Hornung Ernest William

Stingaree

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Содержание

Hornung E. W. Ernest William Stingaree

A Voice in the Wilderness

I

"La parlate d'amor,
O cari fior,
Recate i miei sospiri,
Narrate i miei matiri,
Ditele o cari fior – "

Miss Bouverie ceased on the high note, as abruptly as string that snaps beneath the bow, and revolved with the music-stool, to catch but her echoes in the empty room. None had entered behind her back; there was neither sound nor shadow in the deep veranda through the open door. But for the startled girl at the open piano, Mrs. Clarkson's sanctum was precisely as Mrs. Clarkson had left it an hour before; her own photograph, in as many modes, beamed from the usual number of ornamental frames; there was nothing whatever to confirm a wild suspicion of the living lady's untimely return. And yet either guilty consciences, or an ear as sensitive as it was true, had heard an unmistakable step outside.

Hilda Bouverie lived to look magnificent when she sang, her fine frame drawn up to its last inch, her throat a pillar of pale coral, her mouth the perfect round, her teeth a noble relic of barbarism; but sweeter she never was than in these days, or at this moment of them, as she sat with lips just parted and teeth just showing, in a simple summer frock of her own unaided making. Her eyes, of the one deep Tasmanian blue, were still open very wide, but no longer with the same apprehension; for a step there was, but a step that jingled; nor did they recognize the silhouette in top-boots which at length stood bowing on the threshold.

"Please finish it!" prayed a voice that Miss Bouverie liked in her turn; but it was too much at ease for one entirely strange to her, and she rose with little embarrassment and no hesitation at all.

"Indeed, no! I thought I had the station to myself."

"So you had – I have not seen a soul."

Miss Bouverie instantly perceived that honors were due from her.

"I am so sorry! You've come to see Mr. and Mrs. Clarkson?" she cried. "Mrs. Clarkson has just left for Melbourne with her maid, and Mr. Clarkson has gone mustering with all his men. But the Indian cook is about somewhere. I'll find him, and he shall make some tea."

The visitor planted himself with much gallantry in the doorway; he was a man still young, with a single eye-glass and a martial mustache, which combined to give distinction to a somewhat swarthy countenance. At the moment he had also an engaging smile.

"I didn't come to see either Mr. or Mrs. Clarkson," said he; "in fact, I never heard their name before. I was passing the station, and I simply came to see who it was who could sing like that – to believe my own ears!"

Miss Bouverie was thrilled. The stranger spoke with an authority that she divined, a sincerity which she instinctively took on trust. Her breath came quickly; she was a little nervous now.

"If you won't sing to my face," he went on, "I must go back to where I hung up my horse, and pray that you will at least send me on my way rejoicing. You will do that in any case. I didn't know there was such a voice in these parts. You sing a good deal, of course?"

"I haven't sung for months."

He was now in the room; there was no longer any necessity to bar the doorway, and the light coming through fell full on his amazement. The girl stood before him with a calm face, more wistful than ironic, yet with hints of humor in the dark blue eyes. Her companion put up the eye-glass which he had dropped at her reply.

"May I ask what you are doing in these wilds?"

"Certainly. I am Mrs. Clarkson's companion."

"And you sing, for the first time in months, the minute her back is turned: has the lady no soul for music?"

"You had better ask the lady."

And her visible humor reached the corners of Miss Bouverie's mouth.

"She sings herself, perhaps?"

"And I am here to play her accompaniments!"

The eye-glass focussed the great, smiling girl.

"*Can* she sing?"

"She has a voice."

"But have you never let her hear yours?"

"Once. I had not been here long enough to know better. And I made my usual mistake."

"What is that?"

"I thought I had the station to myself."

The questioner bowed to his rebuke. "Well?" he persisted none the less.

"I was told exactly what my voice was like, and fit for."

The gentleman turned on his heel, as though her appreciation of the humor of her position were an annoyance to him. His movement brought him face to face with a photographic galaxy of ladies in varying styles of evening dress, with an equal variety in coiffures, but a certain family likeness running through the series.

"Are any of these Mrs. Clarkson?"

"All of them."

He muttered something in his mustache. "And what's this?" he asked of a sudden.

The young man (for as such Miss Bouverie was beginning to regard him) was standing under the flaming bill of a grand concert to be given in the township of Yallarook for the benefit of local charities.

"Oh, that's Mrs. Clarkson's concert," he was informed. "She has been getting it up, and that's why she's had to go to Melbourne – about her dress, you know."

He smiled sardonically through mustache and monocle.

"Her charity begins near home!"

"It need not necessarily end there."

"Yet she sings five times herself."

"True – without the encores."

"And you don't sing at all."

"But I accompany."

"A bitter irony! But, I say, what's this? 'Under the distinguished patronage of Sir Julian Crum, Mus. Doc., D.C.L.' Who may he be?"

"Director of the Royal College of Music, in the old country," the girl answered with a sigh.

"Royal College of Music? That's something new, since my time," said the visitor, sighing also. "But what's a man like that doing out here?"

"He has a brother a squatter, the next station but one. Sir Julian's spending the English winter with him on account of his health."

"So you've seen something of him?"

"I wish we had."

"But Mrs. Clarkson has?"

"No – not yet."

"I see!" and an enlightened gleam shot through the eye-glass. "So this is her way of getting to know a poor overworked wreck who came out to patch his lungs in peace and quiet! And she's going to sing him one of his own songs; she's gone to Melbourne to dress the part; and you're not going to sing anything at all!"

Miss Bouverie refrained alike from comment and confirmation; but her silence was the less creditable in that her companion was now communing chiefly with himself. She felt, indeed, that she had already been guilty of a certain disloyalty to one to whom she owed some manner of allegiance; but that was the extent of Miss Bouverie's indiscretion in her own eyes. It caused her no qualms to entertain an anonymous gentleman whom she had never seen before. A colder course had commended itself to the young lady fresh from London; but to a Colonial girl, on a station where special provision was made for the entertaining of strange travellers, the situation was simply conventional. It might have been less onerous with host or hostess on the spot; but then the visitor would not have heard her sing, and he seemed to know what singing was.

Miss Bouverie watched him as he leant over the piano, looking through the songs which she had dared once more to bring forth from her room. She might well have taken a romantic interest in the dark and dapper man, with the military eye-glass and mustache, the spruce duck jacket and the spurred top-boots. It was her first meeting with such a type in the back-blocks of New South Wales. The gallant ease, the natural gayety, the charming manners that charmed no less for a clear trace of mannerism, were a peculiar refreshment after society racier of Riverina soil. Yet it was none of these things which attracted this woman to this man; for the susceptible girl was dead in her for the time being; but the desperate artist was alive again after many weeks, was panting for fresh life, was catching at a straw. He had heard her sing. It had brought him galloping off the track. He praised her voice; and he knew – he knew what singing was.

Who could he be? Not.. could that be possible?

"Sing me this," he said, suddenly, and, seating himself at the piano, played the opening bars of a vocal adaptation of Handel's Largo with a just, though unpractised, touch.

Nothing could have afforded a finer hearing of the quality and the compass of her voice, and she knew of old how well it suited her; yet at the outset, from the sheer excitement of her suspicion, Hilda Bouverie was shaky to the point of a pronounced tremolo. It wore off with the lengthening cadences, and in a minute the little building was bursting with her voice, while the pianist swayed and bent upon his stool with the exuberant sympathy of a brother in art. And when the last rich note had died away he wheeled about, and so sat silent for many moments, looking curiously on her flushed face and panting bosom.

"I can't place your voice," he said, at last. "It's both voices – the most wonderful compass in the world – and the world will tell you so, when you go back to it, as go back you must and shall. May I ask the name of your master?"

"My own name – Bouverie. It was my father. He is dead."

Her eyes glistened.

"You did not go to another?"

"I had no money. Besides, he had lived for what you say; when he died with his dream still a dream, I said I would do the same, and I came up here."

She had turned away. A less tactful interlocutor had sought plainer repudiation of the rash resolve; this one rose and buried himself in more songs.

"I have heard you in Grand Opera, and in something really grand," he said. "Now I want a song, the simpler the better."

