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THE SWEEP WINNER

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The Sweep Winner:

Содержание

CHAPTER I 4
CHAPTER II 11
CHAPTER III 17
CHAPTER IV 24
CHAPTER V 31
CHAPTER VI 38
CHAPTER VII 45
CHAPTER VIII 52
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 56

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CHAPTER I
THE GLITTERING WIRE

A man on horseback shaded his eyes with his hands as he looked along the glittering line of wire which runs for hundreds of miles between New South Wales and Queensland, and forms the great rabbit-proof fence, of which he was one of the keepers.

The blazing sunlight scorched all things living. Not a blade of grass was to be seen. The baked ground gasped with thirst. The slight breeze was like the breath from a huge furnace.

The wire was hot and dazzling. Millions of glimmering specks and hundreds of thousands of electric sparks danced on it in revelry. Merely to look at the shimmering wire blinded the eyes. The horse turned his head away. He was dried, shrivelled, mere skin and bone. Yet he was strong, enduring, capable of going long journeys; an heroic beast, fighting a terrific battle against tremendous odds; a faithful companion, a true friend – always reliable. There was a mute appeal in his puzzled pathetic eyes, which questioned why such things were; why he should be rewarded for his efforts with a parched throat, an empty stomach,

and a hot skin.

The man dismounted, carelessly placing his hand on the wire, then snatching it back quickly, with a sharp oath.

"Everything burns in this cursed country," he muttered.

The horse rubbed his nose against the man's arm.

"Ping, old fellow, it's hotter than hell. Thirsty? of course; so am I. We'll have to thirst until we reach the next hole."

The man was strong, well-built, six feet high; even the hard life had not sapped his strength. His dark hair, moustache, and beard, gave him a sombre appearance. His eyes shone fiercely under bushy brows. His face, hands and arms were tanned a deep brown, as also was his chest, where the shirt opened from the throat. He was no common man. His speech was not that of the keepers of the fence, or the bulk of them, for there were many and strange beings on these hundreds of miles of wire line. The majority were old boundary riders, stockmen, tank sinkers, fencers, teamsters. In another class were criminals, convicts and men whose hands were against their fellows; who were dangerous sometimes, when they scented betrayal, or suspected they were being tracked. The man looking at the mirage in the distance belonged to none of these classes; he stood out alone. They knew it, and gave him a show of respect, when they met him, which was seldom.

There must have been some weighty reason for him to bury himself in this solitude, and to accept an occupation from which any educated man must shrink. He wanted to be alone. He could

not have come to a better place. Boonara, the nearest bush town, was fifty miles away from where he stood, and a dozen less from his hut.

He descended upon Boonara at night, and waited for it to wake up. When it did, surprise was visible on every face as one by one the inhabitants looked forth from their habitation. The surprise was genuine. It was long since a man of this stamp had entered Boonara. He was amused at the people, and wondered if there was one respectably clean inhabitant. Then he remembered the scarcity of water and pardoned the dirt. He was not clean himself, but he felt wholesome. His body had been cared for as much as possible during the week's tramp.

He soon became acquainted with the Boonarites. They gathered round him, and questions were levelled at him. It was quick firing to which he responded with solitary shots. At the end of the first day the people of Boonara were not a jot wiser about him. One fact was patent, he had money. It was difficult to discover how much, but he "shouted" at Bill Big's "shanty," and paid his footing, and was so far granted the freedom of Boonara.

The township of Boonara consisted of one main street, with irregular, irresponsible-looking houses dotted about, built anyhow. They had been put up at various times by many different sorts of men. Building operations commenced at one end and continued at intervals until a sort of street was formed. The first inhabitant had been a "keeper of the fence," and he camped there because it was convenient to his work. Gradually, in oddments,

other men came to the place. It was a bachelor township until some enterprising man, bolder than the rest, and more saving, ventured to Sydney and returned with a wife. She was the only woman in the township for a long time, and was regarded with a certain amount of awe and wonder. The consensus of opinion was that she must have had a terribly bad time in Sydney, or nothing would have induced her to marry Jack and come to Boonara. The example set proved catching, and other members of the bachelor community took unto themselves partners. The township grew slowly, unlike the centres of big mining districts which spring up mushroom-like in a night and often die away as quickly.

Boonara gathered in many of the keepers of the fence, who had tired of the life and settled there on a mere pittance. It was not a prosperous community; there was little conversation, and a lot of grumbling. Each man regarded his neighbour with suspicion, not knowing who he was, except by name, nor whence he came. All around Boonara was an arid waste, except at certain seasons, few and far between, when rain came sweeping in a deluge over the parched earth, filling up the gaping cracks and crevices, hissing and swishing over the land, bringing life, in every drop a new birth. Then the plains woke up. Miles upon miles of dull-brown crumbling grassless spaces became green and refreshing. Strange sights followed these deluges. In a mysterious manner sheep appeared in thousands wandering across the plains, nibbling this wonderful and succulent food from which they had been so long debarred. Cattle came,

mobs of horses, all branded, belonging to squatters miles away. Nobody seemed to own the land round Boonara. At least no member of the township had ever heard the name of an owner mentioned. They ran what cattle, horses and sheep they possessed anywhere on it. There were no enclosures, no square-mile paddocks. The only fence was the glittering wire running along the border.

There were very few men in the township who had seen the wire fence. But they met the keepers of it at long intervals when they paid visits to Bill's shanty.

In all communities, however small, there is a fierce desire to look down upon someone, to imagine a superiority. It is a trait which is laughable, and sometimes pathetic. Although the Boonarites were far from civilisation they had their pride, and regarded the keepers of the fence as beings of an inferior order. As the keepers had no respect for the inhabitants, everybody seemed satisfied with the state of affairs.

There was one keeper of the fence whom the Boonarites placed upon an equality with themselves, and that was the man who came upon them in the night.

They were amazed when he went on the glittering wire track. He was far too good for that job; "he wouldn't stick it long" they declared. He did "stick it," however, to their great surprise. The man was a mystery to them, which is not to be wondered at, considering he was mostly a puzzle to himself. His hut was forty miles away, and only three people had visited him there.

He did not encourage them. Loneliness sat lightly upon him, so it seemed. Bill Bigs was the most frequent visitor, and when he rode there, or drove in his buggy, it was seldom empty-handed. Somewhere, hidden in the bowels of the earth beneath Bill's shanty, there was mysteriously reported to be spirituous hoards of excellent quality; these rarely saw the light of day in Boonara. Various decoctions were served out over the bar, and there was a strange resemblance in the flavour, no matter from which bottle they were taken. A "nip" from one of Bill's underground bottles was like nectar from the gods.

The man on the fence was never served with inferior stuff, and when Bill visited him he took with him of his best.

