, as he meant to do.

'She is not worth a thought from such a man as you, Jim Dennis. You are worth a hundred times more than she is. I am sorry for you, very sorry. Can we help you at all with the little one? If so, please say in what way. I wish to heaven she had never been born to bring this disgrace upon us all.'

Jim Dennis wanted no help, and wrote to that effect. 'I will find her out, and the man who has ruined our lives, and then there will be a heavy settling day between us. As for blotting her out of my memory, I cannot do that yet, but the day may come when it will be done. If ever such a day arrives, there will be no mercy for the man or the woman – at present I have some for her.'

It took him a long time to write this letter. He was not much of a hand at letter writing, and his thoughts did not flow freely. Living his lonely life, he did not hear for a long time the story his wife had circulated in Sydney.

She had not only deserted him, but she had cast aspersions upon his character. She had blackened his name and accused him of many sins. To hide her own shame she threw blame for it upon him. Nay, she even went so far as to repudiate her own son, and say he was not her child. No outrage to the feelings of such a man as Jim Dennis could have been worse. He heard faint rumours of such things, but he refused to believe them. However, the truth was forced home to him by a friend from Sydney, who thought it better he should know the facts and try to refute them.

But Jim Dennis refused to do so. He bore his second blow as he did the first, in silence, but he brooded long and deep over his wrongs. He hardened his heart and cursed the mother of his child.

He clenched his hands and swore a solemn oath the child should never hear its mother's name. Nay, more, he would, if necessary, uphold what his wife had said, and make Willie think he had another mother who was dead.

At all events, the lad should never learn, if he could possibly guard it from him, of the disgrace that had been put upon them both. Time had softened the blow to Jim Dennis, but had not healed it, and he was thinking of the bitter past as he sat by the bedside of his son.

Then old Ned Glenn's words occurred to him.

'What was he to make of the boy?'

Time enough for that, but still it had to be thought about. He had often mapped out an imaginary career for the little chap, but had never been able to satisfy himself the conclusions he had arrived at were for the best.

Ned Glenn's remark:

'I hope I'll live to see him on the back of a cup winner for his dad,' had sent off his thoughts in another direction.

Jim Dennis was a splendid horseman, no man in the wild district in which he lived could compare with him.

He had broken-in the most obstinate of buck-jumpers and took a delight in mastering their stubborn natures. If a neighbour had a particularly savage, untameable animal, he would send to him and ask him if he could 'make the brute manageable.'

Nothing suited Jim better. He did not think it a trouble, but a pleasure, and regarded it more as conferring a favour upon himself than the other way about.

He would ride miles to lend a hand at this 'amusement,' as he called it, and thought he risked neither life nor limb by undertaking the task.

'You are the rummiest fellow I ever knew,' said Dr Tom to him. 'You never charge anything for your trouble, and, bless me, if you don't seem to regard risking your neck as legitimate sport.'

'Is there anything I can do for you in the breaking-in line?' Jim asked with a smile.

'Yes, there is. I have bought a brute that licks creation,' said the doctor.

'Ah!' said Jim, expressively. 'Didn't try him before buying?'

'No, not much.'

'How long was the price?'

'Only a fiver.'

'You cannot expect much for that.'

'But I got more than I bargained for. The seller said he was quiet enough,' said the doctor.

'Have you had him in the buggy?'

'Can't get him to look at the vehicle, and he has kicked down a portion of the stable already.'

'It wouldn't take long to kick the lot down,' laughed Jim.

'Don't abuse my property, or the next time you are ill I shall decline to attend you.'

'You mean the first time I am ill. I have never troubled you for any medicine yet,' said Jim.

'Only for whisky,' said the doctor, with a twinkle in his eyes.

'How about this horse? Must I tackle him for you?' asked Jim, changing the subject.

'If you will be so obliging.'

Jim Dennis took the doctor's steed in hand, and in the course of a severe tussle, extending over several hours, completely cowed him.

To such a man as Jim Dennis the thought of his son being a jockey came natural. With a critical eye he looked him over and thought, 'He is just cut out for it. He'll never be a heavy weight and he's the exact shape.'

'He'll have to pretty well live in the saddle here,' thought Jim; 'and he may as well make the most of his skill if he has any in that direction.'

The lad turned over and, opening his eyes, looked into his father's face.

'Do you feel better now, Willie?' he asked tenderly.

'Yes, dad, all the pain has gone.'

Sal put her hand on his head and smoothed back his hair. 'You will soon be well, Willie,' she said.

'Does Dr Tom say so?'

'Yes,' answered his father.

