

Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

Basil and Annette



Benjamin Farjeon
Basil and Annette

«Public Domain»

Farjeon B.

Basil and Annette / B. Farjeon — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	12
CHAPTER III	17
CHAPTER IV	20
CHAPTER V	23
CHAPTER VI	27
CHAPTER VII	30
CHAPTER VIII	34
CHAPTER IX	39
CHAPTER X	41
CHAPTER XI	47
CHAPTER XII	55
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	57

Farjeon B. L. Benjamin Leopold

Basil and Annette / A Novel

CHAPTER I

In the old world the reign of winter has commenced. The woods are snow-white, the hedges are frosted over, the pools are frozen, icicles hang from the branches of the trees. Wayfarers walk briskly, stamp their feet, and beat their hands to keep the circulation going; while other humans, whom business does not call from their houses, snuggle round the fireside, with doors and windows closed to keep out the nipping air. Winged immigrants that came in the sweet spring days have long since taken their departure to warmer climes, bearing with them memories of a bright youth, to be renewed when another spring smiles upon the land.

In the new world, at the same moment, it is nature's holiday time. The air is scented with the fragrance of white lilies and jessamine; fringed violets carpet the woods; the wild passion fruit, with its gleaming scarlet flowers, illuminates the bushes; the palm-tree rears its graceful head above festoons of feathery leaves, in which clumps of red berries shine like clusters of stars; tall quandong-trees and wild plums shoot up straight as arrows, for the most part clear of vines and creepers, but not always successful in escaping the embrace of the stag's horn fern, one of the handsomest of all Australia's parasites; and the white-wooded umbrella-tree proudly asserts its claim to preeminence, with its darkly lustrous laurel-shaped leaves surmounted by long radiating spikes of crimson flowers, the brilliancy of which rivals the glowing sunset of the South. Through the grand forests, in which for unnumbered ages the dusky savage has roamed in freedom, never dreaming of the invasion of a higher civilisation, flit flocks of resplendent parrots, chief among them being the blue mountain, the rosella, and the crimson wing; black cockatoos, with their dazzling tails spread out, are lurking in the branches of the bloodwood trees, where they find both food and shelter; flycatchers, all green and gold, are cunningly watching the waterholes for prey; laughing jackasses, with their blue feathers and cold grey eyes, which are now twinkling with fun, are making merry over the absurd antics of native companions, whose conceited hoppings and twirlings are comic enough to inspire mirth in the dullest denizens of the woods; while the soft musical notes of the bellbirds, all green and purple, blue and golden, make harmonious the west wind which travels from the beeches, and fill the air with melody strange and sweet.

Within hail of these summer evidences of loveliness and grandeur stand two men, one young, the other not yet middle-aged. The younger man, whose name is Basil Whittingham, is the embodiment of careless, indolent grace, but just now he is evincing an unusual earnestness of manner, both in speaking and listening. His age is barely twenty-three, and he bears about him the unmistakable stamp of gentleman. This is not always the case with men who have honest claims to the title, but with some few it is a gift. It is so with Basil Whittingham. He has blue eyes, fair hair, a supple, graceful form, a laughing mouth, with teeth like pearl, delicate hands, and a long, light-brown moustache, which he evidently regards as a magnificent possession, and cherishes and nurses as a thing of beauty. Otherwise he has not much to be proud of in the shape of possessions, for his clothes would be anything but presentable in Mayfair, though here in the Australian woods they may serve well enough. His trousers, tucked into old knee boots, have conspicuously seen their best days; his shirt, of some light material, has rents in it, showing the fair skin of his arms embrowned by the sun where the sun could get at them; the sash round his waist is frayed and faded; his wide-awake hat, sound in front, is tattered at the back, where it flaps loosely over his flowing hair; and, moreover, he is smoking a short black cutty. Yet despite these drawbacks, if drawbacks they can be called in this land of freedom, freer indeed than any republic under the sun, even the most ordinary observer

would be ready to acknowledge that the man was a gentleman. One, for instance, who would not do a dirty trick, who would not tell a lie to serve his own interests, who would not betray a friend, and who would be more likely to wrong himself than others. Tender, simple, brave; fearless, but not foolhardy; openhearted, confiding, and unsuspecting of sinister, motives in those with whom he has once shaken hands; with a sense of humour which lightens adversity; regretting not the past, though he has wilfully steered his boat into the Bay of Poverty, and dreading not the future; such is Basil Whittingham, a typical type of an honest, frank, manly English gentleman.

His companion, by name Anthony Bidaud, was born and bred in Switzerland, but is of French extraction. He speaks, English fluently, so well indeed that those who serve him will not believe he is a foreigner. He has not yet reached middle age, but he looks sixty at least, and on his worn, anxious face dwells the expression of a man who is waiting for a mortal stroke. He is well dressed, after the free bush fashion, and is no less a gentleman than Basil Whittingham. It is the mutual recognition of social equality that keeps Basil penniless and poorly clad, for he is a guest, not a dependent, on the plantation of which Anthony Bidaud is master. This state of things suits the careless nature of the younger gentleman, who, welcomed and received by Anthony Bidaud as an equal, takes a pride in holding himself free from the touch of servitude. Perhaps Annette, of whom you shall presently hear, serves as a factor in the attitude he has chosen.

Being the hero of our story, it is needful that something should be related of his career in the home country.

His parents were Devonshire people, and he their only child. It was supposed that his father was a man of fortune; he lived as one, kept hounds and horses, and maintained a costly establishment. Needless to say that Basil was the idol of his parents; he was also the idol of a wealthy uncle, to whom he paid a visit once in every year, and who, being childless, had announced his intention of making Basil his heir. Thus, all seemed smooth and pleasant-sailing before the young fellow. But misfortunes came; at the age of fourteen he lost his mother. The memory of the solemn moments he spent by her bedside before she closed her eyes upon the world, abided ever with Basil, whose passionate adoration for the dear mother was a good testimony of his affectionate disposition. But there was something deeper than affection in the feelings he entertained for her. She had been to him more than a loving mother; she had been his truest counsellor and friend. Upon her had devolved the father's duty of inculcating in their child those strict principles of honour and right-doing which set the seal of true manhood upon him who follows them out in his course through life. Basil's father was of an easy, genial nature, and it was from him that Basil inherited a cheerfulness of temper and a sense of humour which lessened evils instead of magnifying them. The higher qualities of his character came from his mother. Lying on her death-bed she impressed upon him the beauty of honesty and uprightness, and the lad's heart responded to her teaching.