Behind his back a daring light came into the moist eyes.

"There is one of Mrs. Clarkson's," she said. "She would never forgive me for singing it, but I have heard it from her so often, I know so well how it ought to go."

And, fetching the song from a cabinet, she thrust it boldly under his nose. It was called "The Unrealized Ideal," and was a setting of some words by a real poet then living, whose name caused this reader to murmur, "London Lyrics!" The composer was Sir Julian Crum. But his name was read without a word, or a movement of the strong shoulders and the tanned neck on which Miss Bouverie's eyes were fixed.

"You had better play this yourself," said he, after peering at the music through his glass. "It is rather too many for me."

And, strangely crestfallen, Miss Bouverie took his place.

"My only love is always near, —
In country or in town
I see her twinkling feet, I hear
The whisper of her gown.

"She foots it, ever fair and young,
Her locks are tied in haste,
And one is o'er her shoulder flung
And hangs below her waist."

For that was the immortal trifle. How much of its immortality it will owe to the setting of Sir Julian Crum is a matter of opinion, but here is an anonymous view.

"I like the words, Miss Bouverie, but the setting doesn't take me. It might with repetition. It seems lacking in go and simplicity; technically, I should say, a gem. But there can be no two opinions of your singing of such a song; that's the sort of arrow to go straight to the heart of the public – a world-wide public – and if I am the first to say it to you, I hope you will one day remember it in my favor. Meanwhile it is for me to thank you – from my heart – and to say good-by!"

He was holding out a sunburnt hand.

"Must you go?" she asked, withholding her own in frank disappointment.

"Unfortunately, yes; my man is waiting for me with both horses in the scrub. But before I go I want to ask a great favor of you. It is – not to tell a soul I have been here."

For a singer and a woman of temperament, Hilda Bouverie had a wonderfully level head. She inquired his reason in no promising tone.

"You will see at Mrs. Clarkson's concert."

Hilda started.

"You are coming to that?"

"Without fail – to hear Mrs. Clarkson sing five songs – your song among them!"

"But it's hers; it has been the other way about."

The gay smile broadened on the swarthy face; a very bright eye twinkled through the monocle into those of Miss Bouverie.

"Well, will you promise to say nothing about me? I have a reason which you will be the first to appreciate in due season."

Hilda hesitated, reasoned with herself, and finally gave her word. Their hands were joined an instant, as he thanked her with gallant smile and bow. Then he was gone. And as his spurs ceased

jingling on the veranda outside, Hilda Bouverie glanced again at the song on the piano and clapped her hands with unreasonable pride.

"I do believe that I was right after all!" said she.

II

Mr. Clarkson and his young men sat at meat that evening with a Miss Bouverie hard to recognize as the apparently austere spinster who had hitherto been something of a skeleton at their board. Coldly handsome at her worst, a single day had brought her forth a radiant beauty wreathed in human smiles. Her clear skin had a tinge which at once suggested and dismissed the thought of rouge; but beyond all doubt she had done her hair with less reserve; and it was coppery hair of a volatile sort, that sprang into natural curls at the first relaxation of an undue discipline. Mr. Clarkson wondered whether his wife's departure had aught to do with the striking change in her companion; the two young men rested mutually assured that it had.

"The old girl keeps too close an eye on her," said little Mr. Hack, who kept the books and hailed from Middlesex. "Get her to yourself, Ted, and she's as larky as they're made."

Ted Radford, the station overseer, was a personage not to be dismissed in a relative clause. He was a typical back-blocker, dry and wiry, nasally cocksure, insolently cool, a fearless hand with horse, man, or woman. He was a good friend to Hack when there was no third person of his own kidney to appreciate the overseer's conception of friendly chaff. They were by themselves now, yet the last speech drew from Radford a sufficiently sardonic grin.

"You see if she is, old man," said he, "and I'll stand by to collect your remains. Not but what she hasn't come off the ice, and looks like thoring if you take her the right way."

Ted Radford was a confirmed believer in the rightness of his own way with all mankind; his admirable confidence had not been shaken by a long succession of snubs in the quarter under discussion. As for Miss Bouverie, it was her practice to play off one young man against the other by discouraging each in his turn. But this evening she was a different being. She had a vague yet absolute conviction that her fortune was made. She could have sung all her songs to the twain, but for the reflection that Mr. Clarkson himself would hear them too, and report the matter to his wife on her return.

And the next night the male trio were strangely absorbed in some station happening which did not arouse Miss Bouverie's curiosity in the least. They were excited and yet constrained at dinner, and drew their chairs close together on the veranda afterward. The young lady caught at least one word of which she did not know the meaning. She had the tact to keep out of earshot after that. Nor was she very much more interested when she met the two young men with revolvers in their hands the following day.

"Going to fight a duel?" she inquired, smilingly, for her heart was still singing Grand Opera and Oratorio by turns.

"More or less," returned the overseer, without his usual pleasantry. "We're going to have a match at a target behind the pines."

The London bookkeeper looked an anxious clerk: the girl was glad when she saw the pair alive at dinner. There seemed to be little doing. Though the summer was already tropical, there had been plenteous rains, and Mr. Clarkson observed in Hilda's hearing that the recent day's mustering would be the last for some little time. She was thrown much in his company, and she liked Mr. Clarkson when Mrs. Clarkson was not there. In his wife's hands the good man was wax; now a mere echo, now a veritable claque in himself, he pandered indefatigably to the multitudinous vanities of a ludicrously vain woman. But it was soon Miss Bouverie's experience that he could, when he dared, be attentively considerate of lesser ladies. And in many ways these were much the happiest days that she had spent on the station.

They were, however, days of a consuming excitement for the caged and gagged nightingale that Hilda Bouverie now conceived herself to be. She sang not another note aloud. Mr. Clarkson lived in slippers on the veranda, which Hilda now associated chiefly with a stranger's spurs: for of the booted

and spurred stranger she was thinking incessantly, though still without the emotions of an ordinarily romantic temperament. Would he be at the concert, or would he not? Would he turn out to be what she firmly imagined him, or was she to find out her mistake? Might he not in any case have said or written some pregnant word for her? Was it beyond the bounds of possibility that she should be asked to sing after all?

The last question was the only one to be answered before the time, unless a point-blank inquiry of Mrs. Clarkson be included in the category. The lady had returned with a gorgeous gown, only less full of her experiences than of the crowning triumph yet to come. She had bought every song of Sir Julian's to be had in Melbourne, and his name was always on her lips. In a reckless moment Miss Bouverie had inquired his age.

"I really don't know," said Mrs. Clarkson. "What *can* it matter?"

"I only wondered whether he was a youngish man or not."

Mrs. Clarkson had already raised her eyebrows; at this answer they disappeared behind a *toupet* dating from her late descent upon the Victorian capital.

"Really, Miss Bouverie!" she said, and nothing more in words. But the tone was intolerable, and its accompanying sneer a refinement in vulgarity, which only the really refined would have resented as it deserved. Miss Bouverie got up and left the room without a word. But her flaming face left a misleading tale behind.

She was not introduced to Sir Julian; but that was not her prime disappointment when the great night came. All desire for an introduction, all interest in the concert, died a sudden death in Hilda Bouverie at her first glimpse of the gentleman who was duly presented to Mrs. Clarkson as Sir Julian Crum. He was more than middle-aged; he wore a gray beard, and the air of a somewhat supercilious martyr; his near sight was obviated by double lenses in gold rims. Hilda could have wept before the world. For nearly three weeks she had been bowing in imagination to a very different Sir Julian, bowing as though she had never beheld him in her life before; and yet in three minutes she saw how little real reason she had ever had for the illogical conclusion to which she had jumped. She searched for the sprightly figure she had worn in her mind's eye; his presence under any other name would still have been welcome enough now. But he was not there at all. In the patchy glare of the kerosene lamps, against the bunting which lined the corrugated walls of Gulland's new iron store, among flower and weed of township and of station, did Miss Bouverie seek in vain for a single eye-glass and a military mustache.