'I'm so glad, dad. I want to be a big man and help you. There's no one to look after you but Sal and me. We'll take care of you. I mean to be as good a rider as you are.'

'That's right. I hope you will be even better.'

'I could not be better, because you are the best.'

'You must rest now, and keep quiet. Give him his medicine, Sal.'

The woman measured out the dose and placed the glass to his lips.

'That's not nasty. I like it,' he said.

A low, rumbling sound was heard. 'We are going to have rain,' said Jim, and his face brightened, for they were sorely in need of it.

'That will do good, dad.'

'Yes, and cool the air for you. You are not frightened at storms, are you?'

'No, not when you are here. I'm never frightened at anything when you are near me.'

It was a great consolation in Jim Dennis's life when he heard his child speak like this. He almost forgave the mother for deserting them, because it left Willie entirely for himself.

The only thing he was selfish in was the love of his son, and he could not bear that to be shared with anyone.

CHAPTER V
A REGULAR SAVAGE

For days and weeks there had been no rain at Wanabeen or in the Swamp Creek district. Jim Dennis was not a rich man, far from it, and he had to depend upon his small station for his living. Everything depended upon the weather. Without rain the land became a mere barren waste, and the stock perished. There were no artesian bores then, no artificial or scientific means of drawing supplies of water from under the ground, although Jim had a shrewd suspicion, from observations he had made, that underground rivers existed. He wished such rivers above instead of beneath the surface, or that he could find some means to tap them.

Owing to his boy's illness he had not been on his run for several days, quite an unusual occurrence with him. He could not leave the lad while in danger. He would have lost everything sooner than do so. But now he was on the high road to recovery, he went about his ordinary duties as usual.

The low rumbling still continued, and he went outside the house to look at the sky and watch the signs of the approach of the welcome storm. In the distance he saw black masses of clouds, but they were a long way off, and he was fearful that, after all, the storm might not reach Wanabeen.

The cattle and horses already recognised the coming rain, and sniffed the air and looked around with eager anticipation.

'I'll saddle up and have a look round,' he said to himself. 'Willie will be all right.'

He stepped inside and found his son asleep. He beckoned to Sal and told her to look after him and that he would not be long gone.

He saddled his horse, a fine bay about six years old, and one he had bred himself. There was a certain amount of comradeship between Jim Dennis and his horses. They seemed to understand him as well as he did them. He rode out at the gate and went in the direction of the storm.

It was with a glad heart he heard the rumbling of the thunder, and from the various signs around him he knew the rain was near at hand. As far as he could see there was a peculiar haze in the atmosphere, dense, like falling rain.

The brown, bare earth, with here and there a scanty tuft of green, seemed to lie gasping for water. Big cracks appeared in the ground where it had been unable to stand the constant baking any longer, and so had given way. The trees were gaunt and well-nigh leafless.

He rode along keeping his eyes fixed on the clouds ahead. With surprising suddenness he felt a cool breeze commence to blow. It fanned his face and refreshed him, and his horse snorted and tossed his head as though he would say, 'This is a pleasant change. There will be a chance of a good feed soon.'

He reined in and waited; there was no occasion to ride on, for the storm was coming towards him fast. It was a thing to be welcomed, not avoided.

A few drops of rain fell, and he turned round to ride home. He had gone out to greet it and give it the welcome due to such a guest.

A dozen horses came galloping towards him, and he saw one of them was a strange animal and did not belong to him.

Jim Dennis knew there were lawless characters in the district who would be only too glad to get him into trouble. He was a straight goer and would have nothing to do with them, although he was credited with being hand and glove with the gang. The mounted police, too, had a 'down' on Jim, with one exception, Constable Doonan, who was his staunch friend. It was over the sticking up of the mail at Potter's Shanty and the robbery of the bank agent, that the police were strong against him. At that time Doonan was not in the district, but he had heard all about it, and when he came to know Jim Dennis he refused to believe he had a hand in it.

Sergeant Machinson, however, and the men who were engaged with him in investigating the robbery, wished to lay the blame upon Jim Dennis, and they, no doubt, honestly thought him the guilty party, or one of it.

Jim, however, was too many for them, and, managed to keep out of their clutches.

Sergeant Machinson had been called over the coals for not capturing the thieves, and he was wroth over the affair accordingly.

'That fellow Dennis was at the bottom of it, I'll be sworn,' he said to the other constables; 'or how did he come by the five-pound note? We must have him yet, my lads, but he'll take some catching. He's a smart fellow, but those very clever men often do some foolish act and it gives them away.'

As the bad characters in any district generally know what is going on, they soon discovered Sergeant Machinson and the bulk of his men had a 'set' against Jim Dennis. This helped them considerably in their dealings with the owner of Wanabeen.