Bill Bigs was rough and ready. Rumour credited him with having been in league with bushrangers, before those undesirable and romantic figures disappeared from the earth. Probably this was true, but Ben was no longer an illegitimate preyer upon mankind. He was licensed to "rob" by doctoring his goods. He prided himself on knowing a man when he saw one, and he put down the occupier of the hut in this category. He, however, knew nothing about his friend, except that he was worth a dozen ordinary fence keepers. The man never spoke of his past, or explained why he was in the most solitary place in this vast land. In vain Bill tried to induce him to talk. There was a threatening glitter in his eyes which caused Bill to halt and get on to another track. It was this man, the keeper of the fence, who stood under the blazing sun pitying his horse more than himself. He was

waiting for another keeper at the point where they had met, and had a few words and parted. He shaded his eyes again, but saw no one coming.

"I'll wait, I'm always waiting. It hasn't worn me out; it never will. There's a fire within that keeps me alive; it burns, but never dies down. There's enough fuel in my thoughts to keep it glowing until my light goes out."

CHAPTER II
IN THE HUT

Glen Leigh was his name. At least he was down as such on the books, but names were not of much account on his job; they might as well have been numbers seeing they were mere indications of identity. He waited until he was tired, although he had much patience. His throat was parched; his skin burned; there was no shade. On his head, straight down, poured the fierce sun. To look at it was blinding. It seared the eyes; sparks danced when they turned to the earth again. He had no watch. In his hut there was one, but he seldom wound it. He told the time by nature's signs, and was never far out in his calculations.

"I've waited an hour. Damn the fellow. Why doesn't he come? He expects me to do his work and my own too." He shrugged his shoulders. Jim Benny was a mere lad compared with him.

"Poor young devil. What's he done that he should come to this? The sins of the father, and so on."

A shadow flitted across the ground. He started. This was not a land of shadows, except when rain clouds swept away the dazzling blue. He looked around, then above. There was a small black cloud floating in the brilliant sky; it looked like a balloon.

"Rain!" he exclaimed. "By all that's holy, rain."

There was a power of feeling in the word.

"Rain."

In lands where skies are dull, where moisture hangs in the air, where a downpour spoils pleasure and provokes temper, the word rain has a very different meaning. To Glen Leigh rain meant almost everything. There had been none for over nine months, not a drop, and that small balloon-like cloud that cast its shadows and startled him, was more welcome than a shower of gold.

"It's curious," he muttered, "I've never seen it exactly like this. But it must mean rain. God send it. We want it, we dried up sapless things. Rain, Ping. Do you hear, old parchment, rain. And your coat'll be dripping wet. There'll be grass, and you'll feel juice in your mouth instead of dried leaves and twigs. Rain, Ping, rain!"

He gave the horse a sound smack, jerked up his head, and pointed to the cloud rolling above.

A slight breeze came. Ping sniffed, inhaling it with delight, while an anxious look of anticipation came into his eyes.

Glen watched the cloud as though his life depended on it, as thousands of lives did. It was a peculiar phenomenon, a black patch steering through a sea of blue. In its wake it left a trail, dull, streaking out, and beyond the trail were more heavy clouds on the rain path. This leader was the herald of the storm.

There was no moan, there was nothing to cause it, but presently the wire fence seemed to buzz, and the rising wind came through it playing on the strings a sort of sad harmony, but sweet music in the ears of the man and horse.

A low rumbling sound proclaimed the advance of the clouds, and they rolled along in battalions blotting out the sunlight; the relief to the eyes was immense. He waited, but Jim Benny did not come. He almost forgot about him in his anxiety over the approaching rain.

A crack straight above his head, which echoed over the plain, was followed by a burst of water which deluged him and Ping in a few minutes. Both gasped with relief. They opened their mouths, and the refreshing water cooled them; they had not had such a soaking for months. The land responded to the rain. He fancied he saw the blades of grass already shooting; he knew they would be there in a matter of twenty-four hours. He mounted Ping and rode to his hut. It was no use waiting any longer for Jim Benny; he would see him next day. Still he wondered what had come to him, and felt a bit uneasy. He liked Jim, although he seldom spoke more than a few words to him. Perhaps it was the mystery surrounding him which appealed to him; he was a mysterious man himself.

The rain poured down as he rode along. Ping's ambling pace soon covered the ground, and he reached his hut in a shorter time than usual.

The door was wide open. Someone had been there in his absence. He smiled; the intruder would not have had a very rich find. A few of his provisions might be gone; the poor devil was welcome to that.

He was always cautious, for he was accustomed to face danger.

There was no telling what sort of desperate, hunted character had found his way there, so he handled his revolver as he went in. Lying on his bunk he saw a bundle of clothes, or what looked like it. Quietly he stepped up, then started back in amazement. It was no sundowner, not even a man from Boonara, out on the jag, who had wandered in a half-frenzied condition so many miles. What he saw was a woman, a young, pretty woman, whose face was lined with sorrow, whose cheeks were sunken. The hands were hanging down, thin, almost emaciated, showing the veins, a dull blue. One leg drooped down the side. The boot was worn, and torn. The dress over it was ragged. Her whole appearance denoted the utmost distress, hardship, exhaustion. She hardly breathed, although he saw her bosom slightly heave and fall. She was in a pitiable plight indeed.

Glen Leigh was so wonder-struck at this strange sight that he stood staring at her for some time, until Ping roused him by poking his head in at the door, asking in his dumb way for food. Even the woman, lying so strangely there, did not cause him to delay. Ping was a good comrade; he must be attended to. He went round to the back of the hut, where there was a lean-to shed, and Ping followed him. There was a little precious hay still left, which he had secured for the horse at Boonara at a fabulous price, panning out, if reckoned up, at about a hundred pounds a ton. It had been brought down the river on one of the puffing, snorting, little steamers, and deposited at the small staging, to be left till called for, and fetched by Bill Bigs at his leisure. Ping sniffed

this small portion of evil-smelling stuff with satisfaction. He had never known better fare, for he had been bred in the wilds, and brought up anyhow, on anything. His dam had very little milk for him; she had nothing to make it with. When his dam deserted him, or he left her to go on his own, he wandered about, living precariously until he was six years old. Then some master on two legs caught him, and Ping began to learn the effects of contact with humanity. Ping's life had not been a happy one until he passed into Glen Leigh's hands. With the wisdom of the horse he discovered the great change in ownership, and wondered at it. He followed Leigh about like a dog; there was no bucking, biting, squealing, kicking against the pricks. He settled down to a humdrum existence with a feeling of glorious content.

As Glen Leigh stood for a few moments eyeing Ping he compared him with the woman lying in his hut. There was a similarity between their lives. Both had been ill-used, and both came into his possession. Into his possession? What on earth was he to do with the woman? Ping was all right. He had bought him for a trifle. But the woman. It was quite a different thing. She was in his hut, and part of his household for the night. What must he do with her?

"Eat your supper, Ping. I'll go and see to the other one," he said, and went back to his "front door."

He entered softly. She was still sleeping. He sat down on a log and watched her.