The concert began. Miss Bouverie opened it herself with the inevitably thankless pianoforte solo, in this case gratuitously meretricious into the bargain, albeit the arbitrary choice of no less a judge than Mrs. Clarkson. It was received with perfunctory applause, through which a dissipated stockman thundered thickly for a song. Miss Bouverie averted her eyes from Sir Julian (ensconced like Royalty in the centre of the first row) as she descended from the platform. She had not the hardihood to glance toward the great man until the indistinct stockman had had his wish, and Mrs. Clarkson, in her fine new raiment, had both sung and acted a coy ditty of the previous decade, wherein every line began with the word "somebody." It was an immediate success; the obstreperous stockman led the encore; but Miss Bouverie, who duly accompanied, extracted solace from the depressed attitude in which Sir Julian Crum sat looking down his nose.

The township boasted its score of dwellings, but few of them showed a light that evening; not less than ninety of the round hundred of inhabitants clapped their hands and mopped their foreheads in Gulland's new store. It might have been run up for its present purpose. There was an entrance at one end for the performers, and that on the platform level, since the ground sloped a little; at the other end was the only other entrance, by which the audience were admitted. A makeshift lobby had been arranged behind the platform, and thither Mrs. Clarkson retired to await her earlier encores; when the compliment became a recognized matter of course, she abandoned the mere form of a momentary retirement, and stood patiently smiling in the satin ball-dress brought from Melbourne for the nonce.

And for the brief intervals between her efforts she descended to a throne specially reserved on the great musician's right.

The other performers did not dim her brilliance by reason of their own. There was her own dear husband, whose serious recitation was the one entertaining number. There was a Rabbit Inspector who rapped out "The Scout" in a defiant barytone, and a publican whose somewhat uneven tenor was shaken to its depths by the simple pathos of "When Sparrows Build." Mrs. Clarkson could afford to encourage such tyros with marked applause. The only danger was that Sir Julian might think she really admired their untutored attempts.

"One must do it," she therefore took occasion to explain as she clapped. "They are so nervous. The hard thing is to put oneself in their place; it's nothing to me to sing a song, Sir Julian."

"So I can see, madam," said he.

At the extreme end of the same row Miss Bouverie passed her unemployed moments between Mr. Radford and the wall, and was not easy until she had signalled to little Mr. Hack to occupy the seat behind her. With the two together she felt comparatively comfortable. Mr. Radford's running criticism on the performers, always pungent, was often amusing, while Mr. Hack lost no opportunity of advancing his own ideals in the matter of musical entertainment.

"A song and dance," said he, again and again, with a more and more sepulchral deviltry – "a song and dance is what you want. You should have heard the Sisters Belton in their palmy days at the Pav! You don't get the best of everything out here, you know, Ted!"

"No; let's hope they've got some better men than you," returned Radford, inspired by the quorum of three to make mince-meat of his friend.

It was the interval between parts one and two. The platform was unoccupied. A cool draught blew through the iron building from open door to open door; there was no occasion to go outside. They had done so, however, at the lower end; there was a sudden stampede of returning feet. A something in the scuffling steps, a certain outcry that accompanied them, caused Miss Bouverie and her companions to turn their heads; they turned again at as sudden a jingle on the platform, and the girl caught her breath. There stood her missing hero, smiling on the people, dapper, swarthy, booted, spurred, and for one moment the man she had reason to remember, exactly as she remembered him. The next his folded arms sprang out from the shoulders, and a brace of long-barrelled revolvers covered the assembly.

"Up with your hands, every man of you!" he cried. "No, not the ladies, but every man and boy who doesn't want a bullet in his brain!"

The command was echoed in uncouth accents at the lower door, where, in fact, a bearded savage had driven in all and sundry at his pistol's point. And in a few seconds the meeting was one which had carried by overwhelming show of hands a proposition from which the ladies alone saw occasion to dissent.

"You may have heard of me before," said the man on the platform, sweeping the forest of hands with his eye-glass. "My name's Stingaree."

It was the word which Hilda Bouverie had heard on the veranda and taken for some strange expletive.

"Who is he?" she asked, in a whisper that bespoke excitement, agitation, but not alarm.

"The fancy bushranger – the dandy outlaw!" drawled Radford, in cool reply. "I've been expecting him. He was seen on our run the day Mrs. Clarkson went down to Melbourne."

That memorable day for Hilda Bouverie! And it was this manner of man who had been her hero ever since: a bushranger, an outlaw, a common robber under arms!

"And you never told me!" she cried, in an indignant whisper.

"We never told Mrs. Clarkson either. You must blame the boss."

Hilda snatched her eyes from Stingaree, and was sorry for Mrs. Clarkson for the first time in their acquaintance. The new ball-dress of bridal satin was no whiter than its wearer's face, which

had aged several years in as many seconds. The squatter leant toward her with uplifted hands, loyally concerned for no one and for nothing else. Between the couple Sir Julian might have been conducting without his bâton, but with both arms. Meanwhile, the flashing eye-glass had fixed itself on Miss Bouverie's companion, without resting for an instant on Miss Bouverie.

"Silence over there!" cried Stingaree, sternly. "I'm here on a perfectly harmless errand. If you know anything about me at all, you may know that I have a weakness for music of any kind, so long as it's good of its kind."

The eye-glass dropped for a moment upon Mrs. Clarkson in the front row, and the irrepressible Radford was enabled to continue his say.

"He has, too, from a mouth-organ to a full orchestra, from all accounts, Miss Bouverie. *My revolver's in the coat-pocket next you!*"

"It is the music," continued Stingaree, looking harder than before in their direction, "which has brought me here to-night. I've come to listen, and for no other reason in the world. Unfortunately, when one has a price upon one's head, one has to take certain precautions before venturing among one's fellow-men. And, though I'm not here for gain or bloodshed, if any man of you gives me trouble I shall shoot him like a dog!"

"That's one for me," whispered the intrepid overseer, in lower key. "Never mind. He's not looking at us now. I believe Mrs. Clarkson's going to faint. *You take what I told you and slip it under your shawl, and you'll save a second by passing it up to me the instant you see her sway!*"

Hilda hesitated. A dead silence had fallen on the crowded and heated store, and in the silence Stingaree was already taking an unguarded interest in Mrs. Clarkson's appearance, which as certainly betokened imminent collapse. "*Now!*" whispered Radford, and Hilda hesitated no more. She was wearing a black lace shawl between her appearances at the piano; she had the revolver under it in a twinkling, and pressed it to her bosom with both hands, one outside the shawl and one underneath, as who should hug a beating heart.

"Mrs. Clarkson," said Stingaree, "you have been singing too much, and the quality of your song has not been equal to the quantity."

It sounded a brutal speech enough; and to do justice to a portion of the audience not hitherto remarkable for its spirit, the ungallant criticism was audibly resented in the back rows. The maudlin stockman had indeed to be restrained by his neighbors from precipitating himself upon the barrels of Stingaree. But the effect upon Mrs. Clarkson herself was still more remarkable, and revealed a subtle kindness in the desperado's cruelty. Her pale face flushed; her lack-lustre eyes blazed forth their indignation; her very clay was on fire for all the room to see.

"I don't sing for criminals and cut-throats!" the indignant lady cried out. She glanced at Sir Julian as one for whom she did sing. And Sir Julian's eyes twinkled under the bushranger's guns.

"To be sure you don't," said Stingaree, with as much sweetness as his character would permit. "You sing for charity, and spend three times as much as you are ever likely to make in arraying yourself for the occasion. Well, we must put up with some song-bird without fine feathers, for I mean to hear the programme out." His eyes ranged the front rows till they fell on Hilda Bouverie in her corner. "You young lady over there! You've been talking since I called for silence. You deserve to pay a penalty; be good enough to step this way."

Hilda's excitement may be supposed; it made her scandalously radiant in that company of humiliated men and women, but it did not rob her of her resource. Removing her shawl with apparent haste, but with calculated deliberation, she laid it in a bunch upon the seat which she had occupied, and stepped forward with a courage that won a cheer from the back rows. Stingaree stooped to hand her up to the platform; and his warm grip told a tale. This was what he had come for, to make her sing, to make her sing before Sir Julian Crum, to give her a start unique in the history of the platform and the stage. Criminal, was he? Then the dearest, kindest, most enchanting, most romantic criminal

the world had ever seen! But she must be worthy of his chivalry and her chance; and, from the first, her artistic egoism insisted that she was.