Fortunately, however, for Jim Dennis, Constable Doonan was stationed at Swamp Creek, and looked after the district around Wanabeen.

Sergeant Machinson was quartered at Barragong, about ten miles away, and was in charge of a large tract of country. He had several men under him, amongst them Doonan. He would have removed Doonan elsewhere, as he knew he was partial to Jim Dennis, but had no ostensible reason for such a step.

When Jim Dennis saw the strange horse running with his own, his first thought was that some evil-disposed person had put it on his run in order to get him into trouble. Such things were often done out of spite or revenge, in fact Jim had narrowly escaped getting into trouble from this cause.

The rain was now coming down fast and the thunder crashed overhead with loud, startling cracks. The vivid lightning frightened the mob of horses, and they galloped at headlong speed in the direction of the homestead.

The strange horse was a splendid mover and soon headed the others.

Jim saw he was a thoroughbred, or nearly so, and thought to himself:

'By Jove! he can gallop. Mine are a fast lot, but he has given them the go-by. He's a stallion too. Wonder whose he is? I must make inquiries. This is no put-up job to get me into trouble. Abe Dalton and his gang never have horses like that to handle!'

He galloped after them and as he neared home saw the yard gates stood wide open.

'They'll go in,' said Jim to himself; 'and I must get up in time to shut them in.'

Faster and faster came the rain, and the hot ground steamed under the grateful cooling shower. In a few days the whole aspect of the country would be changed, and nature appear in a different form. Instead of the dull, dry brown would come a bright, refreshing green. The grass grows with remarkable rapidity in such regions and the scene changes as though by magic. The horses had gone under the sheds for shelter, and Jim, dismounting, closed the gates. Having unsaddled his horse, and peeped inside to see how Willie fared, he went to look at the stranger amongst his mob.

Already there was a fight on and the stallion was trying to savage his nearest neighbour. A battle royal seemed imminent, but Jim Dennis meant to stop that.

He went for a stock whip, and quickly gave the combatants to understand he was acting as referee and that he had called time.

Crack came the lash and caught the stallion on his flank. He jumped as though he had been shot, and stood still quivering. Crack came the whip again, and the other combatant galloped round the yard.

The strange horse stood looking at him with a fiery light in his eyes. He evidently did not understand this unceremonious treatment, and resented the lash of the whip.

'You try it on. Just you try it on. You'll savage me, will you? My boy, you don't know Jim Dennis.'

Jim stood bareheaded, with the rain pouring down upon him, and he revelled in the glorious shower bath. He had on a rough shirt, such as stockmen wear, a dullish red, it having seen some service, and his breeches fitted neatly into his riding boots. He was rather particular about such things for a bushman, and he may be called such without it being a misnomer.

The horse eyed Jim, and Jim kept his eyes steadily fixed on the horse.

There was a moment or two of uncertainty, and then, before the animal had time to plunge forward towards him, Jim Dennis whirled his whip round, and the lash came down on the horse's neck and curled.

With a jerk Jim had it freed again, and then the horse rushed at him.

He sprang on one side and escaped the furious attack. Quick as lightning, before the animal could turn, he had brought the lash down again on his back, and this time the horse did not turn, but galloped to the far side of the yard.

But the struggle was not ended.

The stranger again made an attack on the horse nearest him, and there was a general uproar and stamping of hoofs amongst the mob.

Jim returned to the attack and separated them. In doing so he became wedged in a corner against the fence, and the stallion came straight at him.

He had no time to use the lash, so, seizing it short in his hand, he twisted it round and raised the stock.

He struck the now infuriated horse a blow on the forehead, which dazed him for a moment but did not daunt him. The horse stood on his hind legs and commenced to strike at Jim with his fore feet.

Jim Dennis knew he had never been in such a tight fix before, and he commenced to wonder what would happen.

He struck the horse's fore legs again and again with the stock of his whip, but could not beat him off.

He heard the gate opened, but did not see who was there. Presently the stallion was attacked in the rear, and a vigorous lashing from a strong arm made him alter his tactics. He came down on all fours and then kicked furiously. Jim Dennis dodged round him, and, standing back to give himself more room, again plied his lash with effect.

The horse was now beaten, and took his defeat sullenly. He retreated, and received a parting whack as he went.

Jim Dennis then saw it was Constable Doonan who had so timely come to the rescue.

'You were in a tight corner, Jim. I came just in time. That's a brute of a horse. Where did you get him?'