How had she come there? She must have tramped miles. From

Boonara of course, but he did not remember seeing her there. He smiled at the thought. He seldom gave more than a passing glance to people in the township. He was hardly likely to have noticed her sufficiently to recognise her now. If she came from Boonara, why had she left the place and wandered all these miles? Was it by chance she had struck his hut? Of course, it must have been. No doubt she saw the rainstorm coming, and seeing the hut at the same time hurried in for shelter.

She was not an ordinary working-woman, he saw that, and cudgelled his brains to find out how she came into the country at all.

She must belong to somebody, but to whom?

He knew of women who had lost their reason in solitudes, and had not wondered at it. The country was only fit for blacks, and even they shunned it, the few of them that were left after the white man's march. Had she come along with some squatter, when he had been making a visit to Bathurst, or Bourke, or even Sydney or Melbourne? That was a possible solution, but highly improbable. There was only one large station near enough to this place, from which she could have tramped. Its owner was Craig Bellshaw, of Mintaro Station, and he was not the sort of man to drive a woman away by ill-treatment, quite the contrary.

She stirred. He listened. She was muttering, but he could not catch the words. He got up and leaned over her.

CHAPTER III
A STRANGE SITUATION

He could make nothing of what she said. It was a jumble of incoherent sounds, with no meaning in them. He gathered no information as to how she came there.

"She's ill – delirious. What can I do for her?" he muttered.

He was a soft-hearted man, where women were concerned, and distress, although he had seen much of it, appealed to him. There were no doctors, not even in Boonara. When folks were ill in those parts they had to fight for life as best they could, with a few patent remedies to aid them.

"Fever," he said, "there's no doubt about it, and she has no strength to withstand it. I can't leave her alone. I wish to heaven Bigs, or someone, would come."

He sat by her all night; sometimes he had to hold her down, as she struggled like a bird in his strong grasp. He was very gentle with her. Not one man in a hundred would have credited him with such tenderness. When daylight sprang out suddenly, as it does in these climes, she became quieter. He put his hand on her breast, humming softly. The touch and the sound soothed her. With wonderful patience he remained in this position hour after hour, proving himself a great man, greater than he ever thought or reckoned himself to be. He was hungry, but he did not move.

Ping came to the door and wondered why his wants were left unattended. It was unusual. He would have resented it had not the downpour brought up small shoots of green, with marvellous suddenness. He turned away and went nibbling the unaccustomed luxuries. Ping came to the door instinctively. Grass was a thing he had not seen for months. He didn't expect to find it, but as he sniffed its freshness he left the hut contentedly, and Leigh was glad.

"He smells the grass," he thought, "There's more chance of her pulling through now it's cooler." He mixed up the horse and the woman in his thoughts continually. How long he sat there he did not know, but a sound reached him which gave warning that something or someone was approaching. Ping neighed. He knew if it was a rider he would call at his hut. They always paid "ceremonial" visits; it was an event in their lives. A sound of hoofs reached him. It was very welcome; he gave a sigh of relief. He looked round, and saw a horse and rider pull up at his door. It was Jim Benny. At any other time Benny would have been cursed roundly for neglecting his work. Curses were the habitual mode of forcibly expressing disapproval by the men of the fence. But never was man more heartily welcome. Glen Leigh didn't even give a thought as to why Jim Benny came to his hut. It was an uncommon occurrence but he had no time to consider it.

Jim grinned as he put his head in at the door. He was about to speak when he grasped the situation, as far as it was possible for him to so do, lacking all knowledge of the facts.

He was much surprised, as Glen Leigh had been, when he found the woman in his hut.

"Hush," said Glen softly, and Jim crept in on tiptoe.

He stood looking at the woman. His thoughts were much the same as Glen's. The white wan face struck a chord in Jim Benny's nature that had not twanged before. His eyes glistened, then moisture gathered. Presently a couple of drops trickled down his sunburnt face. He put a hand on Glen's shoulder, bent down, and whispered, "How did she come here?"

Glen shook his head.

"She's bad?"

"Fever."

"Poor little thing," said Jim.

Glen lifted his hand from her bosom. She only stirred slightly, then with a sigh became still again. He beckoned Jim to follow him outside. They walked a few yards away, so that the sound of their voices would not disturb her.

"Where the devil were you yesterday?" was Glen's question.

"My horse broke down. I had to bag another, and a pretty brute he is. Look at him," replied Jim pointing to the wretched mass of skin and bone.

"Why have you come here?" asked Glen.

"I thought I'd ride over and explain. I know what you are when you're in a temper," replied Jim.

"That's not the reason."

"Perhaps it isn't. Anyhow, what about her?" and he pointed

to the hut.

"Somebody must go to Billy's and get some good brandy for her. It's got to be the best – none of his poison," said Glen.

"In that case you'd better go. It's no good me trying it. He'd think I was lying, and there'd be no getting it out of him. I'll stay with her if you go. Besides my horse is no good. Ping will do the journey in half the time," Jim answered.

Glen looked at him. Jim's face did not move a muscle.

"It's lucky you came," Glen remarked. "Tell me what brought you here."

"Another time," replied Jim hesitatingly.

Glen shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please," he said.

"How did she get here?" asked Jim.

Glen told him how he found her, and Jim Benny was as helpless as himself in solving the problem.

"It's very strange," said Jim. "We've never seen a woman round here before. What are you going to do with her?"

"Keep her until she's pulled round. Then I can find out all about her," returned Glen.

A faint cry came from the hut which caused them to turn round quickly and run back. A strange, weird sight met their eyes. The woman was standing close to the bed. Her hair was down. They noticed it was a beautiful nut-brown, and there was plenty of it. Her arms were stretched out. Her eyes stared glassily. As Glen came in she tottered forward, and he caught her in his arms.

A thrill went through him as he clasped her. Her face was close to his. He felt her breath on his cheek. He drew her tightly towards him, and held her for several minutes. Jim Benny watched him with a queer light in his eyes.

Glen carried her, laying her on his rough bed. She was exhausted with the exertion and remained quite still.

"You'd better go at once," said Jim, "she's bad, very bad."

Glen stood thinking for a few minutes, then asked, "You'll not leave her while I'm gone?"

"No, I'll sit by her as I found you sitting. See?" and he sat on the log, placing his hand on her breast. "That'll soothe her."

Without another word Glen Leigh left the hut.

He whistled Ping, and obediently the horse came to his call. Glen saddled him, and rode off towards Boonara. Jim Benny sat looking at the woman. He heard the hoof beats gradually dying away, then with a sudden movement got up and kissed her on the lips. She moaned.

"I couldn't help it. I meant no harm. She reminded me of – never mind names. I loved her, and she married him – that's all done with."

He remained quite still until Spotty, Glen's dog, half dingo, came sniffing round. He had been on the prowl for a day or so, and returned repentant. The predatory instinct was uppermost, which was not to be wondered at considering the wild stock from which he descended, and he made excursions to some land of which his master knew nothing.

The dog knew Jim, on the fence, but had not seen him in Glen's hut. Then there was the woman. Spotty had never come across one. Jim knew the nature of these dogs, their faithful savageness, and scented danger in the air. He had seen the dog on the fence with Glen, but had always been on horseback, and Spotty had never really scented him. He didn't even know the dog's name.