"Never look to consequences, my dear child," she said. "Do always what is right; and when you are a man counsel and guide your dear father."

He promised to obey her, but it was not until many years had passed that he knew what she meant when she told him to counsel and guide his father. It was she who had steered her husband's boat when it had got into troubled waters, and steered it always into a safe harbour. No one knew it, no one suspected it; not even her husband, who believed that it was due to himself alone that he escaped dangers which threatened him from time to time; but this ignorance was due to her wisdom, and partly, also, to her love; rather than wound his feelings, she preferred to suffer herself. It is not to be inferred from this remark that she had not led a happy life; she had, and her home was happy in the truest sense; but she sighed to think of her husband, left alone to grapple with difficulties which his easy nature prevented him from seeing.

She had a private fortune of her own, and with her husband's consent she made a will devising it all to her son, with the exception of some small legacies to humble friends. The money was to be invested, and to accumulate till Basil was twenty-one years of age, when he was to come into

possession of it; so that, even without his uncle, he was comfortably provided for. A short time after his mother's death, his father announced his intention of giving up his establishment in the country and settling in London. The home in which he had passed so many happy years with his wife was desolate and sad now that she was gone from it; he wandered through the rooms with a weight on his heart which memory made heavier instead of lighter.

"Yes Basil," he said to his son, "it is the best thing I can do. If I remain here I shall lose my reason; I must find some distraction from grief."

Basil was too young to question this decision; what his father resolved upon must be right. The old home was sold up, and father and son removed to London. Then came the question of Basil's education. His uncle considered removal to London a step in the wrong direction, and he wrote to that effect; he also expressed his opinion that London was an unsuitable place in which to conduct a young gentleman's education. "Give the lad a tutor," he said, "and let him travel." This was done, and before he was fifteen years of age Basil was living on the Continent, picking up knowledge and picking up pleasure in not quite equal quantities, the latter predominating. It was an agreeable life, and Basil did not harm by it. Every year he came to England, and spent a month with his father in London and a week with his uncle in the country. On one occasion he and his uncle spent this week together in the great city, living at Morley's Hotel, Charing Cross, and seeing the sights, and this visit was destined to be pregnant with strange results in years to come. Except upon all other occasions the uncle received Basil in the country. The old gentleman was full of quips and cranks and imaginary ills. He fancied himself an invalid, and coddled himself up absurdly; and Basil, when he visited him, seldom left the house. The forced seclusion did not trouble the young fellow; he could make himself happy anywhere. Certainly there were few dull moments in his uncle's house when Basil was in it, and the old gentleman, while not objecting to a display of animal spirits, improved the opportunity by endeavouring to drive into his nephew's head a special kind of worldly wisdom. As, for instance: All men are rogues (ourselves excepted). Never open your heart to a friend (except to an uncle who is going to leave you all his money). Keep your secrets. Spend your money on your own pleasures and your own ambitions. Never make yourself responsible for another man's debts. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. This kind of counsel was showered upon Basil, and produced no effect upon him whatever; he was spared the trouble of arguing upon these matters, even if he were in the humour for it-which he was not; he had a knack of avoiding disagreeable topics by his uncle's everlasting assertion that the counsel he gave was absolutely indisputable, and was to be received as such.

"All right, uncle," said Basil; "now let us talk of something else."

And he would fly off into accounts of such of his Continental adventures as he knew would please the old fellow. He had a capital gift of description, and the old man would sit huddled up in his arm-chair, cracking his sides at his nephew's wit. Basil never bade his uncle good-bye without a cheque for a substantial sum in his pocket. He was liberally provided for by his father, but he did not despise his uncle's gifts. Seeing that his stories of his travels amused his uncle, he said that he would one day write a book.

"And when you write it," his uncle said, "burn it. Write a book indeed! Put your time out at better interest, Basil. Make money, money, money. Then people will bow down to you. *I'm* not a nice object to look at, am I? But I've got money, and people bow down to *me!* How much more will they be likely to do so to a handsome fellow like you? Make money, my boy, make money, and stick to it."

Which worldly advice went as usual in at one ear and out at the other. After all, the old gentleman's remarks had only a general application; had there been any special interest at stake Basil would have argued it stoutly enough, and thereby got himself into hot water.

So things went on till Basil was twenty-one years of age, when he was to come into possession of his mother's fortune. On his birthday he wrote to his father, saying he would be home in a fortnight, and full of kind messages-messages which did not reach the sense of the man for whom they were intended: on the day the letter was delivered at the London address his father was lying in delirium

on a bed from which he was never to rise. A week before he intended to start for home Basil received a letter informing him of the sad news. "Come back immediately," the writer said, "if you wish to see your father alive." Basil did not lose a moment. Travelling as quickly as possible he arrived at his father's house-too late. It was a terrible blow to him, more terrible than the loss of his mother, for which he had been in a measure prepared. Death came more slowly in her case, and she had instilled into her son a spirit of resignation which softened the bereavement. Even before she drew her last breath Basil had thought of her as an angel in heaven. But with his father it was so sudden; there had been no preparation for the parting, no indication of it. It was true that his father had been ailing for months, but he had been careful not to alarm his son. He may have believed, as most men do, that the worst would not happen; we are chary in applying to ourselves the rules we are so ready to apply to others. Only in his last hour of consciousness, before he fell into the delirium from which it was fated he should not recover, had he asked for his desk, and taking from it a sheet of paper wrote a few words to his son, which he desired should be delivered in the event of anything serious happening to him. He did not believe it even then; had he been a religious man he would have weighed the matter more deeply, but he was one who, living as fairly good and moral a life as the average church-goer, seldom went to the Divine fount for comfort and counsel. It might have been better for Basil if he had, for a warning might have come to him to check the mad desire which had taken possession of him.