'I didn't get him, he came of his own accord. He doesn't belong to me. I found him with my mob when I was out on the run. The storm gave them a fright, and they galloped into the yard. He commenced to savage my horses, so I had to separate them. We have had a toughish struggle.'

'Curious,' said Doonan. 'I wonder to whom he belongs. Looks like a thoroughbred. I have heard nothing about a horse being lost. He must have broken loose. Can you keep him here until I make inquiries?'

'If we can box him he'll be all right. Perhaps they were bringing him from Sydney or somewhere, and he managed to get away. Come inside, Fred, you are wet through.'

'It will do me good,' laughed Doonan. 'It is a long time since we had such a soaking. What a difference it will make to your place. By the way, how's the young un? I heard from Dr Sheridan he had been very ill.'

'He has had a narrow squeak, but he's pulled through, thanks to Dr Tom. Come in and see him. Willie is very fond of you,' said Jim.

'Oh, did you hear Rodney Shaw has come back from England?' said Doonan, as they went indoors.

'Has he?' said Jim. 'Why, he must have been away six or seven years.'

CHAPTER VI
RODNEY SHAW

Rodney Shaw was the wealthiest squatter round Swamp Creek. He inherited the property from his father, and had taken no share in amassing the very large sum of money he found himself in possession of at an early age.

He was only two-and-twenty when he found himself his own master, and soon after his father's death he left his property in the hands of a manager and went to Sydney, where he remained for some time before he took his departure for London. The name of his station was Cudgegong, and it comprised an area of about thirty to forty square miles. In addition to this he held big shares in several mines in the western district, most of which paid good dividends. On his return from England he went straight to Cudgegong, 'to put things in order,' he said, although everything had gone on well during his prolonged absence.

As a lad he was not liked in the district, and as he grew older he became domineering and somewhat vicious in his habits.

He had the usual love of horses which seems bred in all Australians, and before he was of age he owned race horses.

He was a younger man than Jim Dennis by several years, but the two men had not been bad friends, in fact Rodney Shaw got on better with the owner of Wanabeen than with anyone else.

Jim Dennis was surprised to hear of his return, and asked Doonan if he was sure his news was true.

'Certain of it,' said the constable.

'I had it from Dr Tom, and he knows everything that goes on in these parts.'

'There's not much escapes him, I grant you,' laughed Jim; 'but I hardly think he is correct this time.'

'Why not ride over and see?' said Doonan. 'You were always welcome at Cudgegong, I hear.'

'I think I will,' replied Jim, 'as soon as the weather takes up. Perhaps I can be of use to him as he has been away so long.'

Constable Doonan remained at Wanabeen for the night, and had a long talk with Willie. The lad loved to hear of his exploits, and how he had captured bushrangers in Victoria, and Queensland, before he came into New South Wales.

When Doonan described the races he had seen in Melbourne the lad's eyes glistened, and he became quite excited.

'I'd like to ride in a real race,' he said.

'You're just cut out for a jockey,' laughed Doonan.

'Am I? Then I'll be one if dad will let me.'

'Do you hear that, Jim?' said the constable. 'Your boy wants to be a jockey.'

'Does he?' said Jim, as he entered the room. 'That's strange. I was only thinking the other day what a good one he would make.'

'Wait until I am strong and old enough, and I shall ride some winners,' said Willie.

'Hullo, there's the coach coming,' said Jim. 'I forgot it was Ned's day. Ned will be glad of this rain, for he has had a rough time of it lately.'

Ned Glenn pulled up at Wanabeen as usual, and, leaving a couple of passengers to grumble on the top of the coach, came inside for his accustomed chat.

'Mind no one runs away with the mails,' said Doonan, laughing.

'No fear of that near Wanabeen,' said Ned. 'I shouldn't mind if someone would take those two male passengers, though, and leave them somewhere.'

'Not very sociable, are they?' asked Jim.

'Regular bears. They have been growling all the way.'

'Put 'em inside,' said Doonan.

'No such luck. I'm glad they are fairly wet outside, but they must be precious dry inside.'

'I'll give them a quencher,' said Jim, good-naturedly.

'Don't be a fool; it would be wasted on them,' replied Ned. 'I can do with their share.'

Ned Glenn sat down and caught sight of one of the passengers looking at the house, evidently in search of him, and in hopes of a speedy departure.

'You keep calm, my friend,' said Ned, shaking his fist. 'It will do you good to cool in the rain a bit.'

'Any news?' asked Jim, when he had attended to Ned's want.

'Yes. Rodney Shaw has come back to Cudgegong. I don't know whether that can be reckoned as good news or bad, but it's true,' said Ned.

'It is a long time since he went away,' said Jim.