Spotty eyed Jim, then looked at the woman on the bed. Here was something he did not understand. He came forward, crouching, like a panther ready to spring, and Jim set him with his eyes, not daring to move, on her account.

Spotty sniffed at her dress, turned round, faced Jim and growled, a low rumbling sound. Then he lay on the floor, paws outstretched, head erect, watching.

Jim knew if he moved the dog would probably fly at his throat. It would be hours before Leigh returned, and he must remain in this position the whole time, on her account. Had he been alone he could have cowed Spotty, or attempted it. He heard distant thunder. There was another storm brewing, the promise of more welcome rain. The lightning flashed through the hut, playing in and out at the doors. The crashing sounds came nearer; then the rain burst in torrents.

Spotty did not move. He remained with his eyes on Jim, not even giving a glance at the figure on the bed. The woman slept through it all. Jim wondered at her strange stillness. Was she dead?

The thought made him start. He had not put his hand on her again after he kissed her, and could not feel or hear her breath. Spotty saw him move, and growled. He seemed about to spring, then crouched again.

It was a strange situation – the man, the woman, and the dog, in the hut, the storm raging outside, and Glen Leigh riding on his mission to Boonara.

CHAPTER IV
"IT'S FOR A WOMAN"

"Hello, what brings you here?" said Bill Bigs, as Glen Leigh entered his house. The tone was not encouraging. Bill was in an ill-humour, and it was not difficult to discover the cause. The bar was in a state of wild confusion. Broken bottles, bits of wood, splinters from the rough furniture, and jagged pieces of glass lay about. There was every sign of a fight.

Glen took it all in at a glance. Although he was in a desperate hurry he knew the best way to succeed would be by humouring him.

"Bit of a skirmish, eh?" began Glen.

"Two of your fence fellows began it. I never saw such beasts in my life. They all are."

Glen's eyes glittered.

"Does that include me?" he asked.

"No. I can't say it does, but there's no telling what may happen. You'll break out some day. Flesh and blood can't stand your job," replied Bill.

Here was an opening. Glen was holding himself in leash wonderfully well. All the time he was thinking, "What's she doing? What's he doing?"

He wanted to hurry back. Ping would have to hustle when he

made a start.

"You're right," he agreed, "if it wasn't for a nip of your good stuff now and again, Bill, I'd go under."

"I see. So that's what you're here for. Well, I can't gratify you this time. I've run out."

Bill was husbanding his resources; it was his habit. Glen knew there was a tough job before him.

"I must have some of the best, Bill, I'm run down," persisted Glen.

Bill laughed.

"Must have it? I like that. Look around. Do you think I'm going to stand that sort of thing from your fellows without paying somebody out? As you happen to have come along first I'll pay you out. You'll get nothing from me to-day."

"I must have it, Bill. I'll pay double price for it."

"When?"

"In a month. I can't do it now."

"A month! Six months you mean, and then it's uncertain."

"Not with me."

"I'll not deny you're a good payer, and straight, but you've got to suffer for the sins of others. You're one of 'em," returned Bill.

Glen Leigh leaned over the counter, his face close to Bill's.

"If you knew what I wanted it for you'd give it me without payment," he said.

Bill looked hard at him. Glen's face was quivering. His mouth twitched. His eyes glared. He was thinking of the woman. How

should he get the brandy if Bill persisted in refusing, for he meant having it at any cost?

"What's it for?"

"I can't tell you. I will before long, but not now."

"Then it's a fake. You want it for yourself."

"I do not."

He fancied he could hear her moaning, becoming restless, and if he got what he wanted and hurried back she might have a chance. It exasperated him.

"Why not tell me the reason?" asked Bill, fairly enough.

"There's somebody ill in my hut."

"Oh, that's it, one of your mates. Do you think I'm going to help him after last night's work? Not me."

Glen wanted to conceal that it was a woman, but he was wasting precious time. Could Bill be trusted to keep it to himself? He had no desire for the township to know until he had found out all about her.

"It's not one of my mates. I'd not ask it for him after that," and he waved his hand round. "You'll not say a word, but keep it dark?"

"It depends on what it is you tell me."

"I can't tell you. Bill, we've been what folks call friends, as far as it goes here. Promise me. It's a matter of life and death. You'll not be sorry. You'll have done a good action, and saved a life."

Bill saw he was in deadly earnest. He knew Glen Leigh had always gone straight with him.

"Out with it then. I'll promise, so help me I will, but I don't say I'll let you have what you want."

Glen saw he was yielding. Again his thoughts went back to his hut, and he groaned at the loss of time.

"It's for a woman. She's got fever, and is delirious. She'll die if she doesn't have some stimulant. For God's sake, Bill, let me have it."

Bill stared at him. There was a genuine, even pathetic ring in his voice. But a woman! He couldn't be expected to swallow that yarn.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"In my hut."

Bill laughed. He couldn't help it. The thing was so ridiculous.

"Who's the lady?" he asked with a grin.

Leigh's hands clenched. He was becoming dangerous.

"I haven't time to tell you lies. I don't know who she is, or where she comes from. All I can say is I found her in there lying on my shakedown, dying," and he told the whole story as rapidly as possible to the astonished Bill.

"It's as true as gospel, and Jim Benny's with her waiting my return. Think of the time I've wasted here. I may be too late. Ping's none too fast, but he's sure. For heaven's sake, Bill, let me have it, and some tinned stuff, soup, anything you've got. There's nothing at my place for her."

He spoke rapidly, excitedly. He was strung to the highest pitch as he thought how long he had already been away.

"It's the rummiest yarn I ever heard, but I don't see as how you could make it up. I wonder who she is?"

"That's what I've got to find out. If she dies, her secret goes with her. Help to save her, then we'll get to know," begged Glen.

Bill thought of his girl at work in Adelaide. Supposing she was in such a plight? The mere idea made him shiver.

"I'll do it, Glen. Damn it, man, if you'd outed with it at first the thing would have been settled in five minutes."

He disappeared. Glen knew if he had fired the story at him straight away it would not have been believed at all. Bill also knew it as he dived into the bowels of the earth beneath his bar.

"He's worked me cleverly," he muttered. "He saw I was cut up rough when he came in, and he handled me well. It's a queer go, a very queer go, but I believe him. He's not given to lying, and in any case I can go and see for myself in a day or two. If he's put up a game on me, I'll – No, he'd never do it. He's too much of a man. And his face! It might be his sweetheart the way he looked."

Bill was rummaging about. Selecting two bottles he took them with him. As he went back through his storeroom, he collected some tinned milk, soup, and biscuits.

He packed them all carefully so that there would be no risk of breakage, then went back to the bar.

Two men had come in during his absence. One was "on the fence," and as usual they had selected a bottle of alleged whisky, and were helping themselves. Glen had refused to join them. He was called a sullen bounder.