Between him and Basil there had never been a harsh word. Each bore for the other the truest affection. Never a cross, never an ill-tempered look; unvarying sweetness had marked their intercourse. So sudden a separation could have been nothing less than terrible to the living. It was long before Basil recovered from it. With the exception of his crotchety old uncle he was absolutely without kith or kin. Letters had passed between them with reference to the sad event. "I cannot come to London to attend the funeral," his uncle wrote; "I am too infirm and feeble. When you have settled your father's affairs I shall be glad to see you to talk things over. It is time you made a serious start in life. You have your mother's fortune, and your father's, which I should say is a handsome one; you will have mine, though I intend to keep you out of it as long as I can. You are a lucky dog; you ought to die a millionaire." A mortal ending the absolute desirability of which may well be doubted. Basil replied, hoping his uncle would live to a good old age, and promising to visit him as soon as affairs were settled. In his father's desk he found the scrawl which the dying man had written. It was very short.

"My dear Basil, – The honour of my name is in your hands. Your loving father."

He had not strength to attach his name.

It was not until the day after the funeral that the significance of these words impressed itself on Basil. "The honour of my name is in your hands." They were his father's last words to him. What meaning did they bear? He had heard from his father's lawyers, informing him that they had the will in their possession, and that they were at his service. He wrote to them, to the effect that he would call upon them early the following morning.

The head of the firm received him gravely and courteously, and gave orders that they were not to be disturbed.

The will had been drawn out years since, and no alteration had been made in it. Everything was left to Basil, unreservedly to him. There were affectionate allusions in it which drew tears from Basil's eyes. When this emotion had subsided he observed that the lawyer was regarding him with an air of curiosity.

"May I ask," said the lawyer, "if full confidence existed between you and your father?"

"The fullest," replied Basil. "He had no secrets from me, nor I any from him."

The lawyer seemed sensibly relieved. "You know of his speculations?"

"His speculations!" exclaimed Basil, in surprise. "I was not aware that he speculated."

"Then full confidence did not exist between you. I warned him; I could do no more than that. In my experience, my dear sir, I have seen so many go the same way. There is but one end to it, and this has ended as the others have done."

"I will listen to nothing against my father," said Basil warmly.

"I have nothing to say against him," responded the lawyer, "except that he was unwise. He had an intense craving to leave you a very large fortune, and this craving became a kind of disease in him, and led him on. I regret to tell you that all his speculations have ended disastrously."

"That is to say, have resulted in a loss?"

"In great losses."

"To what extent?"

"Claims are pouring in. If they are satisfied, the will in your hands is not worth more than waste paper. But some of the claims may be contested, and in my belief successfully. But that will be a matter for counsel's opinion."

"It has nothing to do with counsel," said Basil; "it has to do with me. I am my dear father's representative, and it is for me to determine what is to be done."

"Undoubtedly. Instructions must come from you."

"Claims are pouring in, you say. Can you tell me to what amount?"

"As far as we have received them; there are more to be presented you understand."

"Yes."

"Plainly, then," said the lawyer, "the property your father has left will not be sufficient to meet his debts."

"They must be paid, however." The lawyer inclined his head.

"Yes," said Basil, rising and pacing the room in his excitement, "they must be paid. No stigma must rest upon my father's memory. Some of the claims may be contested, you say? In justice?"

"Legally," replied the lawyer.

"I ask you again," said Basil. "In justice?"

The lawyer, declining to commit himself, made no reply.

"At least," said Basil, "you can answer me this question. My father owes the money?"

"Yes, my dear sir, he owes the money."

"Then it must be paid. Do you not see that it *must* be paid? No man shall have the power of uttering one word against him."

"But," said the lawyer, eyeing the young man as he would have eyed a psychological puzzle, "if the estate left by your father is not sufficient to satisfy all these claims, what is to be done?"

"I have money of my own-my mother's fortune-of which you have the particulars."

"Yes, we can give you all the information you require, and it requires but your signature to a few documents, already prepared, my dear sir, to place you in possession of this very handsome inheritance."

"You can probably tell me the amount of it."

"Almost to a farthing. It is invested in the safest securities, realisable at an hour's notice, and it amounts to," – the lawyer took some papers from a japanned box and ran his eye over them-"it amounts to not less than twenty-three thousand pounds."

"Will that," asked Basil, "with my father's estate, satisfy in full the claims which are pouring in?"

"But my dear sir," expostulated the lawyer, with a look of astonishment.

Basil would not allow him to conclude. "I have to repeat some of my questions, it seems," he said. "Will this fortune, which is realisable in an hour, satisfy in full the claims of my father's creditors?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders, and replied briefly, "More than satisfy them."

"Then the matter is settled," said Basil. "I empower you to collect the whole of these claims to the uttermost farthing; to convert the securities which are mine into money; to prepare a complete balance sheet, and to pay my father's creditors in full, with as little delay as possible."

"I am to accept these instructions as definite and decisive?"

"As definite and decisive!"

"They shall be followed and carried out with as little delay as possible. I must trouble you to call here at three o'clock this afternoon to sign the necessary papers."

"I will be punctual. Good morning; and I am greatly obliged to you."

"Good morning, my dear sir," said the lawyer, adding under his breath, "and I am greatly astonished at you."

At three o'clock that afternoon Basil called again at the lawyer's office, and signed "the necessary papers," and went away with a light heart and a smiling face. Within a month the affair was concluded, his father's estate was realised, and his father's creditor's paid in full. There remained to him then, out of his mother's fortune, the sum of three thousand pounds.

He was perfectly happy and contented. Long before the business was finally settled he had realised what his father meant by his last few written words: "My dear Basil, – The honour of my name is in your hands. Your loving father." To good hands indeed had the honour of a dead man's name been entrusted. Basil had preserved it unsullied, unblemished.

He took no credit for it; he had fulfilled a sacred trust. It was simply a duty performed.

"Now," he said to himself; "I will go and see my uncle."

But while he was preparing to start he received a letter from that gentleman, which will explain why the visit was never paid.

"Nephew Basil" (the letter ran), "I have received news of your mad proceedings since your return home. No person in his sober senses would have acted as you have done. The greater portion of the claims made against your father's estate could have been legally and successfully contested, and even in what remained a sharp lawyer could have obtained a substantial abatement. This view, as I understand, was presented to you by an able firm of solicitors, but you rejected it, and chose to play the fool. Now, I do not care to have dealings with a fool.

"I might have pardoned you for sacrificing your father's estate to satisfy these claims, but I will not pardon you for sacrificing the fortune your mother left you. It proves to me that it is not safe to entrust money to you, and I have decided to put mine to better use than to leave it to you. Accept this intimation as my ultimatum. It is the last letter you will ever receive from me, and you will never see me again. Therefore you need not go to the trouble of coming my way. My house is not open to you. All the good counsel I have given you has been thrown away. You might have told me at the time and I should have saved my breath and my patience. Good-bye, foolish nephew.