'Nigh on seven or eight years, I should think, maybe not quite so long.'

'He'll find his property all right. Benjamin Nix is a good manager,' said Jim.

'And a good fellow too,' answered Ned. 'Better than his boss, I reckon.'

Turning to Doonan, he said, 'There's likely to be trouble in this district before long, I hear.'

'How's that?'

'Horse thieves about again,' said Ned.

Jim Dennis thought of the strange stallion boxed in his yard, and glanced at Constable Doonan. Was there more rumour and suspicion to surround him?

'It's a rum go too,' said Ned. 'Rodney Shaw bought a fine stallion in Sydney, a thoroughbred, and sent him up to Cudgegong. The man in charge of him complains that someone either stole him or let him loose while he was resting at Potter's. There'll be a deuce of a row at Cudgegong about it.'

'That's queer,' said Jim. 'A strange horse galloped into the yard with my mob yesterday during the storm. I wonder if he belongs to Mr Shaw.'

'You don't say so!' exclaimed Ned.

'Yes, I do; and, what's more, the brute would have made short work of me had not Fred Doonan arrived in time.'

He then explained to Ned what had happened.

'If he's such a savage horse,' said Ned, 'I shouldn't be at all surprised if the man did not let him go through sheer fright and now wants to cast the blame on someone.'

'That's probable,' said Constable Doonan. 'I'm going round by Potter's and will make inquiries. In the meantime, Jim, I would ride over to Cudgegong and let Mr Shaw know about it.'

'I'll go to-morrow,' said Jim.

Doonan took his departure, and soon afterwards Ned, much to the relief of his two passengers, clambered into the box seat and continued his journey.

Next morning it was still raining, but Jim Dennis cared little for this, in fact was glad of it. He saddled Bess and rode over to Cudgegong, a distance of about fifteen miles.

The mare revelled in the good going, and the already green grass gave way beneath her feet. It was a luxury that had not befallen her for many a day, to gallop on yielding ground.

Midway between the two stations he saw a couple of mounted police, and recognised Sergeant Machinson and another constable he did not know.

'Wonder what brings him round here. Perhaps he has been to pay his respects to Rodney Shaw.'

Then he thought:

'If he has, he'll have heard of the loss of his horse. He's such a suspicious beggar, he might think I had a hand in "lifting" it. If the stallion in my place is the missing one, Machinson would

be only too pleased to get me into trouble, though why I don't know. It's sheer spite because of that Potter's affair, and poor spite it is too. They have seen me, so I may as well ride over to them.'

He was passing them with a casual remark about the rain when Sergeant Machinson said, —

'We have just been over to Cudgegong. Mr Shaw has returned from England. He bought a valuable stallion in Sydney, which has been stolen. The man in charge of it says it was taken from Potter's. Have you seen anything of it yet?'

Jim Dennis did not hesitate to tell the story of how he found a stray stallion in his mob, and also said that Constable Doonan arrived at an opportune moment to rescue him.

'I was just riding over to Mr Shaw's to tell him about it,' said Jim. 'I heard from Doonan, and Ned Glenn, that he had lost a thoroughbred stallion.'

A suspicious, sneering smile came over Sergeant Machinson's face. 'Then you do not know who is the owner of this horse? It is not often you find stray thoroughbreds running about the country, I suppose?'

'No, do you?' asked Jim, who was not afraid of half-a-dozen Sergeant Machinsons.

'It is part of my duty to find them when they have been stolen,' said the sergeant.

'So I believe,' replied Jim; 'but if this horse I have is Mr Shaw's, it will save you any trouble in that line.'

'Except to catch the thief,' said the sergeant.

'Always provided the horse was stolen,' said Jim.

'Of course it was stolen; the man says so.'

'Then how did it come to be running about with my mob?' asked Jim.

'That's what I'd like to know,' was the suggestive and uncalled-for reply.

'What do you mean to infer by that?' asked Jim, hotly.

'Anything you please. Don't you think it needs some explanation?'

'I have told you what happened.'

'But you omitted to state how the horse came to be amongst your lot.'

'That is what I should like to find out. Perhaps you can help me,' said Jim.

'I shall do all in my power to apprehend the thief. There is too much of this sort of thing going on round here.'

'Yes, there is,' said Jim; 'and it is partly your fault, because you never catch the thieves. Why don't you try Dalton's gang?'

'That's my business,' said the sergeant, angrily. 'Remember I can make you account for having that horse on your premises.'

'I have accounted for it.'

'Shall you tell that story to Mr Shaw?'

'Certainly; that is what I am going over for.'

'Then we will ride back with you.'