Stingaree had picked up a programme, and dexterously mounted it between hammer and cartridge of the revolver which he had momentarily relinquished, much as a cornet-player mounts his music under his nose. With both weapons once more levelled, he consulted the programme now.

"The next item, ladies and gentlemen," said he, "is another pianoforte solo by this young lady. We'll let you off that, Miss Bouverie, since you've got to sing. The next song on the programme is called 'The Unrealized Ideal,' and the music is by our distinguished visitor and patron, Sir Julian Crum. In happier circumstances it would have been sung to you by Mrs. Montgomery Clarkson; as it is, I call upon Miss Bouverie to realize her ideal and ours, and on Sir Julian Crum to accompany her, if he will."

At Mrs. Clarkson's stony side the great man dropped both arms at the superb impudence of the invitation.

"Quite right, Sir Julian; let the blood run into them," said Stingaree. "It is a pure oversight that you were not exempted in the beginning. Comply with my entreaty and I guarantee that you shall suffer no further inconvenience."

Sir Julian wavered. In London he was a club-man and a diner-out; and what a tale for the Athenæum – what a short cut to every ear at a Kensington dinner-table! In the end it would get into the papers. That was the worst of it. But in the midst of Sir Julian's hesitation his pondering eyes met those of Miss Bouverie – on fire to sing him his own song – alight with the ability to do it justice. And Sir Julian was lost.

How she sang it may be guessed. Sir Julian bowed and swayed upon his stool. Stingaree stood by with a smile of personal pride and responsibility, but with both revolvers still levelled, and one of them cocked. It was a better song than he had supposed. It gained enormously from the composer's accompaniment. The last verse was softer than another would have made it, and yet the singer obeyed inaudible instructions as though she had never sung it otherwise. It was more in a tuneful whisper than in hushed notes that the last words left her lips: —

"Lightly I sped when hope was high,
And youth beguiled the chase;
I follow – follow still; but I
Shall never see her Face."

The applause, when it came, was almost overwhelming. The bushranger watched and smiled, but cocked his second pistol, and let the programme flutter to the floor. As for Sir Julian Crum, the self-contained, the cynical, he was seen for an instant, wheeled about on the music-stool, grasping the singer by both hands. But there was no hearing what he said; the girl herself heard nothing until he bellowed in her ear:

"They'll have their encore. What can you give them? It must be something they know. 'Home, Sweet Home'? 'The Last Rose'? 'Within a Mile'? The first, eh? Very well; it's a leaf out of Patti's book; but so are they all."

And he struck the opening bars in the key of his own song, but for some moments Hilda Bouverie stood bereft of her great voice. A leaf out of Patti's book, in that up-country township, before a roomful held in terror – and yet unmindful – of the loaded pistols of two bloodthirsty bushrangers! The singer prayed for power to live up to those golden words. A leaf out of Patti's book!

It was over. The last poignant note trembled into nothingness. The silence, absolutely dead for some seconds, was then only broken by a spirituous sob from the incorrigible stockman. There was never any applause at all. Ere it came, even as it was coming, the overseer Radford leapt to his feet with a raucous shout.

The bushranger had vanished from the platform. The other bushranger had disappeared through the other door. The precious pair of them had melted from the room unseen, unheard, what time every eye doted on handsome Hilda Bouverie, and every ear on the simple words and moving cadences of "Home, Sweet Home."

Ted Radford was the first to see it; for by the end of the brief song he had his revolver uncovered and cocked at last, and no quarry left for him to shoot. With a bound he was on the platform; another carried him into the canvas anteroom, a third and a fourth out into the moonlight. It was as bright as noon in a conservatory of smoked glass. And in the tinted brightness one man was already galloping away; but it was Stingaree who danced with one foot only in the stirrup of a milk-white mare.

Radford rushed up to him and fired point-blank again and again. A series of metallic clicks was all the harm he did, for Stingaree was in the saddle before the hurled revolver struck the mare on the ribs, and sent the pair flying through the moonlight with a shout of laughter, a cloud of sand, and a dull volley of thunderous hoofs. The overseer picked up his revolver and returned crestfallen to examine it in the lights of the emptying room.

"I could have sworn I loaded it," said he. "If I had, he'd have been a dead man six times over."

Miss Bouverie had been talking to Sir Julian Crum. On Radford's entry she had grown *distraite*, but at Radford's speech she turned back to Sir Julian with shining eyes.

"My wife wants a companion for the voyage," he was saying. "So that will cost you nothing, but if anything the other way, and once in London, I'll be answerable. I've adjudicated these things for years to voices not in the same class as yours. But the worst of it is you won't stay with us."

"I will."

"No; they'll want you at Covent Garden before we know where we are. And when you are ready to go to them, go you must."

"I shall do what you tell me."

"Then speak to Mrs. Clarkson at once."

Hilda Bouverie glanced over her shoulder, but her employers had left the building. Her smile was less roguish than demure.

"There is no need, Sir Julian. Mrs. Clarkson has already spoken to me, though only in a whisper. But I am to take myself off by the next coach."

The Black Hole of Glenranald

It was coming up the Murrumbidgee that Fergus Carrick first heard the name of Stingaree. With the cautious enterprise of his race, the young gentleman had booked steerage on a river steamer whose solitary passenger he proved to be; accordingly he was not only permitted to sleep on the saloon settee at nights, but graciously bidden to the captain's board by day. It was there that Fergus Carrick encouraged tales of the bushrangers as the one cleanly topic familiar in the mouth of the elderly engineer who completed the party. And it seemed that the knighthood of the up-country road had been an extinct order from the extirpation of the Kellys to the appearance of this same Stingaree, who was reported a man of birth and mystery, with an ostentatious passion for music and as romantic a method as that of any highwayman of the Old World from which he hailed. But the callow Fergus had been spared the romantic temperament, and was less impressed than entertained with what he heard.

On his arrival at Glenranald, however, he found that substantial township shaking with laughter over the outlaw's latest and least discreditable exploit, at the back-block hamlet of Yallarook; and then it was that young Carrick first conceived an ambition to open his Colonial career with the capture of Stingaree; for he was a serious immigrant, who had come out in his teens, to stay out, if necessary, for the term of his natural life.

The idea had birth under one of the many pine trees which shaded the skeleton streets of budding Glenranald. On this tree was nailed a placard offering high reward for the bushranger's person alive or dead. Fergus was making an immediate note in his pocketbook when a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Would ye like the half o' yon?" inquired a voice in his own tongue; and there at his elbow stood an elderly gentleman, whose patriarchal beard hid half the buttons of his alpaca coat, while a black skull-cap sat somewhat jauntily on his head.

"What do you mean?" said Fergus, bluntly, for the old gentleman stood chuckling gently in his venerable beard.

"To lay a hold of him," replied the other, "with the help o' some younger and abler-bodied man; and you're the very one I want."

The raw youth stared ingenuously.

"But what can you know about me?"

"I saw ye land at the wharf," said the old gentleman, nodding his approval of the question, "and says I, 'That's my man,' as soon as ever I clapped eyes on ye. So I had a crack wi' the captain o' yon steamer; he told me you hadna a billet, but were just on the lookout for the best ye could get, an' that's all he'd been able to get out o' ye in a five days' voyage. That was enough for me. I want a man who can keep his tongue behind his teeth, and I wanted you before I knew you were a brither Scot!"

"Are you a squatter, sir?" the young man asked, a little overwhelmed.

"No, sir, I'm branch manager o' the Bank o' New South Wales, the only bank within a hunder miles o' where we stand; and I can offer ye a better billet than any squatter in the Colony."

"Indeed? I'm sure you're very kind, sir, but I'm wanting to get on a station," protested Fergus with all his tact. "And as a matter of fact, I have introductions to one or two stations further back, though I saw no reason to tell our friend the skipper so."