"Bartholomew Whittingham."

He was angry enough to add a postscript:

"As you are so fond of paying debts for which you are not responsible, what do you say to considering the money I have given you from time to time as one, and handing it back? You can do as you please about it. I can make no legal demand for it, but I gave it to you under the impression that you were not exactly an idiot. It amounts to quite fourteen hundred pounds. If I had it I would put it out at good interest."

To state that Basil was not hurt by this letter would be to state what is not true. He had an affection for the old fellow, and he was greatly pained to think that all was over between them; but he was not in the least disturbed by the old man's arguments. He had done what was right; of this he was sure. But the letter stung Basil as well as hurt him. There was a bitter twang in his uncle's remark that he could make no legal demand for the money he had given his nephew. "He shall have it back," said Basil, "every farthing of it." Then he was seized with an expensive fit of humour. His uncle had spoken of interest. He would prove that he was not a whit less independent than the old fellow himself. He made some lame and ridiculous calculations of interest at five per cent, per annum, and arrived at the sum of two thousand pounds and a few pence. He got a draft for the amount, and inclosed it in the following note: -

"All right, my dear uncle. Here is your money back again, with interest added. If it is not enough interest, let me know, and I will send you more. Good-bye, and good luck to you.

*"Your affectionate nephew,
"Basil."*

This last debt paid, Basil had barely a thousand pounds left. He did not hear from his uncle again.

Now, what was he to do? He was without profession or trade, and did not feel equal for any kind of service he saw around, even if it was offered to him. "I think," he said, "I will travel a little more." He did so, and was prudent enough to travel in an economic spirit but his money went fast enough for all that. At the end of a year and a half he had in his purse exactly one hundred pounds. Was he dashed? Not a bit. But he knew that something must be done. "I will go to Australia," he said. The project exalted him. He glowed, he rubbed his hands, he was in a whirl of pleasant excitement. He would be in a new land, in a land of adventure, in a land of romance. There he would be all right, of course. Not a doubt of it. As for his empty purse-and it *was* pretty well empty by the time he had paid for his passage and a few necessary odds and ends-he scarcely gave it a thought. Was he not going to Australia, the poor man's El Dorado? So he set forth in a sailing vessel, and enjoyed the passage immensely, and landed in Sydney as happy as a king. The fairy harbour, the most beautiful in all the wide world, enchanted him; the ravishing scenery enchanted him; the quaint old city, so home-like in its appearance, enchanted him. Certainly he had come to the right place.

He was rather more melancholy a few weeks afterwards, but he never lost heart. Suitable employment did not present itself so readily as he had thought it would, and gold was not to be picked up in the streets. "I am making a mistake," he said. "I must not remain in the city; I must go into the bush." He soon made a start, and began tramping Queensland way, and after some weeks of wondering reached the tract of country which Anthony Bidaud had taken up.

CHAPTER II

On the plantation which he had brought almost to perfection by twenty years of wise labour Anthony Bidaud lived with his only child, Annette, fourteen years of age. He had no other of his kindred near him. The wife he brought from Switzerland lay in a flower-covered grave within a mile of the spot upon which he stood. They came to the colony childless, but after a lapse of years Annette was born to them. Until the child was nine years of age the fond mother was spared to rear her, and then one morning Annette awoke to find the dear protector lost to her. It was an irreparable loss in that far-away land, and there was no one of her own sex to take the mother's place. But Annette had her father left, and he, not unsuccessfully, strove to fill the void in his child's life. He was unremitting in his tenderness and watchfulness, and he bestowed upon his little one a full-hearted love. The two had lived together till now, when Anthony Bidaud's heart was gloomed by the fear of approaching death. He had never been strong, and the climate of the new world in which he had made his home was destined to be fatal to him. He made pilgrimages to Sydney and Melbourne to consult the best physicians, but they gave him little hope. Death was approaching surely and swiftly. A gnawing pain, an inexpressible grief, stirred his heart as he thought of his child, whom he idolised. The reflection that she would be left alone in this wild spot, in this remote part of the world, without a relative, with scarcely a friend, appalled him. Yet what could he do?

He had neither sought nor made friends, he and his wife and child had been sufficient for each other, and when his wife died he and Annette sighed for no other companionship. But had he sought friendships he would not have succeeded in making them in any but fitful fashion. His nearest neighbour was twenty miles away, and everybody in the colony was so intent upon "getting on" and making his fortune, that there was no time for social intercourse. In colonial cities there was at that time but little "society;" in the bush, none.

About a hundred feet above the blue clear stream of the Pioneer stood the house in which Anthony Bidaud lived. The slabs with which it was built had been split from the gum and bloodwood trees growing in the forest which lay in the rear of the huts and buildings inhabited by the labourers, chiefly South Sea Islanders, who worked on the plantation. The roof was composed of shingles split from the same description of trees. The interior of the house was lined with rich, dark red cedar, which grew in the thick scrub on the opposite banks of the river. An avenue of bananas led from the house along the cliff to an arbour, in which oranges, custard apples, guavas, and other delicious fruits, ripened in unsurpassed perfection. The posts of the verandahs which surrounded three sides of the house were covered by gigantic passion fruit, except at one end, which was completely enclosed by grape vines and the yellow jessamine. Hammocks were slung in the verandahs, and the occupants could swing idly to and fro, shaded from the hot sun, and within reach of the fruit which grew in such wonderful abundance and luxuriance all around. A lovely home for husband, wife, and children; a dream which a poet soul only could properly appreciate, but for one simple human being, in whose days the flower of human affection was not blossoming—little better than a wilderness.

It was of this sad prospect, which his state of health warned him lay before Annette, that Anthony Bidaud was speaking to Basil at the time of their introduction to the reader. They had been acquainted but a short time, but each bore for the other a genuine esteem. Some kindred qualities of independence, high-mindedness, and honesty of purpose had drawn them together from the hour they first met, and would have drawn them even closer in the future; but the shadows gathering over one life marred this fulfilment of a brighter promise. Barely two months had elapsed since Basil Whittingham, presenting himself to Anthony Bidaud, had asked for a shelter of his roof for a night. Annette was present when Basil appeared; by her side a faithful Scotch terrier, who guarded his young mistress with watchful care, and when needed, with ferocity. Basil stooped and patted the head of the dog, who did not snarl and show his teeth, as was his wont with strangers, but submitted to the

familiarity with unusual amiability. The sensible creature went even farther than this; he rose, and rubbed his head against Basil's leg, courting by the action a continuance of the caressing.