"Get out of this," yelled Bill when he saw the rider on the fence. "You're one of the devils who caused all this mess."

"I'll pay for it – at least my share," answered the man.

"Then out with it," said Bill, putting his package down.

Glen eyed it greedily. He ought to have had it an hour ago and been well on his way back to the hut. Here was more delay. Would she be alive? Would she be alive? Was Jim with her? Yes, he'd wait. He was sure of it.

The man pulled out some greasy pound-notes and handed Bill a couple.

"That's more'n my whack. It'll have to stand good for this," and he placed his hand on the bottle.

"And mind, if I see any signs of strife brewing you'll not get away so easily next time," warned Bill, as he stuffed the dirty notes in his pocket, only too glad to get anything in payment for the damage.

He beckoned to Glen, picked up the package and went outside.

"You'll find all you want here; at least as much as I can give you."

"I'll never forget it, Bill. One of these days I may be able to do you a good turn. I'll see you are paid in full, and more."

"Never mind about that. It's something to my credit that I've faith enough in a man to believe such a dodgasted yarn as you've spun me."

"You do believe it?"

"Yes. Shake. You'll not mind me driving over? I'll not come

empty-handed, and not to act the spy, but it's such a stretcher that I'd just like to see for myself."

Glen smiled as he mounted Ping, and Bill handed him the parcel.

"I can't wonder at it. I can hardly believe it myself. Come and see. You'll be welcome. You always are, but not a word to a soul."

"I'll keep it dark, you bet. I'm with you in finding out all about her. It'll be a bit of a change from that filthy work," and he jerked his thumb in the direction of the bar.

As Glen was riding away, the man who had paid Bill the two notes rushed out and yelled, "Expect you've not heard that Joe Calder's been found shot dead on his track!"

CHAPTER V
WHY JIM CAME TO THE HUT

Joe Calder shot dead on his track!

Glen had no time to waste or he would have gone back to hear more. He must hurry on. Ping felt there was need for haste. His master seldom pushed him as he was doing now.

Joe Calder done for at last! Glen had warned him it would come some day, for the man was a brute. He had no human feeling, and how he earned promotion over his fellows was one of those things no man could understand.

Glen was overseer on his track, as Joe Calder was on the other, and the two men often met, but they were as wide apart as the poles in every respect.

Calder was a sneak. The men under him hated him. More than one threatened to do for him, but he was a big powerful man, and dangerous. He was one of the worst characters, and when he went to Boonara even Bill Bigs fought shy of him. There was no doubt he was a criminal. His face, his shifty eyes, the backward glances, his fear of being followed and tracked down betrayed it. But he must have had a friend somewhere, or he would never have got his post.

Glen was surprised, and yet he was not. The news was shot at him unexpectedly, but he believed it, and wondered who had rid

the world of a scoundrel, and the track of a desperate man. Ping travelled well, his head bound for home, such as it was, and every horse knows the way to his stable. Mile after mile was traversed, until Glen saw a faint speck in the distance and knew it was his hut. A townsman would have seen nothing, but Glen's eyes were used to looking long distances, and were almost as powerful as a glass in distinguishing objects.

"Go on, Ping. We'll soon be there," and the horse put on another spurt.

The tension in the hut was not relaxed for a moment. Hour after hour passed, and still the dog stood on guard and eyed Jim. If the man moved there came an ominous growl.

Two or three times the woman groaned, and Spotty pricked his ears wonderingly. Such sounds were unfamiliar. Jim watched him. The dog seemed half inclined to spring on the bed. Thinking better of it he settled down again with his eyes fixed as before.

A drowsy feeling crept over Jim. He was fearful of going to sleep. He had been sitting like a statue for the Lord knows how long and he had no idea of the time.

He listened. Not a sound, except a few melancholy notes from a passing bird. What was Glen doing all this time? He had promised to watch, but Glen had not promised to come back. Jim's mind was in a chaotic state, and he was hardly responsible for it.

Spotty pricked his ears. Jim accepted this as a sign that he heard something, and listened intently.

The dog gave a short, sharp bark, a true signal this time.

In his great sense of relief Jim stood up. He could bear the strain no longer.

Spotty flew at him, straight at his throat. Jim caught him with both hands and held him, the dog growling, snarling, trying to wrench himself free to bite his hands. Jim held on. He heard the hoof-beats. It was Glen returning and all would be well, but he was tired and cramped with the strain, and Spotty was a ferocious dog, and strong.

The woman moved and half sat up; then she sank back again. He was thankful.

Ping halted. Glen got out of the saddle with the precious burden and strode into the hut. Unstrung as he was, the sight that met his gaze caused him to drop the package. With a cry of despair he caught at it, just breaking its fall.

Spotty, seeing his master, ceased struggling. Jim let go his hold and fell on the floor in a dead faint.

"Get out," almost yelled Glen, and the dog shot through the opening like a fox bolting from hounds, dashing under Ping's belly and scouring across country at top speed. Yet he had only guarded his master's hut, and his doggy brain resented the injustice.

Glen opened the package before attending to Jim. There was no damage done, and he had never felt so like offering up a prayer before – supposing, after all, he had gone through, the precious bottles had broken? He knelt down beside Jim, summing up the

situation, and wondering how long he had been subjected to the strain caused by the dog. Opening one of the bottles, he poured a small quantity down Jim's throat, being careful not to spill a drop.

Presently Jim sat up, looked round in a dazed way, and then seeing Glen said, "It was a near go. The dog watched me for hours. I dared not move for fear he would savage me or her, but when I heard you coming I could stand it no longer. I got up, and he flew at me. She's been like that ever since you left. What have you brought?"

"Many things, but I'd a job to work round Bill. There'd been a row in his shanty. Two of your fellows smashed things up, and he was in a towering rage. Fetch some water. It's funny we can get it nice, cool, clean and fresh. We haven't done that for months, have we?"

As he spoke he was busy with the package placing the things carefully on the floor. Bill had made amends after all, and opened his heart. He was a dashed good sort, and should be repaid.

Jim staggered out for the water. The tank was overflowing into sundry water-catchers. It was far too precious to waste, although many times the quantity would have been used to wash up after a single meal in a big hotel.

Glen made the mixture weak, then, taking a bit of rag, he moistened her lips with it, squeezing a little into her mouth.

He was glad she was alive. A tremendous sense of relief came over him, and with it relaxation from the strain he too had gone through. He could have lain down on the floor and slept for many

hours.

"Get some rest, Jim. You need it," he said.

"Not so much as you."

"Yes, your struggle was greater than mine. Sleep, man; then you can watch when I give up."

Jim lay down. He was in a dead slumber in a minute or two.

Glen sat looking at the woman. A slight colour came into her cheeks, her lips were not so blue, a warmth spread over her body; he could feel it as he touched her bare arm. Then a curious thing happened. He bent down and kissed her, not like Jim Benny, on the lips, but on her forehead, reverently, tenderly, like a father would a child – and he was the most reckless rider on the fence. Both men were among the legion of the lost, why was only known to themselves, but they had given this woman what many a one of her sex in a great city would have been thankful for – human kindness.