"Quite right, quite right! I like a man who can keep his tongue in its kennel!" cried the bank manager, rubbing his hands. "But wait while I tell ye: ye'd need to work for your rations an any station I ever heard tell of, and I keep the accounts of enough to know. Now, with me, ye'd get two pound a week till your share o' the reward was wiped off; and if we had no luck for a year you'd be no worse off, but could go and try your squatters then. That's a promise, and I'll keep it as sure as my name's Andr' Macbean!"

"But how do you propose to catch this fellow, Mr. Macbean?"

The bank manager looked on all sides, likewise behind the tree, before replying under his breath: "By setting a wee trap for him! A bank's a bank, and Stingaree hasna stuck one up since he took to his trade. But I'll tell ye no more till ye give me your answer. Yes or no?"

"I'm afraid I don't even write an office hand; and as for figures – "

Mr. Macbean laughed outright.

"Did I say I was going to take ye into the bank, mun?" cried he. "There's three of us already to do the writin' an' the cipherin,' an' three's enough. Can you ride?"

"I have ridden."

"And ye'll do any rough job I set ye to?"

"The rougher the better."

"That's all I ask. There's a buggy and a pair for ye to mind, and mebbe drive, though it's horseback errands you'll do most of. I'm an old widower, living alone with an aged housekeeper. The cashier and the clerk dig in the township, and I need to have a man of some sort about the place; in fact, I have one, but I'll soon get rid of him if you'll come instead. Understand, you live in the house with me, just like the jackeroos on the stations; and like the jackeroos, you do all the odd jobs and dirty work that no one else'll look at; but, unlike them, you get two pounds a week from the first for doing it."

Mr. Andrew Macbean had chanced upon a magic word. It was the position of "jackeroo," or utility parlor-man, on one or other of the stations to which he carried introductions, that his young countryman had set before him as his goal. True, a bank in a bush township was not a station in the bush itself. On the other hand, his would-be friend was not the first to warn Fergus against the futility of expecting more than a nominal salary as a babe and suckling in Colonial experience; and perhaps the prime elements of that experience might be gained as well in the purlieus of a sufficiently remote township as in realms unnamed on any map. It will be seen that the sober stripling was reduced to arguing with himself, and that his main argument was not to be admitted in his own heart. The mysterious eccentricity of his employer, coupled with the adventurous character of his alleged prospects, was what induced the lad to embrace both in defiance of an unimaginative hard-headedness which he aimed at rather than possessed.

With characteristic prudence he had left his baggage on board the river-steamer, and his own hands carried it piecemeal to the bank. This was a red-brick bungalow with an ample veranda, standing back from the future street that was as yet little better than a country road. The veranda commanded a long perspective of pines, but no further bricks and mortar, and but very few weather board walls. The yard behind the house was shut in by as many outbuildings as clustered about the small homesteads which Fergus had already beheld on the banks of the Murrumbidgee. The man in charge of the yard was palpably in liquor, a chronic condition from his general appearance, and Mr. Macbean discharged him on the spot with a decision which left no loophole for appeal. The woman in charge of the house adorned another plane of civilization; she was very deaf, and very outspoken on her introduction to the young gentleman, whose face she was pleased to approve, with the implied reservation that all faces were liars; but she served up the mutton of the country hot and tender; and Fergus Carrick, leaning back after an excellent repast, marvelled for the twentieth time that he was not to pay for it.

"A teetotaler, are ye?" said Macbean, mixing a third glass of whiskey, with the skull-cap on the back of his head. "And so was I at your age; but you're my very man. There are some it sets talking. Wait till the old lady turns in, and then you shall see what you shall see."

Fergus waited in increasing excitement. The day's events were worthier of a dream. To have set foot in Glenranald without knowing a soul in the place, and to find one's self comfortably housed at a good salary before night! There were moments when he questioned the complete sanity of his eccentric benefactor, who drank whiskey like water, both as to quantity and effect, and who chuckled continuously in his huge gray beard. But such doubts only added to the excitement of the evening,

which reached a climax when a lighted candle was thrust in at the door and the pair advised not to make a night of it by the candid crone on her way to bed.

"We will give her twenty minutes," said the manager, winking across his glass. "I've never let her hear me, and she mustn't hear you either. She must know nothing at all about it; nobody must, except you and me."

The mystification of Fergus was now complete. Unimaginative as he was by practice and profession, he had an explanation a minute until the time was up, when the truth beat them all for wild improbability. Macbean had risen, lifting the lamp; holding it on high he led the way through baize doors into the banking premises. Here was another door, which Macbean not only unlocked, but locked again behind them both. A small inner office led them into a shuttered chamber of fair size, with a broad polished counter, glass swing-doors, and a formidable portal beyond. And one of young Carrick's theories received apparent confirmation on the spot; for the manager slipped behind his counter by another door, and at once whipped out a great revolver.

"This they provide us with," said he. "So far it is our only authorized defence, and it hangs on a hook down here behind the counter. But you march in here prepared, your pistol cocked behind your back, and which of us is likely to shoot first?"

"The bushranger," said Fergus, still rather more startled than reassured.

"The bushranger, of course. Stingaree, let us say. As for me, either my arms go up, or down I go in a heap. But supposing my arms do go up – supposing I still touch something with one foot – and supposing the floor just opens and swallows Mr. Sanguinary Stingaree! Eh? eh? What then?"

"It would be great," cried Fergus. "But could it be done?"

"It can be, it will be, and is being done," replied the manager, replacing the bank revolver and sliding over the counter like a boy. A square of plain linoleum covered the floor, overlapped by a border of the same material bearing a design. Down went Macbean upon his knees, and his beard swept this border as he began pulling it up, tacks and all.

The lamp burned brightly on the counter, its rays reflected in the burnished mahogany. All at once Fergus seized it on his own initiative, and set it on the floor before his kneeling elder, going upon his own knees on the other side. And where the plain linoleum ended, but where the overlapping border covered the floor, the planks were sawn through and through down one side of the central and self-colored square.

"A trap-door!" exclaimed Fergus in a whisper.

Macbean leant back on his slippered heels, his skull-cap wickedly awry.

"This border takes a lot o' lifting," said he. "Yet we've just got to lift it every time, and tack it down again before morning. You might try your hand over yonder on the far side."

Fergus complied with so much energy that the whole border was ripped up in a minute; and he was not mistaken. A trap-door it was, of huge dimensions, almost exactly covered by the self-colored square; but at each side a tongue of linoleum had been left loose for lifting it; and the lamp had scarcely been replaced upon the counter when the bulk of the floor leaned upright in one piece against the opposite wall. It had uncovered a pit of corresponding size, but as yet hardly deep enough to afford a hiding-place for the bucket, spade, and pickaxe which lay there on a length of sacking.

"I see!" exclaimed Carrick, as the full light flooded his brain.

"Is that a fact?" inquired the manager twinkling.

"You're going to make a deep hole of it – ?"

"No. I'm going to pay you to make it deep for me – "

"And then – "

"At dead o' night; you can take out your sleep by day."

"When Stingaree comes – "

"If he waits till we're ready for him – "

"You touch some lever – "

"And the floor swallows him, as I said, if he waits till we are ready for him. Everything depends on that – and on your silence. We must take time. It isn't only the digging of the hole. We need to fix up some counterpoise to make it shut after a body like a mouse-trap; we must do the thing thoroughly if we do it at all; and till it's done, not a word to a soul in the same hemisphere! In the end I suppose I shall have to tell Donkin, my cashier, and Fowler the clerk. Donkin's a disbeliever who deserves the name o' Didymus more than ony mon o' my acquaintance. Fowler would take so kindly to the whole idea that he'd blurt it out within a week. He may find it out when all's in readiness, but I'll no tell him even then. See how I trust a brither Scot at sight!"

"I much appreciate it," said Fergus, humbly.

"I wouldna ha' trustit even you, gin I hadna found the delvin' ill worrk for auld shoulders," pursued Macbean, broadening his speech with intentional humor. "Noo, wull ye do't or wull ye no?"

The young man's answer was to strip off his coat and spring into the hole, and to set to work with such energy, yet so quietly, that the bucket was filled in a few almost silent seconds. Macbean carried it off, unlocking doors for the nonce, while Fergus remained in the hole to mop his forehead.