"Father," said Annette, "no stranger has ever done that with Bruno before."

"Bruno and I are old friends," said Basil, with a pleasant smile. Annette thought that she had never seen such beautiful teeth.

"Oh, Bruno," she cried reproachfully, "and you never told me! Come here directly, sir!" Bruno approached her, wagging his tail. "Really old friends?" she asked turning to Basil.

"No, not really," he replied. "What I mean is, I love dogs, and dogs love me."

"A good testimonial," remarked Anthony Bidaud, gazing with interest upon this poorly attired gentleman.

"I have found it so," responded Basil, "for dog and man."

He held out his hand to Annette, who not only took it, but retained it. This went far to complete the conquest of Anthony Bidaud. With the ordinary tramp he was very familiar, but here was a man of another breed. No hang-dog looks, no slouching, no lowering of the brows, no prison-mark about him. An upright gentleman, who looked the man he was asking a favour from square in the face.

"Have you travelled far?" asked Anthony Bidaud.

"About twenty miles I should say. Rather too hot a day for so long a walk."

"You must be tired," said Anthony Bidaud. "You are heartily welcome here."

"I thank you," said Basil.

That this young man had so swiftly won favour with his child and her four-footed protector was a sufficient recommendation to Bidaud, but, independent of that, he was rejoiced to meet with a gentleman from whom manners and polish of good society had not been rubbed off by familiarity with the rougher aspects of life in the new world. Basil was a man whom no experience could harden; the inner grain of his nature was refined and sweet. The hardships he had already met with in the colony had not embittered him in the least. He grumbled at nothing, took all things easily, and showed a smiling face to the world. When he presented himself to Anthony Bidaud he was really at his wits' end, but though he had not tasted food that day he was not discouraged or disheartened. A clean conscience is a wonderful sustainer. "I am like a cat," thought Basil, as he trudged blithely through the bush, "I am bound to fall on my feet". And fall on his feet he did that summer afternoon, which was to be the prelude of many happier days; for before the night was over he told his host sufficient of his antecedents to satisfy Bidaud that his hospitality was not likely to be misplaced. Upon his persuasion his guest remained for a week, then for another week, and so on till the present time. Bidaud was diffident in asking Basil to enter his service, and Basil, though he had come to the plantation with a vague idea of seeking employment, did not entertain it after his first introduction to Bidaud and his daughter. The terms upon which they had met and upon which he was received forbade his asking for employment. It was gentleman and gentleman, not master and servant. But at length Bidaud—who had learned sufficient to be aware that Basil's purse was empty, and that he had no friends in the colony—delicately pressed his guest upon the subject, and, as timidly as though he was asking a favour instead of being anxious to bestow one, hinted at some business connection between them. Basil, from scruples with which we are familiar but which he did not explain to his host, would not entertain the idea, but firmly and courteously set it aside.

"You have your future to look to," said Bidaud.

"There is time enough to think of that," said Basil, cheerfully. "I am not so very old."

Many a time did Bidaud look with eyes of affection at Basil, and wish he had a son like him to whom he could entrust his darling Annette. Basil was a man peculiarly adapted to inspire affection in honest, simple hearts, and such a bond grew between him and Annette. Happy is the man whose manners cause children to regard him as one of themselves; he possesses an inheritance of pleasant hours which money cannot purchase. Basil and Annette, then, spent a great deal of time together,

accompanied by the faithful Bruno, and it gladdened the father's heart to see his child so happy in the society of their new friend.

"Father says your name is Whittingham," said Annette.

"Yes, it is," said the young man.

"Mr. Whittingham."

"Yes. Do you like it?"

"No. You must have another name."

"Of course I have. Basil."

"Basil. That is much nicer, ever so much nicer. I shall call you Basil."

"I shall feel honoured, Annette."

This compact being made, Annette took him in hand; the little maid had already discovered that she knew a great deal which he did not, and she set up a school, with Basil as her only pupil. Whether what she taught was likely to be of use to him in the battle of life he was bound to fight is an open question. Had some foreknowledge come upon him as to the nature of that battle, and the roads into which it would lead him, he would have laughingly rejected it as the wildest of fancies. He was quite content with the present; he had found an enchanting companion, and time was passing delightfully. During Annette's five years of motherless life she had acquired a wonderful knowledge of the fauna and the flora of the colony, and to these mysteries she introduced Basil. It is not incorrect to call them mysteries, for they are really so to ninety-nine out of every hundred colonials, who spend their lives in ignorance of the wonders by which they are surrounded. But it is so in all lands.

Annette, then, opened Basil's mind, and let in knowledge. She showed him how to snare game, which abounded in vast quantities, snipe, quail, and numerous varieties of duck, of which the whistling duck is the most curious, and the black duck the best eating; she taught him the names of the strange and beautiful birds which found their home in the scrub and forests round about; she described to him the different trees which grew in the neighbourhood of the beautiful Pioneer River, and would not rest contented till he was familiar with them, and could give them their right names.

"What is this, Basil?"

"What is this, Annette? Why, a tree."

"But what kind of tree?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Ha-hum-oh, yes, it is the tea-tree."

"It is not, Basil. It is the bottle-tree."

"Well, the bottle-tree. Of course it is the bottle-tree. How could I be so stupid?"

"You are not stupid; you are inattentive. Do you see this hole cut in the tree?"

"Of course I do."

"I will not have that answer. 'Of course I do' sounds as if I had no right to ask the question. Say 'I do.'"

"I do."

"And mean it, if you please."

"I mean it," said Basil, with his hand on his heart, and a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"Very good. You see the hole. Who cut it?"

"On my word of honour, Annette, I haven't the slightest idea."

"It was cut by the blacks. Now, what did they cut it for?"

"How on earth should I know?"

"You ought to know. You have been brought up in a very bad school. I'll show you what for. Out with your knife, Basil. Dig it in here, a long way under the hole. That is right. Now you can have a good drink of cold sweet water. Is it not wonderful?"

"Indeed it is. Like Oliver Twist, I ask for more."