"Sleep's best for her," he thought, as he moistened her lips again. "She's been hot and cold, but there's a nice glow on her now. It's healthy. She'll pull through. I'll bet she pulls through, and we'll have done it, Jim, and I, and Bill. He's had a big share in it. I should say the three of us will be able to look after her and find out all about her."

Jim had his rest. Glen roused him when he found sleep would overcome him whether he willed it or no.

"Wet her lips with it when they're dry. Place your finger on and feel."

Jim nodded. He thought how he had placed his lips to hers when Glen was away. He was ashamed of it; somehow he thought he ought to tell him. He'd think it over while he slept.

In the midst of nature's great silent solitudes these three were working out their fate. It was so still that to most people the silence would have been worse than the noise and rush of traffic. Outside, Ping, neglected after his long journey, unsaddled, was finding refreshment. The horse was weary, leg tired, but his heart was in the right place. He was the sort that never gives in until something snaps.

Spotty called a halt when he had gone a couple of miles, and considered the question of the unjustness of his master. He must have arrived at some conclusion for he retraced his steps slowly. Near the hut he encountered Ping, so nosed round him as though apologising for the sudden bolt under him. Ping and Spotty were chums. They were both mongrels, but there is often a lot of good to be found in such animals. Eventually when Ping lay down Spotty curled up close to his back; the silence was unbroken.

When Glen awoke he saw at a glance the woman was coming round. She began to mutter. They listened but could make out no words.

"She's pulling through. I reckon she'll mend now. We've all of us got to get her round."

"All of us?"

"Yes, you and Bill and me."

"And what about the fence?" asked Jim.

"Damn the fence," answered Glen fiercely, "I've done with it."

"Then so have I," echoed Jim almost gladly.

"Good boy. It's a cursed job. Keepers of the fence. I tell you, Jim, it's slow murder. I'd as lief have solitary confinement."

"I guess we'd get better tucker in prison," said Jim.

The word murder recalled to Glen's mind the death of Calder.

"Jim!"

"Well?"

"Joe Calder's been shot dead on the track."

"Serves the brute right," replied Jim in a hard voice.

"You haven't told me yet what brought you here," said Glen looking at him.

"That was it."

"What?"

"The Calder business."

"You – ?"

Jim nodded.

"I shot him."

CHAPTER VI
"COME"

Glen asked no questions. If Jim Benny had shot Calder he must have had good reason for it. He waited to hear if he would say more.

"Do you want to know why?" asked Jim.

"Please yourself."

Jim pulled off his shirt, or tried to. It stuck.

"The water," he said faintly.

Glen gave him a damp cloth. Jim bathed the shirt, near his breast. For the first time Glen noticed a deep red mark.

"That's better," said Jim, as he felt the shirt give, and pulled it off. Then he went on, "He did that with his knife, and I shot him."

"It served him right," returned Glen.

"We quarrelled, not for the first time. He said brutal things to me, and called me names no man would stand, so I struck him between the eyes. He whipped out his knife, and I had it before I could think. I pulled my revolver from my belt, and shot him through the heart. He fell like a log. I left him there. I never even looked at him, but came on here."

"Why did you come here?"

"Because I thought I could depend upon you, and you would give me good advice. I didn't tell you at first, because of her. One

thing at a time's enough."

"You can depend upon me. I'll help you if there's trouble, but no one knows you shot him, and there'll not be much fuss made over him," declared Glen.

The woman opened her eyes, and looked at them. Then a faint smile spread over her face.

"Are you better?" asked Glen.

No answer.

"Do you feel stronger, my lass?"

She pressed her hand over her forehead feebly, and a vacant look came into her eyes.

"She's weak. She's had no food. Warm some of that milk, Jim."

When it was ready Glen gave it to her with a spoon. She took it greedily. In a few minutes she dozed again.

"Her head's sure to be bad for a time," said Glen.

There was a brief silence, then Jim said, "While you were away I did something."

"What?"

"I kissed her on the lips. I couldn't help it. Something prompted me."

Glen started. For a moment he felt angry, then muttered, "When you were outside I kissed her on the forehead."

These kisses were characteristic of the men and showed the difference between them.

They said no more about it. Both thought it strange, and the

subject dropped.

The woman progressed slowly but surely. As she recovered some strength they found her memory had gone; she did not know her name, or where she came from. She appeared to imagine she had been there all her life.

Bill Bigs arrived in his buggy, and did not come empty-handed; there was an ample supply stowed away in the back.

"That's her, eh?" he asked.

"Yes. Do you believe me now?" replied Glen smiling.

"I believed you before, but I wanted to see her. I say, Glen, she'll be a grand-looking woman when she's picked up and filled out a bit. Where the deuce did she come from? It's miles away from everywhere here," said Bill.

"It'll be hard to find out. She's lost her memory; she fancies she's been here all her days, but she's sane enough. She'll talk all right in a bit," replied Glen.

"Jim Benny!" exclaimed Bill.

"He's been here ever since she came. It was funny he should turn up almost at the same time."

Jim came into the hut and greeted Bill.

"I never expected to see you here," exclaimed the latter.

"He came to consult me. We're going to throw it up," Glen told him.

"Throw what up?"

"The fence. We've done with it; we're sick of the whole thing. It's too much for flesh and blood to stand."

Bill stared.

"Going!" he cried. "Why you're the best man on the job."

"Am I?" answered Glen. "I'm glad to hear someone has a good opinion of me."

"I always had," pursued Bill. "I'm not surprised. I've often wondered why you came. I remember the first time I saw you in Boonara. I thought you'd dropped from the clouds. Have you sent in your resignation?"

"No. What does it matter. Let 'em find out. You can drop a line to the overseer when we're gone."

"And the fence?" asked Bill "We don't want those cursed rabbits to get through to our side."

"There are plenty to look after it; men are always disappearing. There are good and bad among us. Some fellows are there fighting down the drink curse. I don't blame 'em; it's their only chance. I know two of 'em, good men in their way, but I can tell how it would be with them if they went back to a town life. They'd go under quick. I've been in many a jag myself, but that's not why I came out. I can stifle it; it's only a matter of will," declared Glen.

"I don't know so much about that. I've had a lot of experience in that line. Some of the poor beggars can't help themselves," said Bill, and then added, "They've buried Calder. There'll be no inquiry. Most people think he shot himself. Anyhow we've shovelled him away in Boonara. If any trouble is made they can dig him up again and call him as witness. He's the only one who

could give evidence. All your fellows are glad he's gone."

Jim listened in silence, with a feeling of relief; he did not in the least regret what he had done. He regarded it as a righteous act.

The woman sat up. When she saw Bill she asked, "When did he come?"

This was almost the first sentence she had spoken correctly. Hitherto her words had come disjointedly – in jerks.

"Me, my lass? I've just dropped in to see my friend, Glen. He told me you were here."