'As you please,' said Jim; 'but I should prefer your room to your company.'

Sergeant Machinson bit his lip, but made no reply. He knew in his heart Jim Dennis's story to be true, yet this only aggravated him the more. Such is the nature of some men, but Jim Dennis was not of them. When they arrived at Cudgegong station they were received, after a brief delay, by Rodney Shaw.

'I am glad to see you back, Mr Shaw,' said Jim, holding out his hand, and looking him straight in the face.

Rodney Shaw took his hand in a half-hearted way and said hesitatingly, —

'I have been away such a long time I have almost forgotten all my old friends, but you are none the less welcome for all that.'

'How he has altered,' thought Jim. 'I should not have recognised him had he been anywhere but at Cudgegong.'

'So you returned with Dennis?' said Shaw to the sergeant.

'Yes. I fancy he has your horse,' said Sergeant Machinson.

'Let me tell you the story,' said Jim, 'or it may be misrepresented.'

He then gave Rodney Shaw an account of what had happened.

'It is very strange,' was his comment. 'I wonder how the horse got into your paddocks. My man says it was stolen.'

'I am as ignorant as yourself,' replied Jim, 'how the horse came there. If he is your horse, you can have him back by sending for him.'

Jim Dennis did not like the tone in which Rodney Shaw spoke; it seemed to imply a doubt about his story.

'Of course I will send for him. One of my men shall return with you.'

'I think you had better send two,' replied Jim, smiling.

'Is the horse as dangerous as that?'

'He was, but Doonan and myself tamed him down. Still, I think it would be safer to have two men.'

'Will you bring him over?'

'If you wish it,' said Jim, 'but I had rather your own men did it. He might get lost on the way again.' This with a glance at the sergeant.

'Perhaps it would be better to send your own men,' said that worthy guardian of law and order.

Jim Dennis rose to go. He had not received a hospitable reception, and he was not a man to remain where he saw he was not wanted.

'I hope I shall see you again soon,' said Rodney Shaw, who seemed suddenly to think he had been too frigid.

'You may if I am riding this way,' was the quiet answer.

Although Rodney Shaw was wealthy, Jim Dennis considered himself his equal as a man, and so he was.

CHAPTER VII
OUTWITTED

Dennis waited a short time to see if Rodney Shaw's men would return with him to Wanabeen, and as they did not appear he took his departure.

As he rode back he thought of the strange change that had taken place in Rodney Shaw.

'I suppose living in England has done it,' thought Jim; 'but I had no idea it would make such an alteration in a man. He looks so much older, and speaks differently. There's something about him I can't make out. He has such a shifty look, and might have done some great wrong, he has that half-frightened glance as though he feared detection. It is quite evident he does not mean us to be on our old footing. That will not trouble me, I'm as good as he any day. Strange how a few years can alter a man. He never was a friendly fellow, but he seems a regular bear now.'

'If he prefers such men as Machinson, he's welcome to him. I'll get even with the sergeant one of these days. They say he is none too straight, and is not above accepting a tip now and again. If he lets me alone I'll let him alone, but I'm hanged if he shall meddle in my affairs without any cause. Doonan ought to be in his place, he's a man anyway.'

The rain was still coming down, but it did not interfere with Jim's meditations. He wished it would keep on for a fortnight, but there were already signs of a break in the sky.

The reins hung loosely on the mare's neck, for he knew he could trust her not to stumble over any of the numerous rabbit holes, and she would make straight for Wanabeen.

In due course he arrived home.

'Two men have been here,' said Sal.

'What did they come for? Who were they?'

'I have not seen them before, but they said they had come for the horse they had lost a few days ago, and that had been seen on your run,' said Sal.

Jim stared; he could hardly believe what she said. Then it dawned upon him that the men who had stolen Mr Shaw's horse must have lost him again and tracked him on to Wanabeen; they were clever at such work, and only one set of men could do it, Abe Dalton's gang.

'Did they take it away?'

'Yes, and it went quietly enough,' said Sal. 'I think you took it all out of him.'

Jim smiled. He thought it very probable such was the case.

'How long have they been gone?'

'A couple of hours, or more.'

'I must go after them,' said Jim.

'Be careful, dad,' said Willie; 'they may belong to Dalton's gang.'

'I have something here that will settle half-a-dozen of Dalton's men,' he said, as he took a six-chambered revolver out of a cupboard and loaded it, putting more cartridges in his pouch. It was an old-fashioned weapon, or would be considered so now, but it was apt to be dangerous when handled by Jim Dennis. He kissed the boy and went out, saying he would return as speedily as possible.