The conversation instantly took another turn. There were but few books on the home station, and among them no work of fiction. It fell to Basil's lot to open a new fairyland in the young girl's life.

"What was Oliver Twist?" "He was not a 'what'; he was a 'who.'" "Then who was Oliver Twist?" Basil told the story as well as he could, and afterwards told another; and after the second tale, still another, this time a more simple one, from the magic cupboard of Hans Christian Andersen. It was long before they resumed their woodland lessons. Annette pointed out where the best figs and almonds grew, instructed him how to make bracelets and necklaces out of the stones of the quandong fruit, and where the sugar bags of the native bees were to be found. They caught a native bear, not a very ferocious creature and tamed it in a few days so thoroughly that it followed them about like a dog, to the disgust of Bruno, who did not approve of the proceeding; they gathered wild ginger and wild nutmegs in the scrub, and in a famous creek they caught quantities of golden perch, with red eyes and double chins; and once they saw two emus in the distance, and heard the faint sound of their peculiar whistle. In such-like idling the days flew by, and the hours were all too short, but suddenly it dawned upon Basil that this lotus life could not last for ever. It was from a sense of duty, and with a sinking heart (for the thought of parting from these good friends, especially from Annette, sorely oppressed him) that he intimated to Anthony Bidaud that he had lingered too long, and must go farther afield.

"I must not outstay my welcome," he said.

"You cannot do that," said Bidaud. "Are you not happy here?"

"Too happy."

"No, one cannot be too happy," said Bidaud, in a tone of great sadness. There was that weighing on his heart which he yearned to impart to some person in whom he could confide. He had thought of it for days past, and had resolved to unbosom his sorrow to the young gentleman who had brought a new light of tenderness into the prosperous home.

His story was told. Basil learned that the father feared he had not long to live, and that he was filled with apprehension at the contemplation of Annette being left without a friend.

"You were born in Switzerland," said Basil, thoughtfully. "Is there no one connected with you in your own country into whose charge you could give Annette?"

"It is twenty years since I left my native land," said Bidaud, "and great changes must have taken place during that time."

"You left relatives there?"

"Yes, a sister-and a brother." His mention of his brother was made with evident reluctance.

"Why not write to your brother," asked Basil, "to come and receive the trust?"

"Heaven forbid!" cried Bidaud. "Give my darling child into Gilbert's care! I would as soon give her into the care of a wolf! No, no, it is not to be thought of. Six months ago I wrote to my sister, in whom I have some confidence-she is a woman, and would surely not ill-treat my child-informing her of my circumstances, and of the certain fate which awaited me, and imploring her to come out to me. I promised to provide for her, and for her family, if she had any. I thought that the knowledge that I was rich would tempt her. To that letter I have received no reply. Basil" – like his daughter, he called his guest by his Christian name-"it is the sad and sober truth that you are the only friend upon whom I can rely to render me a service. Will you do so?"

"If it is in my power," said Basil, gravely.

"You have given me the impression that you are alone in the world."

"Practically alone," replied Basil.

"With no kindred who have claims upon you."

"My parents are dead; I was their only child. There is but one man alive in England who is of my blood-an uncle whose heir I was to be, but who has cast me off."

"May I inquire for what reason?"

"For a very serious reason. I did not know the value of money, he said. My father, when he died, was heavily involved, and I ruined myself in paying his debts. My uncle was angry at this, saying there was no obligation upon me to satisfy my father's creditors. I held, and hold, a different opinion; but the consequence was that my uncle abandoned his intention of making me his heir."

"My task is all the easier for your explanation. The service I am about to ask of you is no light one, and may be agreeable to you because it will open out a future which few men would turn their back upon. I do not say this to tempt you, for I know that you will be guided entirely by your own feelings, by your own sense of right and wrong, and that worldly advantage will weigh for nothing in the scale. You are fond of Annette."

"I love the child; I never met with a sweeter and more sympathetic nature than hers. She has strength of character, too."

"Do you think so?" asked Bidaud, anxiously.

"I am sure of it. Even now she rules me."

Bidaud shook his head with a sad smile. "That is not a proof. You are content to be ruled, and what passes between you springs from affection. The strength of character required to battle with the world is of a different kind from that which Annette exhibits towards you. The service I ask you to render me concerns Annette."

"Why, then," said Basil, gaily, "it is rendered before you ask for it."

"You must know its nature before you consent. It is nothing more nor less, Basil, than that you should stand to my child in the light of guardian."

Basil started. The tone in which this was spoken was that of a man who was convinced that the world was slipping from him.

"Surely you are alarming yourself unnecessarily," said the young man.

"I am not. There are warnings which it would be criminal to neglect, especially where there is such a vital interest at stake as the happiness of an only and beloved child. I have received these warnings and must be prepared. Say that the spiritual whisper which tells me that my end is approaching is false, is no faith to be placed in the doctor's decree that my hours are numbered? A man may have morbid fancies, but the teachings of experience and science are not to be lightly set aside and disregarded. If my fears prove groundless, so much the better for Annette; if they are confirmed-which they will be, Basil, nothing can alter it-so much the worse for her unless needful preparation is made for the crisis in her young life. Will you now consent?"

"Let me hear more fully what you have to say," replied Basil, gravely, "before I fully pledge myself. You speak of a brother and sister in your own country, and you have written to one who may appear at any moment. The claim she has upon Annette, and the authority with which the laws of nature have invested her, are stronger than those of any stranger. I am a young man, and the idea of becoming guardian to so tender and sweet a flower as Annette startles me. I ask myself, am I equal to a responsibility so serious, and the question reveals to me my own deficiencies, of which I am generally somewhat painfully aware. It is really as though the most serious page in my life was about to be opened."