"We need to have another bucket," said the manager, on his return. "I've thought of every other thing. There's a disused well in the yard, and down goes every blessed bucket!"

To and fro, over the lip of the closing well, back into the throat of the deepening hole, went the buckets for many a night; and by day Fergus Carrick employed his best wits to make an intrinsically anomalous position appear natural to the world. It was a position which he himself could thoroughly enjoy; he was largely his own master. He had daily opportunities of picking up the ways and customs of the bush, and a nightly excitement which did not pall as the secret task approached conclusion; but he was subjected to much chaff and questioning from the other young bloods of Glenranald. He felt from the first that it was what he must expect. He was a groom with a place at his master's table; he was a jackeroo who introduced station life into a town. And the element of underlying mystery, really existing as it did, was detected soon enough by other young heads, led by that of Fowler, the keen bank clerk.

"I was looking at you both together, and you do favor the old man, and no error!" he would say; or else, "What is it you could hang the boss for, Fergy, old toucher?"

These delicate but cryptic sallies being ignored or parried, the heavy swamp of innuendo was invariably deserted for the breezy hill-top of plain speech, and Fergus had often work enough to put a guard upon hand and tongue. But his temperament was eminently self-contained, and on the whole he was an elusive target for the witticisms of his friends. There was no wit, however, and no attempt at it on the part of Donkin, the cantankerous cashier. He seldom addressed a word to Carrick, never a civil word, but more than once he treated his chief to a sarcastic remonstrance on his degrading familiarity with an underling. In such encounters the imperturbable graybeard was well able to take care of himself, albeit he expressed to Fergus a regret that he had not exercised a little more ingenuity in the beginning.

"You should have come to me with a letter of introduction," said he.

"But who would have given me one?"

"I would, yon first night, and you'd have presented it next day in office hours," replied the manager. "But it's too late to think about it now, and in a few days Donkin may know the truth."

He might have known it already, but for one difficulty. They had digged their pit to the generous depth of eight feet, so that a tall prisoner could barely touch the trap-door with extended finger-tips; and Stingaree (whose latest performance was no longer the Yallarook affair) was of medium height according to his police description. The trap-door was a double one, which parted in the centre with the deadly precision of the gallows floor. The difficulty was to make the flaps close automatically, with the mouse-trap effect of Macbean's ambition. It was managed eventually by boring separate wells for a weight behind the hinges on either side. Copper wire running on minute pulleys let into grooves suspended these weights and connected them with the flaps, and powerful door-springs supplemented

the more elaborate contrivance. The lever controlling the whole was concealed under the counter, and reached by thrusting a foot through a panel, which also opened inward on a spring.

It may be conceived that all this represented the midnight labors and the constant thought of many weeks. It was now the beginning of the cool but brilliant Riverina winter, and, despite the disparity in their years, the two Scotsmen were fast friends. They had worked together as one man, with the same patient passion for perfection, the same delight in detail for its own sake. Almost the only difference was that the old fellow refreshed his energies with the glass of whiskey which was never far from his elbow after banking hours, while the young one cultivated the local excess of continual tea. And all this time the rascally Stingaree ranged the district, with or without his taciturn accomplice, covering great distances in fabulous time, lurking none knew where, and springing on the unwary in the last places in which his presence was suspected.

"But he has not yet robbed a bank, and we have our hopes," wrote Fergus to a faithful sister at Largs. "It may be for fear of the revolvers with which all the banks are provided now. Mr. Macbean has been practising with ours, and purposely put a bullet through one of our back windows. The whole township has been chafing him about it, and the local rag has risen to a sarcastic paragraph, which is exactly what we wanted. The trap-door over the pit is now practically finished. It's too complicated to describe, but Stingaree has only to march into the bank and 'stick it up,' and the man behind the counter has only to touch a lever with his foot for the villain to disappear through the floor into a prison it'll take him all his time to break. On Saturday the cashier and the clerk are coming to dinner, and before we sit down they are to be shown everything."

This was but a fraction of one of the long letters which Fergus despatched by nearly every mail. Silent and self-contained as he was, he had one confidante at the opposite end of the earth, one escape-pipe in his pen. Not a word of the great secret had he even written to another soul. To his trusted sister he had never before been quite so communicative. His conscience pricked him as he took his letter to the post, and he had it registered on no other score.

On Saturday the bank closed at one o'clock; the staff were to return and dine at seven, the Queen's birthday falling on the same day for a sufficient pretext. As the hour approached Fergus made the distressing discovery that his friend and host had anticipated the festivities with too free a hand. Macbean was not drunk, but he was perceptibly blunted and blurred, and Fergus had never seen the pale eyes so watery or the black skull-cap so much on one side of the venerable head. The lad was genuinely grieved. A whiskey bottle stood empty on the laden board, and he had the temerity to pocket the corkscrew while Macbean was gone to his storeroom for another bottle. A solemn search ensued, and then Fergus was despatched in haste for a new corkscrew.

"An' look slippy," said Macbean, "or we'll have old Donkin here before ye get back."

"Not for another three-quarters of an hour," remarked Fergus, looking at his watch.

"Any minute!" retorted Macbean, with a ribald epithet. "I invited Donkin, in confidence, to come a good half-hour airly, and I'll tell ye for why. Donkin must ken, but I'm none so sure o' yon other impident young squirt. His tongue's too long for his mouth. Donkin or I could always be behind the counter; anyway, I mean to take his opeenion before tellin' any other body."

Entertaining his own distrust of the vivacious Fowler, Fergus commended the decision, and so took his departure by the private entrance. It was near sundown; a fresh breeze blew along the hard road, puffing cloudlets of yellow sand into the rosy dusk. Fergus hurried till he was out of sight, and then idled shamelessly under trees. He was not going on for a new corkscrew. He was going back to confess boldly where he had found the old one. And the sight of Donkin in the distance sent him back in something of a hurry; it was quite enough to have to spend an evening with the cantankerous cashier.

The bank was practically at one end of the township as then laid out; two or three buildings there were further on, but they stood altogether aloof. The bank, for a bank, was sufficiently isolated, and Fergus could not but congratulate himself on the completion of its ingenious and unsuspected

defences. It only remained to keep the inventor reasonably sober for the evening, and thereafter to whistle or to pray for Stingaree. Meanwhile the present was no mean occasion, and Fergus was glad to see that Macbean had thrown open the official doors in his absence. They had often agreed that it would be worth all their labor to enlighten Donkin by letting the pit gape under his nose as he entered the bank. Fergus glanced over his shoulder, saw the other hurrying, and hurried himself in order to take up a good position for seeing the cashier's face. He was in the middle of the treacherous floor before he perceived that it was not Macbean in the half-light behind the counter, but a good-looking man whom he had never seen before.

"Didn't know I was invited, eh?" said the stranger, putting up a single eye-glass. "Don't believe it, perhaps? You'd better ask Mr. Macbean!"

And before it had occurred to him to stir from where he stood agape, the floor fell from under the feet of Fergus, his body lurched forward, and came down flat and heavy on the hard earth eight feet below. Not entirely stunned, though shaken and hurt from head to heel, he was still collecting his senses when the pit blackened as the trap-door shut in implicit obedience to its weights and springs. And in the clinging velvet darkness the young man heard a groan.

"Is that yoursel', Fergy?"

"And are you there, Mr. Macbean?"

"Mon, didn't it shut just fine!"

Curiously blended with the physical pain in the manager's voice was a sodden philosophic humor which maddened the younger man. Fergus swore where he lay writhing on his stomach. Macbean chuckled and groaned again.

"It's Stingaree," he said, drawing a breath through his teeth.

"Of course it is."

"I never breathed it to a soul."

"No more did I."

Fergus spoke with ready confidence, and yet the words left something on his mind. It was something vague but haunting, something that made him feel instinctively unworthy of the kindly, uncomplaining tone which had annoyed him but a moment before.

"No bones broken, Fergy?"

"None that I know of."

"I doubt I've not been so lucky. I'm thinkin' it's a rib, by the way it hurts to breathe."