'Poor old dad, he's always in trouble over something,' said Willie. 'I wonder why it is, when he is so good to you, and me, and everybody.'

'There's men about here as hate him 'cause he's honest,' said Sal; 'but don't you be feared for him, Willie, he's a good man and he'll come to no harm.'

'I wish I were a man,' said the lad. 'You'd see what I'd do.'

'What would you do?' she asked, smiling.

'Stick up for him. Back Dr Tom up when he stuck up for him, and Fred Doonan too. They're fond of dad, aren't they, Sal?'

'Yes, very fond of him.'

'And Fred Doonan's fond of someone else here,' said the lad.

'You, Willie? He's very fond of you,' she said.

'And he's fond of you, Sal. He said you are a real good sort, a regular white woman, even if you had dark blood in you. Oh, yes, he's fond of you, Sal.'

The half-caste's eyes gleamed with pleasurable pride, and her whole face changed. She was a comely woman, a very comely woman, with a heart and nature that would love fiercely, half savagely, if such a sentiment were roused within her.

'He said that about me?' she asked in a low voice. She could hardly believe it, so few, very few men had been kind to her, and none of her own sex. The black gins had hated her because of their ugliness and her good looks – they were not so very unlike their white sisters after all. Even in this almost deserted land there was love and hate, sorrow and joy, comedy and tragedy.

'Yes, he said that and more.'

'More! More, Willie?'

'He said you were like a mother to me, and you have been, Sal. I never had a real mother that I knew of; dad says she died when I was a baby.'

The woman stroked the child's hair and said, —

'I will always be your mother. I love you, and your father has been kinder to me than any man in the world.'

'Good-bye,' shouted Jim, and they sent him an answering cry.

'Two hours' start or more. Which way must I go?' thought Jim. 'If it is Dalton's men who have taken him, I know their ropes as well as they do themselves. They'll make for Barker's Creek. I'll chance it.'

Barker's Creek was a small hamlet consisting of half-a-dozen shanties, all occupied by the members of the gang of which Abe Dalton was the head. They were a lawless, licentious lot, blacks and whites living together, regardless of law or order. There were about two dozen white men, and double that number of gins, – old and young, – and black fellows, camped around the wooden structures in humpies.

These blacks were part of King Charlie's tribe, but the old chief had cast them off; savage that he was, he had an instinctive feeling that his people were better than Dalton's men. He cursed them as they threw in their lot with the white men, and his sentence of excommunication was heard by those of the tribe who remained with him, and they carried the tidings into many places far distant. Even these blacks, uncouth and savage, had their laws, and rendered obedience to their old king.

It was a dangerous place was Barker's Creek, and its tenants ought to have been rooted out, but Abe Dalton was a cunning man and had contrived to keep Sergeant Machinson from meddling in his affairs.

Jim Dennis had no intention of riding alone into Barker's Creek. He wanted to catch his men before they arrived there.

He had a fresh horse under him, and he made the most of his mount.

He rode over the plain at a great pace, from time to time pulling up and dismounting to look for tracks. His practised eye soon found them, and sure enough there were three horses going in the direction of Barker's Creek.

'It's all right,' he muttered. 'I only hope I shall come up with them. I feel in a fighting humour, and they will have to stand and deliver, "hands up"; they are used to the sounds, they will know what they mean. It will put me in a bit of a hole if they reach Barker's Creek first. Machinson will swear I had a hand in sending the horse there, and that my ride over to Cudgegong was a ruse to deceive them and get the horse away; any cock-and-bull story would serve his purpose so long as it got me into a hole.'

He galloped on at a fast pace, and towards evening saw his men in the distance. They were in no hurry, and evidently did not fear pursuit. The horse was with them and going quietly.

'I have tamed him at anyrate,' said Jim. 'I'll tame them before I have done with them.'

He rode away to the left, for he knew a track by which he thought he could get ahead, and there wait until they came past.

The country near Barker's Creek was covered with scrub, and there was a considerable amount of shelter, much of it never having been cleared or touched in any way, but just left in its wild condition. He knew it would be a near thing between them, as the round would take him several miles out of his way. It was, however, the only course to pursue, so he sent his horse along at his best pace and hoped for success.

There is scarcely any twilight in the colonies, the sun goes down quickly, and day turns into night rapidly.

When Jim Dennis reached the spot he had ridden for he saw it would be almost dark in an hour, but that would serve his purpose.

If he could get hold of the stallion he knew the horse would gallop readily enough alongside his own.

He waited with the best patience he could muster, for he did not know whether they had passed the place. As the time went by he began to be afraid they had beaten him after all, and he had had his ride for nothing.