"I've been here a long time. Oh, such a long time. I must have been sleeping for weeks. I've forgotten which is Glen," she answered.

"I'm Glen – Glen Leigh," he said as he placed his hand on her shoulder.

"How silly of me that I didn't remember, but I shall not forget again. You have been very good to me. Have I been very ill?"

"Yes, for a long time," replied Glen humouring her.

She looked at Jim, and Glen said, "He's Jim Benny, another good friend. And that's Bill Bigs, one of the best of friends. We're all going to look after you."

She smiled.

"Do I want looking after?"

"You'll not be too strong for a good while yet," replied Glen. "When you are strong we're going away from here."

She looked at him wonderingly.

"Going away from home?" she asked.

"You'll want a change when you get stronger."

This put a different complexion on the matter, and she smiled again, nodded, and lay down once more.

"That's the first attempt at conversation she's made," said Glen. "We're getting on."

"You boys – where are you going when you leave here?" asked Bill suddenly.

Glen did not hesitate.

"Sydney," he answered.

Bill remained silent a few minutes, then said slowly, as though still thinking it out, "Sydney! I've a good mind to go with you, I'm sick of Boonara. It's the last place that was ever put up on this earth."

Glen jumped up from his seat, so did Jim. They took a hand each and almost pulled Bill's arms off.

"Do it!" cried Glen. "Do it! We want you. If the three can't make headway in Sydney we're not the men I fancy we are."

"Yes, come with us," put in Jim heartily.

"Stop, you fellows, stop," said Bill. "It's easier said than done. I'll tell you something. I've had an offer for my shanty, a damned good offer, more than it's worth. I can't think why he's made it, or where he's got the money from. I never knew Craig Bellshaw to give much money away, and I don't see where else it could have come from."

"Craig Bellshaw!" exclaimed Glen in surprise, "has he made a bid for it?"

"Not likely. What'd he want with a place like mine? It's Garry Backham, Bellshaw's overseer. He came into my place and wanted to know if I'd sell out. He said he wanted the place and was tired of Mintaro. I was never more surprised in my life. You could have pushed me over with a blade of grass."

"I met him several times. He seems a taciturn sort of man, sullen, bad tempered – not one of my sort," said Glen.

"I fancy he's had a roughish time at Mintaro," Bill surmised, "but he must have saved money. Bellshaw wouldn't lend it him in hundreds."

"He was a pal of Calder's; about the only one he had," Jim remarked.

"I never knew that," said Bill.

"They used to meet on the track, and talk and smoke. He bought Calder drink at times," explained Jim.

"Birds of a feather," said Glen.

"He made no fuss about Calder being shot," Bill commented.

"It was no use. He's dead and gone, and there's no proof that he was shot; he probably did it himself as you have said," decided Glen.

The woman stirred, murmuring some words in her sleep; with a start she sat up, stared at the group, stretched out her arms, and in a pleading voice uttered the one word, "Come."

CHAPTER VII
THE FACE IN THE WATER

"I'm not superstitious," said Bill, "but that settles it; she said 'come' as plainly as she could, although she's fast asleep. I can't get over that. I'll sell out to Backham, and join you. We'll make things gee in Sydney, I reckon."

They were delighted at this decision, for they knew Bigs was a good man of business, who had his head screwed on right, and if there was anything to be made he'd be on to it straight.

"She'll want some clothes. She can't go in those things," said Glen.

"I'll fix that up. I can get sufficient garments in Boonara for her to reach Sydney in and there's no occasion for her to arrive like the Queen of Sheba," Bill replied.

They laughed. Things were more cheerful. The decision to abandon the fence livened them up.

When Bill left he promised to return in a week, and see how the woman was progressing.

"It'll be longer than that before we can travel with her," he said.

Away in Sydney, the great city, vast even in those days, life was going on very differently from the solitudes round Boonara. There were hundreds, nay, thousands, of people in that beautiful

city who had never heard of Boonara, or knew there were such men as the keepers of the fence. As far as the majority of the inhabitants were concerned such men as Glen Leigh, Jim Benny, and Bill Bigs, might not have existed. Had the story of the woman in the hut been told it would have been laughed to scorn, and counted impossible, but there is nothing impossible in the world, however improbable it may seem.

Sydney was pulsating with life in this year of grace 18 – . There is no occasion to be exact. It might partially spoil matters, and what's a year or two to a story, so long as the interest is maintained, and the characters are living beings? Late in the nineteenth century Sydney flourished exceedingly. The last twenty years of that remarkable era saw it going ahead by leaps and bounds, and it has been growing ever since until men who left it years ago, and have revisited it, can hardly recognise the place. Long may it flourish, most beautiful of many beautiful cities!

There was a crowd in Pitt Street, outside Tattersalls, and over the way at the marble bar streams of people were passing in and out, for it was hot, and there were many parched throats. Moreover, it had been the winding up day of the A.J.C. Meeting at Randwick, and every favourite had got home, much to the disgust of the bookmakers.

It was ten at night and sultry; there was no air to speak of. The keepers of the fence would have thought it cool, but they were used to being burnt up and parched, and lived in a land where water was often flavoured with the taste of dead things,

and not cooled with ice and fragrant with lemon. Not one of this crowd knew what took place on the border line of glittering wire. Boonara was as far off as, and more strange than, Timbuctoo.

Not one of this crowd? Stay. There was one – probably the only one – who knew all about it, and he stood smoking a cigar and chatting to a man outside a tobacconist's shop, not far from the Club on the opposite side of the road. He was a man nearly six feet high, with black hair and eyebrows, and a sunburnt face. Not a pleasant face, but strong, determined, with a rather cruel mouth and dark cat-like eyes; a man dangerous both to friend and enemy if he willed. He was well-dressed, but somewhat carelessly; he had a slouch hat, dark grey clothes, and his tie was awry. He stood with his legs slightly apart, gesticulating with one hand as he talked. The man to whom he was speaking was the leviathan of the Australian turf, who had made his position by a mixture of shrewd business qualities and bold gambling, who betted in thousands, and took "knocks" that would have sent a less plucky man out of the ring. But he always came up smiling, and his luck was proverbial. He had been known to play hazards for twelve hours at a stretch and never have a hand tremble when he lost thousands. He was ostensibly a dealer in choice cigars, etc., in fact in all the paraphernalia of a tobacconist's, and it was his shop they had just come out of as they stood talking on the pavement. He was not so tall as his companion, and had a much more kindly face. He was popular because he was cheerful and honest, and the little backer could always get a point over the odds from him.

The taller man was Craig Bellshaw, of Mintaro Station. The bookmaker was Nicholas Gerard, always called Nick by everybody.

Craig Bellshaw was, as before mentioned, probably the only man who knew there were such men as the keepers of the fence, who had heard of Boonara, and was acquainted with the vast solitudes in the West. He was a wealthy man, and could afford to leave Mintaro to the men he employed, and come to Sydney in search of pleasure. When he was away he still had his grip on his place, as some of his hands found to their cost. They put it down to the spying of Garry Backham, the overseer.