Fergus was already fumbling in his pocket. The match-box opened with a click. The match scraped several times in vain. Then at last the scene sprang out as on the screen of a magic-lantern. And to Fergus it was a very white old man, hunched up against the muddy wall, with blood upon his naked scalp and beard, and both hands pressed to his side; to the old man, a muddy face stricken with horrified concern, and a match burning down between muddy fingers; but to both, such a new view and version of their precious hole that the corners of each mouth were twitching as the match was thrown away.

Fergus was fumbling for another when a step rang overhead; and at the sharp exchange of words which both underground expected, Fergus came on all fours to the old man's side, and together they sat gazing upward into the pall of impenetrable crape.

"You infernal villain!" they heard Donkin roar, and stamp his feet with such effect that the floor opened, and down through the square of light came the cashier feet first.

"Heaven and hell!" he squealed, but subsided unhurt on hands and knees as the flaps went up with such a snap that Macbean and Carrick nudged each other at the same moment. "Now I know who you are!" the cashier raved. "Call yourself Stingaree! You're Fowler dressed up, and this is one of Macbean's putrid practical jokes. I saw his jackal hurrying in to say I was coming. By cripes! it takes a surgical operation to see their sort, I grant you."

There was a noise of subdued laughter overhead; even in the pit a dry chuckle came through Macbean's set teeth.

"If it's practical joke o' mine, Donkin, it's recoiled on my own poor pate," said the old man. "I've a rib stove in, too, if that's any consolation to ye. It's Stingaree, my manny!"

"You're right, it is, it must be!" cried the cashier, finding his words in a torrent. "I was going to tell you. He's been at his game down south; stuck up our own mail again only yesterday, between this and Deniliquin, and got a fine haul of registered letters, so they say. But where the deuce are we? I never knew there was a cellar under here, let alone a trap-door that might have been made for these villains."

"It was made for them," replied Macbean, after a pause; and in the dead dark he went on to relate the frank and humble history of the hole, from its inception to the crooked climax of that bitter hour. A braver confession Fergus had never heard; its philosophic flow was unruffled by the more and more scornful interjections of the ungenerous cashier; and yet his younger countryman, who might have been proud of him, hardly listened to a word uttered by Macbean.

Half-a-dozen fallen from the lips of Donkin had lightened young Carrick's darkness with consuming fires of shame. "A fine haul of registered letters" – among others his own last letter to his sister! So it was he who had done it all; and he had perjured himself to his benefactor, besides, betraying him. He sat in the dark between fire and ice, chiefly wondering how he could soonest win through the trap-door and earn a bullet in his brain.

"The spree to-night," concluded Macbean, whose fall completely sobered him, "was for the express purpose of expounding the trap to you, and I asked you airly to take your advice. I was no so sure about young Fowler, whether we need tell him or no. He has an awful long tongue; but I'm thinkin' there's a longer if I knew where to look for it."

"I could tell you where," rasped Donkin. "But go on."

"I was watching old Hannah putting her feenishing touches to the table, and waiting for Fergus Carrick to come back, when I thought I heard him behind me and you with him. But it was Stingaree and his mate, and the two of us were covered with revolvers like young rifles. Hannah they told to go on with what she was doing, as they were mighty hungry, and I advised her to do as she was bid. The brute with the beard has charge of her. Stingaree himself drove me into the middle of my own trap-door, made me give up my keys, and then went behind the counter and did the trick. He'd got it all down on paper, the Lord alone knows how."

"Oh, you Scotchmen!" cried the pleasant cashier. "Talk of your land of cakes! You take every cake in the land between you!"

It seemed he had been filling his pipe while he listened and prepared this pretty speech. Now he struck a match, and with the flame to the bowl saw Fergus for the first time. The cashier held the match on high.

"You hear all the while?" he cried. "No wonder you lay low, Carrick; no wonder I didn't hear your voice."

"What do you mean by that?" growled Fergus, in fierce heat and fierce satisfaction.

"Surely, Mr. Macbean, you aren't wondering who wagged the long tongue now?"

"You mean that I wagged mine? And it's a lie!" said Fergus, hoarsely; he was sitting upon his heels, poised to spring.

"I mean that if Mr. Macbean had listened to me two months ago we should none of us be in this hole now."

"Then, my faith, you're in a worse one than you think!" cried Fergus, and fell upon his traducer as the match went out. "Take that, and that, and that!" he ground out through his teeth, as he sent the cashier over on his back and pounded the earth with his skull. Luckily the first was soft and the second hard, so that the man was more outraged than hurt when circumstances which they might have followed created a diversion.

In his turn the lively Fowler had marched whistling into the bank, had ceased whistling to swear down the barrel of a cocked revolver, and met a quicker fate than his comrades by impressing the bushranger as the most dangerous man of the quartette. Unfortunately for him, his fate was still further differentiated from theirs. Fowler's feet glanced off Carrick's back, and he plunged into the well head-first, rolling over like a stone as the wooden jaws above closed greedily upon the light of day.

Fergus at once struck matches, and in their light the cashier took the insensible head upon his knees and glared at his enemy as if from sanctuary of the Red Cross. But Fergus returned to Macbean's side.

"I never said a word to a living soul," he muttered. "It has come out some other way."

"Of course it has," said the old manager, with the same tell-tale inhalation through the teeth. Fergus felt worse than ever. He groped for the bald head and found it cold and dank. In an instant he was clamoring under the trap-door, leaping up and striking it with his fist.

"What do you want?"

"Whiskey. Some of us are hurt."

"God help you if it's any hanky-panky!"

"It's none. Something to drink, and something to drink it in, or there's blood upon your head!"

Clanking steps departed and returned.

"Stand by to catch, below there!"

And Fergus stood by, expecting to see a long barrel with the bottle and glass that broke their fall on him; but Stingaree had crept away unheard, and he pressed the lever just enough to let the glass and bottle tumble through.

Time passed: it might have been an hour. The huddled heap that was Macbean breathed forth relief. The head on Donkin's knees moved from side to side with groans. Donkin himself thanked Fergus for his ration; he who served it out alone went thirsty. "Wait till I earn some," he said bitterly to himself. "I could finish the lot if I started now." But the others never dreamt that he was waiting, and he lied about it to Macbean.

Now that they sat in silence no sound escaped them overhead. They heard Stingaree and his mate sit down to a feast which Macbean described with groaning modesty as the best that he could do.

"There's no soup," he whispered, "but there's a barr'l of oysters fetched up on purpose by the coach. I hope they havena missed the Chablis. They may as well do the thing complete." In a little the champagne popped. "Dry Monopole!" moaned the manager, near to tears. "It came up along with the oysters. O sirs, O sirs, but this is hard on us all! Now they're at the turkey – and I chopped the stuffing with my ain twa han's!"

They were at the turkey a long time. Another cork popped; but the familiar tread of deaf Hannah was heard no more, and at length they called her.

"Mother!" roared a mouth that was full.

"Old lady!" cried the gallant Stingaree.

"She's 'ard of 'earing, mate."

"She might still hear you, Howie."

And the chairs rasped backward over bare boards as one; at the same instant Fergus leapt to his feet in the earthly Tartarus his own hands had dug.

"I do believe she's done a bolt," he gasped, "and got clean away!"

Curses overhead confirmed the supposition. Clanking feet hunted the premises at a run. In a minute the curses were renewed and multiplied, yet muffled, as though there was some fresh cause for them which the prisoners need not know. Hannah had not been found. Yet some disturbing discovery had undoubtedly been made. Doors were banged and bolted. A gunshot came faint but staccato from the outer world. A real report echoed through the bank.

"A siege!" cried Fergus, striking a match to dance by. "The old heroine has fetched the police, and these beauties are in a trap."

"And what about us?" demanded the cashier.

"Shut up and listen!" retorted Fergus, without ceremony. Macbean was leaning forward, with bald head on one side and hollowed palm at the upper ear. Even the stunned man had recovered sufficiently to raise himself on one elbow and gaze overhead as Fergus struck match after match. The villains were having an altercation on the very trap-door.

"Now's the time to cut and run – now or never."