CHAPTER III

"I have no fears," said Anthony Bidaud, with a gentle smile, "on the score of your deficiencies. I have been no inattentive observer since the fortunate day upon which I first formed acquaintance with you. That you have had a disappointment in life counts for very little, and such small difficulties as befall a newcomer in this new land are scarcely to be accounted among the real difficulties of life. You do not yet know your own strength, but already, in a position of serious responsibility, you have acted in a manner which few men would have had the courage to do. Your past is honourable, and contents me. You have a kind heart, and that adds to my content. Should the worst happen, my Annette will have by her side a true and honest counsellor. Reflect a moment. Say that I were to die to-morrow-nay, do not argue with me; death is the only certain thing in life, and it may come at any unexpected moment to the strongest-say that I die to-morrow, what would be the position of my dear child? I have an estate worth thousands of pounds; she is a mere child, and could not manage it. She would become the prey of schemers, who would undoubtedly not deal fairly by her. I have a hundred servants on this plantation, and not a friend among them. By accident you enter into our lives. I use the term accident, but I believe it to be a providence. We are drawn to each other. I have observed you closely, and am satisfied to deliver into your hands a sacred charge, the charge of a young girl's future. At such moments as these there comes to some men a subtle, unfathomable insight. It comes to me. I firmly believe that there is a link between you and my child which, if you do not recognise it now, you will be bound to recognise in the future. It may be broken in the present, but the threads will be joined as surely as we stand here side by side. Apart from this mysticism, to which I do not expect you to subscribe, there is a worldly, practical side which it is right and necessary you should understand. You ask for fuller information of my brother and sister. I will give it to you. That my brother and I did not part friends, and that his attitude towards me influenced my sister, was not my fault. I loved a young girl in my own station in life, and she loved me and afterwards became my wife. That my brother Gilbert loved her also was to be deplored; we were not to be blamed for it, though Gilbert was furious-with me for loving her, with her for returning my love. I endeavoured to remonstrate with him: he would not listen to me. 'You have stepped in the way of my happiness,' he said; 'you shall rue it.' It is hard to speak harshly of one's flesh and blood, but it is the truth that the girl I loved was fortunate in not placing her affections upon him. He would have broken her heart. He was a spendthrift and a libertine, and would stop at little for the gratification of his selfish pleasures. He was furious against me, not so much because he loved Annette's mother, but because he could not have his own way. He was clever in crooked things, and in cunning shrewdness there were few to beat him. Educated as a doctor, he could have earned a good name if he had chosen to be industrious; but he preferred to lead an idle, dissolute life. These evil courses caused him to be deeply in debt at the time of my father's death. A portion of my father's fortune, which was not very large, was left to me, and Gilbert endeavoured to rob me of it, saying he was the elder, as he was by a year. With wedded life in view I resisted the attempt, and this angered him the more. He swore that he would never forgive me, and that he would be revenged upon me. It was strange that my sister leaned more towards him than towards me, but that does sometimes happen with the scapegrace of the family. I am not endeavouring to blacken Gilbert's character for my own glorification. In drawing his picture I have dealt more than justly by him; were he not my brother I should speak of actions of his which made me wonder how he and I could have been born of the same mother. It is that I wish you to understand why I did not write to him to come here and take charge of my dear child, and to understand why I said that I would as soon give her into the care of a wolf. I succeeded in obtaining my share of my father's fortune, and soon afterwards married. Even then Gilbert did not cease from persecuting me. He would come and take up his quarters in our house, and insult my wife, and revile me, unto our life became intolerable. It was then that we resolved to emigrate, chiefly to escape his persecutions.

Then he showed us plainly that his love had changed to hate. He said to me before I left Switzerland, 'One day I will be even with you. Remember my words—dead or alive, I will be even with you!' Since that day I have never seen him, never heard from him, and I do not know whether he is still living. Upon our arrival in this colony fortune smiled upon us almost from the first. We were happy, very happy, and as you see I have been prosperous. But I have not been wise. I should have provided my child with a suitable companion at the death of my wife, though heaven knows where I should have found one; but I should have tried. To marry again was impossible; I loved my wife too well, and I could not be false to her memory. I have been worse than unwise: I have neglected a serious duty. Up to this day I have shrunk from making a will, so that my affairs would get into confusion should anything happen to me. I have resolved to make instant amends for this neglect of duty. To-night I shall write to a lawyer to come to me without an hour's delay, and he shall draw out my will before he departs. In this will it is my desire to appoint you manager of my estate and guardian of my child till she arrives at the age of twenty-one. It is not a bad prospect I hold out to you. At the end of seven years you will still be a young man, and if you elect to leave Annette you can do so. She will by that time have learned from you all that is necessary to continue the management of the estate herself; but she will also then be free to act as she pleases: either to remain upon it, or to sell it and go elsewhere. I do not think there is anything more I can tell you to enable you to arrive at a decision. I do not urge you to comply with my desire because of any personal advantage that may accrue to yourself, but I beg of you as a friend to render me as great a service as it is in the power of one man to render to another. If you wish for time to consider this proposal take it, but decide before the arrival of the lawyer. One way or another, my will must be made before a week has passed."

But Basil did not ask for time; he was deeply touched by the confidence reposed in him by Anthony Bidaud, and while the father spoke he had made up his mind. He had been very happy on the plantation; he knew that it was a desirable home, and that within its domains could be found much that would make a man's life agreeable and useful. He had come to the colony, as had thousands of other colonists, with the intention of making his fortune and returning to England. He could not hope to make a fortune in a day, though wild ideas of gold-seeking—successful gold-seeking, of course—had floated through his mind. Suddenly, when his fortunes were at the lowest ebb, there was presented an opportunity which, unworldly as he was, he could not disguise from himself it would be folly to throw away. But it was due to Anthony Bidaud that the matter should not be concluded without something more being said.

"I need no time to consider," he said. "Your proposition is flattering and advantageous to myself. But you speak of not being wise. Are you wise in placing a trust so delicate and important in the hands of a stranger?"

"I am content to do so," said Bidaud, "and I beg you to believe that the obligation will be on my side."

"After all," suggested Basil, with a little touch of shrewdness "it may be with you a choice of evils."

"It is a choice of good," observed Bidaud. "I have told you," continued Basil, "that I have not been educated into an understanding of business matters, and that my mission in life"—here he smiled deprecatingly—"was to go through life in a gentlemanly way, without working for my living."

"But you came to the colony to work?"

"Yes. I am only endeavouring to prove to you how utterly unfit I am for the position you would assign to me."

"I am entirely convinced," said Bidaud, with a look of affection at the young man, "of your fitness for it."

"Think of my inexperience."

"Experience will come to you as it came to me. You will learn as I did."

"Then there is another view," said Basil, and now he spoke with a certain hesitation. "You and Annette are here as father and daughter. It is not to be supposed that I could supply your place. I am a young man; in a very few years Annette will be a young woman. Will not our relative positions then be likely to wound her susceptibilities?"