Craig Bellshaw was a man of about fifty years of age, but did not look it. He had led a hardy life, and been successful. He owned miles upon miles of land, thousands of cattle, and his sheep ran into hundreds of thousands. Horses he had in abundance; how many he had no idea. He claimed all within reach of his land round Mintaro district, but never missed a dozen when they were taken. It pleased him to say they were his, so he did not grumble when Boonara men, and fencers, claimed a few. Bellshaw was difficult to understand, but one thing was certain: once he got his hold on a thing, he seldom let go.

He was a bachelor, but had a house in Sydney which cost him a considerable sum to keep up; he found it handy when he came to town. He owned racehorses, and his trainer was Ivor Hadwin, who had stables on the hill at Randwick. Hadwin was completely under Bellshaw's thumb, and was heavily in his debt.

It was owing to pecuniary difficulties that he became connected with him. This was often the case with Craig Bellshaw. For once in a way the A.J.C. Meeting proved successful to the stable, and Bellshaw's horses had won four races, one on each day; all were heavily backed, and the bulk of the money had either been laid by Nick Gerard, or he had worked the commission. This was the subject of their conversation, and as they talked in the flare of the gaslights and the shops, many people turned to look at them, for both were well-known figures in the sporting world.

"Yes, Nick, I've had a pretty good meeting," said Craig.

Nick Gerard smiled.

"I should say you had. There are several thousands to your credit," he rejoined.

"What do you think of the dark bay – the fellow that won to-day?"

"Barellan? Oh, he's all right. A pretty fair horse I should say."

"Yes, he is, a good deal better than you think."

"Is he? I've seen him at work on the track. He won to-day, but I don't think he's the best you've got."

"No? Which is?"

"Flash."

Bellshaw smiled in his peculiar way as he said, "Perhaps he's a better track horse, but I'm sure Barellan is the better horse in a race, especially over a distance."

"He may be. When are you going back West?"

"Not yet. I'm sick of it. We've had such a long dry spell, but

now we've had rain, a real soaker. We wanted it badly enough."

"It must be terrible when you have no rain for months."

"It is. You're lucky to be here always."

"Why don't you give it up now you've made your pile?"

"Throw it up? I can't afford it. You don't know what's hanging to Mintaro."

"A good deal, no doubt, but you're a single man, with no one dependent on you. It seems to me you're wasting your time. You've worked hard enough," argued Nick.

"So I have, but I couldn't live in Sydney always, any more than I could at Mintaro."

They talked for some little time. Eventually Gerard bade him good night and went over to Tattersalls. The squatter walked along Pitt Street, then hailing a cab drove to Surrey Hills. He called at a house, remained some time, then drove to Circular Quay, catching the last boat to Manley. It was beautiful on the harbour; a cool breeze was blowing from the heads. The moon shone, and as he leaned over the side he saw his face reflected in the water. This was peculiar. He did not remember having seen such a thing before. As he looked he clutched the rail with both hands, turned pale, and gasped. Reflected beside his face was another face, that of a young woman – he had not noticed a lady standing a short distance away from him who was also looking over the side of the boat.

He staggered away and went to the fore part of the steamer, where there was more breeze, and sat down. The perspiration

broke out all over him. He felt faint for the first time in his life.

"I saw it. I'm sure of it, and it was like her face. I'm a fool to be frightened at a shadow on the water," and he laughed harshly, a mirthless sound.

CHAPTER VIII
WAYS AND MEANS

Three men and a woman arrived in Sydney by the mail train from Bourke; there were not many passengers, and they attracted some attention. It was evident they came from out back, their appearance denoted it; they were clothed in a rough country style. They were Glen Leigh, Jim Benny, Bill Bigs, and the woman. They had very little luggage; it was contained in a couple of bundles, "swags," that could be strapped on the back, slung over a shoulder, or carried in the hand. Many people in Sydney have seen the once familiar figure of a tall Queensland millionaire walking along George Street with a similar outfit. In appearance Glen Leigh was not unlike him, only younger.

A porter watched them as they walked out of the station. They all seemed solicitous about the woman. The man understood the three, the female he was puzzled about.

"They can't have picked her up coming in the train. She belongs to one of them. I wonder which. The tall chap, perhaps. He's a big 'un; I fancy I've seen him before. I wonder where they're bound for?"

The porter's attention was claimed and he forgot all about them.

"There's a coffee place in Lower George Street that will do us

for a time," said Glen, "till we've had a look round."

The woman stared about her wonderingly. If she had ever been in a large city it was evident she had forgotten all about it.

Since her illness, which was not yet shaken off, she had developed in body and mind, although as regards the latter it was to a great extent blank as to the past. She had some colour in her cheeks. There were signs that she would be pretty, with a good figure, and be an attractive woman.

She made no remarks as Glen and Jim walked on either side of her, Bigs following behind with the larger bundle. Several people turned to look at them as they went along.

The coffee house was large, but unpretentious, the locality being none of the best. It was at the Circular Quay end of George Street, and Chinamen's shops and dens abounded – dull dirty places, with a few empty tea chests in the windows, and bits of paper with Chinese characters scrawled, or printed on, in various colours, like cracker coverings on a table after a riotous Boxing Day dinner. In several of the shop doorways Chinamen leaned against the posts, seldom moving when a customer pushed by them into the shop, bent on playing fan tan, or smoking opium.

"The Chinkies might have been propped up there since I was here last, and that's a few years ago," laughed Bigs.

"Rotten lot," said Jim.

"Most of 'em. I've met one or two decent pigtails out West," Bill answered.

When the woman caught sight of the Chinaman it had a most

peculiar effect upon her. She shrank close to Glen, pushing him on to the roadway, and almost slipping down herself. He saw by her face that she was terrified, and followed the direction of her glance. It was fixed on a fat Chinaman standing in his shop door looking across at them. He was not exactly repulsive, but he was sleek and oily. His face shone, his cheeks hung low, he had a double chin, and his eyes were like nuts fixed in slits.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," said Glen. "If he is a nasty-looking beggar I daresay he's harmless."

Jim and Bill noticed her agitation and scowled at the Chinaman, who returned the challenge with a broad grin, showing his yellow teeth.

She trembled violently. Her hand shook as it clasped Glen's arm with a tight squeeze. He hurried her on; she was quite willing. It was not until they were inside the coffee house that she recovered.

"You don't like the Chinamen?" asked Glen.

"I hate them. They frighten me," she said.

I wonder why? thought Glen, as a maid came to show her her room.

She looked back and asked, "Where is your room?"

"I don't know yet," returned Glen.

"Please don't go far away from me. Please don't."

"All right," replied Glen. "I'll see to that."

The maid smiled, but Glen's scowl quickly frightened it away.

"We'll have to fix something up," he said. "She'd better be

somebody's sister. I'm too old; you take it on, Jim."

"Yes, Jim's most suitable. He's not much older – a matter of three or four years," agreed Bill.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.