"Very well, you do so. I'm going through the safe."

"You should ha' done that first."

"Better late than not at all."

"You can't stop and do it without me."

"Oh, yes, I can. I'll call for a volunteer from below. You show them your spurs and save your skin."

"Oh, I'll stay, curse you, I'll stay!"

"And I'll have my volunteer, whether you stay or not."

The pair had scarcely parted when the trap-door opened slowly and stayed open for the first time. The banking chamber was but dimly lit, and the light in the pit less than it had been during the brief burning of single matches. No peering face was revealed to those below, but the voice of Stingaree came rich and crisp from behind the counter.

"Your old woman has got away to the police-barracks and the place is surrounded. One of you has got to come up and help, and help fair, or go to hell with a bullet in his heart. I give you one minute to choose your man."

But in one second the man had chosen himself. Without a word, or a glance at any of his companions, but with a face burning with extraordinary fires, Fergus Carrick sprang for the clean edge of the trap-door, caught it first with one hand and then with both, drew himself up like the gymnast he had been at his Scottish school, and found himself prone upon the floor and trap-door as the latter closed under him on the release of the lever which Stingaree understood so well. A yell of execration followed him into the upper air. And Stingaree was across the counter before his new ally had picked himself up.

"That's because this was expected of me," said Fergus, grimly, to explain the cashier's reiterated anathemas. "I was the writer of the registered letter that led to all this. So now I'm going the whole hog."

And the blue eyes boiled in his brick-red face.

"You mean that? No nonsense?"

"You shall see."

"I should shoot you like a native cat."

"You couldn't do me a better turn."

"Right! Swear on your knees that you won't use it against me or my mate, and I'll trust you with this revolver. You may fire as high as you please, but they must think we're three instead of two."

Fergus took the oath in fierce earnest upon his knees, was handed the weapon belonging to the bank, and posted in his own bedroom window at the rear of the building. The front was secure enough with the shutters and bolts of the official fortress. It was to the back premises that the attack confined itself, making all use of the admirable cover afforded by the stables.

Carrick saw heads and shoulders hunched to aim over stable-doors as he obeyed his orders and kept his oath. His high fire drew a deadlier upon himself; a stream of lead from a Winchester whistled into the room past his ear and over his ducked head. He tried firing from the floor without showing his face. The Winchester let him alone; in a sudden sickness he sprang up to see if anything hung sprawling over the stable-door, and was in time to see men in retreat to right and left, the white pugarees of the police fluttering ingloriously among them. Only one was left upon the ground, and he could sit up to nurse a knee.

Fergus sighed relief as he sought Stingaree, and found him with a comical face before the open safe.

"House full of paltry paper!" said he. "I suppose it's the old sportsman's custom to get rid of most of his heavy metal before closing on Saturdays?"

Fergus said it was; he had himself stowed many a strong-box aboard unsuspected barges for Echuca.

"Well, now's our time to leave you," continued Stingaree. "If I'm not mistaken, their flight is simply for the moment, and in two or three more they'll be back to batter in the bank shutters. I wonder what they think we've done with our horses? I'll bet they've looked everywhere but in the larder next the kitchen door – not that we ever let them get so close. But my mate's in there now, mounted and waiting, and I shall have to leave you."

"But I was coming with you," cried Fergus, aghast.

Stingaree's eye-glass dangled on its cord.

"I'm afraid I must trouble you to step into that safe instead," said he, smiling.

"Man, I mean it! You think I don't. I've fought on your side of my own free will. How can I live that down? It's the only side for me for the rest of time!"

The fixed eye-glass covered the brick-red face with the molten eyes.

"I believe you do mean it."

"You shall shoot me if I don't."

"I most certainly should. But my mate Howie has his obvious limitations. I've long wanted a drop of new blood. Barmaid's thoroughbred and strong as an elephant; we're neither of us heavyweights; by the powers, I'll trust you, and you shall ride behind!"

Now, Barmaid was the milk-white mare that was only less notorious than her lawless rider. It was noised in travellers' huts and around campfires that she would do more at her master's word than had been known of horse outside a circus. It was the one touch that Stingaree had borrowed from a more Napoleonic but incomparably coarser and crueller knight of the bush. In all other respects the *fin de siècle* desperado was unique. It was a stroke of luck, however, that there happened to be an old white mare in the bank stables, which the police had impounded with solemn care while turning every other animal adrift. And so it fell out that not a shot followed the mounted bushrangers into the night, and that long before the bank shutters were battered in the flying trio were miles away.

Fergus flew like a runaway bride, his arms about the belted waist of Stingaree. Trees loomed ahead and flew past by the clump under a wonderful wide sky of scintillating stars. The broad bush track had very soon been deserted at a tangent; through ridges and billows of salt-bush and cotton-bush they sailed with the swift confidence of a well-handled clipper before the wind. Stingaree was the leader four miles out of five, but in the fifth his mate Howie would gallop ahead, and anon they would come on him dismounted at a wire fence, with the wires strapped down and his horse tethered to one of the posts till he had led Barmaid over.

It was thus they careered across the vast chessboard of the fenced back-blocks at dead of night. Stingaree and Fergus sat saddle and bareback without a break until near dawn their pioneer spurred forward yet again and was swallowed in a steely haze. It was cold as a sharp spring night in England. But for a mile or more Fergus had clung on with but one arm round the bushranger's waist; now the right arm came stealing back; felt something cold for the fraction of a second, and plucked prodigiously, and in another fraction an icy ring mouthed Stingaree's neck.

"Pull up," said Fergus, hoarsely, "or your brains go flying."

"Little traitor!" whispered the other, with an imprecation that froze the blood.

"I am no traitor. I swore I wouldn't abuse the revolver you gave me, and it's been in my pocket all the night."

"The other's unloaded."

"You wouldn't sit so quiet if it were. Now, round we go, and back on our tracks full split. It's getting light, and we shall see them plain. If you vary a yard either way, or if your mate catches us, out go your brains."

The bushranger obeyed without a word. Fergus was almost unnerved by the incredible ease of his conquest over so redoubtable a ruffian. His stolid Scottish blood stood by him; but still he made grim apology as they rode.

"I had to do it. It was through me you got to know. I had to live that down; this was the only way."

"You have spirit. If you would still be my mate – "

"Your mate! I mean this to be the making of me as an honest man. Here's the fence. I give you two minutes to strap it down and get us over."

Stingaree slid tamely to the ground.

"Don't you dare to get through those wires! Strap it from this side with your belt, and strap it quick!"

And the bushranger obeyed with the same sensible docility, but with his back turned, so that Fergus could not see has face; and it was light enough to see faces now; yet Barmaid refused the visible wires, as she had not refused them all that night of indigo starlight.

"Coax her, man!" cried Fergus, in the saddle now, and urging the mare with his heels. So Stingaree whispered in the mare's ear; and with that the strapped wires flew under his captor's nose, as the rider took the fence, but not the horse.

At a single syllable the milk-white mare had gone on her knees, like devout lady in holy fane; and as she rose her last rider lay senseless at her master's feet; but whether from his fall, or from a blow dealt him in the act of falling, the unhappy Fergus never knew. Indeed, knowledge for him was at an end until matches burnt under his nose awakened him to a position of the last humiliation. His throat and chin topped a fence-post, the weight of his body was on chin and throat, while wrists and muscles were lashed at full stretch to the wires on either side.

"Now I'm going to shoot you like a dog," said Stingaree. He drew the revolver whose muzzle had pressed into his own neck so short a time before. Yet now it was broad daylight, and the sun coming up in the bound youth's eyes for the last time.

"Shoot away!" he croaked, raising the top of his head to speak at all. "I gave you leave before we started. Shoot away!"

"At ten paces," said Stingaree, stepping them. "That, I think, is fair."

"Perfectly," replied Fergus. "But be kind enough to make this so-called man of yours hold his foul tongue till I'm out of earshot of you all."

Huge Howie had muttered little enough for him, but to that little Stingaree put an instantaneous stop.

"He's a dog, to be shot like a dog, but too good a dog for you to blackguard!" cried he. "Any message, young fellow?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.