Presently, however, his quick ears caught the sound of horses' hoofs, and then he knew he had a chance of success. As they drew nearer he made ready to ride straight at them. Peering through the bushes that concealed him, he saw the two men coming along at a careless pace, evidently unaware there was any danger at hand.

When they were about fifty yards away he rushed up at them, and before they could prepare to meet him he covered one man with his revolver and said, —

'Now, you Dalton fellows, give up that horse. There are six shots here, so you have no chance.'

They knew him, and a volley of oaths came from them.

'He's not your horse,' said one of the men.

'That's my business. He is not yours, and you took him out of my yard. Hand him over.'

'You'll suffer for this, Jim Dennis. Abe Dalton is not the man to forget it.'

'You tell Abe Dalton and the whole of your dirty gang that I am not afraid of any of you. Now hand over the horse.'

He rode forward, still keeping his revolver handy.

The horse was handed over, and the man who had spoken before said, —

'We'll be even with you for this.'

'You are a set of cowards,' said Jim. 'There is not a fair fight in you. I am not afraid of half-a-dozen such as you.'

Then he thought, if they have revolvers it may be awkward, but he knew, after a moment's consideration, that had such been the case they would have risked it and used them.

It was Abe Dalton's plan to often send his men out unarmed, so that there was no danger of any shooting, for he knew when it come to murder it was a serious matter.

Jim rode away with his capture, and a volley of abusive language was sent after him.

He was undecided whether to take the horse to Wanabeen, or go to Cudgegong. He could reach the latter place early in the morning, so he made up his mind to go there. He could wait about until some of the hands were out, and as they were generally up early there would not be a long delay.

He reached Cudgegong about two o'clock, and as there was no one to be seen he tied the horse securely and, having hitched up his own some distance away from the other, he went to see if there was a chair on the verandah he could rest in.

It was no uncommon thing for a stranger to sleep on the verandah at one of the stations, and in the morning be provided with a breakfast and then sent on his way.

He stepped quietly along the boards and soon found a comfortable seat.

He was tired, for he had been in the saddle many hours, and, although he was a man who could do with but little sleep, he commenced to feel drowsy.

How long he had been asleep he did not know, but he awoke with a start and listened.

There was a peculiar sound inside the room near which he sat.

He thought it was a man moaning, but was not sure. Then he heard someone moving about, and footsteps approached the window of the room which led on to the verandah.

He remained perfectly quiet and waited expectantly for some explanation of what he had heard.

CHAPTER VIII
AT CUDGEGONG STATION

He had not long to wait. The doors were pushed open and someone looked out.

In the dim light he saw it was Rodney Shaw, and he seemed to be listening intently. Then he went inside, leaving the windows open.

'He must have heard me step on to the verandah,' thought Jim.

He heard him moving about the room again, and, although he had no desire to spy upon him, he thought it better to remain in his present position.

'Perhaps he has been indulging too freely,' said Jim to himself. 'He could take more than his share before he went away.'

'Curse the thing!'

Jim heard these words distinctly, and then came the sound of a man stumbling over a chair.

It was strange behaviour on the part of Rodney Shaw, and Jim Dennis could not understand it.

In a short time all was quiet, and he decided to slip off the verandah and go round to the horses.

He was passing the open window when he heard a cry of surprise, almost of terror, from within, which caused him to stop.

Looking into the room, he saw Rodney Shaw sitting on his bed, in his pyjamas, and glancing at him with wide, staring eyes.

'Who the devil are you?' said Shaw in a wild tone of voice.

'It's only me, Jim Dennis.'

'What are you doing there? Why are you spying about on my verandah? I'll have you locked up,' said Shaw.

Jim laughed, and made excuses for him.

'He's not himself, he's been drinking,' he thought.

'I brought your horse back, and I camped in a chair on the verandah to wait until some of the hands were about.'

'I don't believe it. It's a – ' began Shaw.

'Stop,' said Jim. 'Even if you have been on a "jag," I allow no man to call me that.'

He spoke in a resolute tone, and Rodney Shaw, pulling himself together, thought better of what he was about to say, and went out to him.

'You took me by surprise,' he said in an apologetic way. 'I have been absent so long that I am not accustomed to the change again.'

'How haggard and worn he looks,' thought Jim. 'I wonder what ails him.'

'Have you been on a "jag"?' asked Jim, smiling.

Rodney Shaw looked at him. He evidently did not understand what he meant.

Jim thought this strange.

'Surely you have not forgotten what a "jag" means. You have been on one or two in your time at Swamp Creek.'

Rodney Shaw laughed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.