"Do not finish," said Bidaud, pressing Basil's hand warmly. "Leave all to time. Nothing but good can spring from what I propose. If Annette were now a young woman—"

And here he himself purposely broke off in the middle of a sentence. Certainly his manner could not be mistaken. A flush came into Basil's face, and he did not speak again for a few moments.

"Has the letter," he then said, "you wrote to your sister been returned to you?"

"No."

"Then it must have been delivered."

"Not necessarily. I am not sure whether undelivered letters addressed to Switzerland are returned to the colonial post-offices. If you have stated your principal objections I see nothing in them to cause you to hesitate. You will consent?"

"Yes," said Basil, "I accept the trust."

"With all my heart I thank you," said Anthony Bidaud; then he placed his hands on Basil's shoulders, and said in a solemn tone, "Guard my child."

"Whatever lies in my power to do," said Basil, "shall be done."

Bidaud nodded and turned away; his heart was too full to say more. Basil turned in another direction, with the intention of seeking Annette, in fulfilment of a promise he had made to join her in the woods. He knew where to find her.

CHAPTER IV

Traversing a narrow, winding bridle track, he soon reached the river. A broad belt of white sand stretched on either side for some little distance, the water glistening like polished mirrors in its smooth, deep reaches. Here and there it broke into a thousand tiny silver-crested waves, created by the inequalities in the ground. Farther on the main stream twisted into great clusters of dark green river oaks, and was lost to view. The white sands narrowed, and were replaced by rocks, covered with moss and lichen, and here a bark canoe was moored. Stepping on a large boulder, Basil jumped into the canoe, and loosening the rope, paddled down stream. The water ran like a mill race, and presently divided into two streams, beautified by waterfalls and fairy islands adorned with luxuriant vegetation. This dividing of the waters extended only some three or four hundred yards, at the termination of which they were united in one dark lagoon. A strange stillness reigned upon the surface of the water, but this sign of peace was insincere, the current in reality running hard and strong. Round about the canoe floated masses of white and mauve water lilies; in parts the huge leaves formed a perfect carpet, which easily supported the light weight of the lotus birds as they skipped from shore to shore. At the lower end of the lagoon the stream became so narrow that a man could jump across it, and here Basil left his canoe, and plunged into the woods to find Annette.

She was sitting on a great patch of velvet moss, idling with some flowers of the wax plant and the yellow hibiscus. Her back was towards Basil, who stepped softly, intending to surprise her, but the crackling of the leaves betrayed him. She turned quickly, and jumping up, ran to meet him.

"I have been waiting for you ever so long," she said, and she slipped her hand into his.

Basil made no excuse for being late; an age seemed to have passed since he had last seen her, though scarcely three hours separated "then" from "now." But short as was really the interval it had effected an important alteration in their relations towards each other, and the contemplation of this change made him silent. Neither was Annette as talkative as usual, and they strolled idly along for some distance without exchanging a word. Basil had hitherto accepted Annette's beauty in a general sense; she was pretty, she was bright, she was full of vivacity—that was all. Had she been a woman he would have subjected her to a closer and more analytical observation, for he had an artist's eye for beauty, and loved to look at it in animate and inanimate nature; but Annette was only a child, and he had paid her just that amount of attention which one pays to small wild-flowers that grow by the wayside. But now, looking down upon her as she walked by his side, he observed that her eyes were hazel, and he said to himself that hazel eyes, in girl and woman, were the most beautiful eyes in the world. The hazel colour in the eyes he was gazing upon was brilliant, and Basil said to himself that it was the brilliant hazel eyes that are the most beautiful in the world. Annette's features were not exactly regular, but formed as fair a picture of human loveliness as a man would wish to see, her lips sweetly curved, her teeth white and shapely, her ears like little shells, her golden brown hair gathered carelessly about the gracefully shaped head. Yes, Annette was beautiful even now as a child; how much more beautiful was she likely to be when her springtime was fully set in!

Raising her head suddenly she saw that Basil was gazing at her more earnestly and closely than he was in the habit of doing. "I was looking at your eyes, Annette," he said, rather guiltily. "I never noticed their colour till to-day."

"They are hazel. Do you like hazel eyes?"

"Very much."

"I am glad of that. My eyes are like my mother's. Will you come with me?"

"Where?"

"To her grave."

He had visited it before with Annette, and they now walked towards the canoe, gathering wild flowers as they walked. Once Annette slipped, and he caught her and held her up; there was an unusual

tenderness in the action, and Annette nestled closer to him, and smiled happily. In the canoe her skilful fingers were busily at work, weaving the flowers they had gathered into garlands to lay upon her mother's grave. She had a special gift in such-like graceful tasks, but then her heart was in her fingers. The loving homage was reverently rendered when they reached the spot, and Basil assisted her in clearing the dead leaves and in planting some fresh roots she had brought with her from the woods.

Her task accomplished, Annette sat beside the grave, with a wistful expression on her face which made Basil wonder what was stirring in her mind. He waited for her to break the silence, and presently she spoke.

"What makes you so quiet, Basil?"

"I do not know. Perhaps it is because you have said so little, Annette."

"I have been thinking."

"Yes."

"I wanted all day to speak to you about it. I thought I would when we were in the wood alone; then you spoke of my eyes and I thought of my dear mother. You would have loved her, Basil, and she would have loved you. She hears me now-yes, she hears and sees me, Basil, and I think she is glad you came to us."

"I am glad too, Annette."

"Really glad, Basil?"

"Really glad, Annette."

"Then you will not go away from us?"

"What makes you ask that?" Her question, tremulously uttered, formed a pregnant link in the promise he had given her father.

"It is my dream," said Annette. "I dreamt it last night, and it made me sad. You came to say good-bye, and I was unhappy at the thought that I should never see you again. Basil, if that was to happen I should be sorry you ever came at all."

"Then you wish me to stay?"

"Dearly, Basil, dearly! I thought I would speak to father about it; then I thought I would speak to you first."

"Did you not speak to your father?"

"Not about my dream; but about your going away, yes. I asked him to persuade you to stop with us."

"Because, Annette-" he said, and paused. "Because I love you, Basil. I told father so, and he said he loved you, too, and that he wished he had a son like you. Then you would be my brother, and I should be very happy. But father said he was afraid you intended to leave us soon, and that made me dream, I suppose."

"Annette, listen to me."

"I am listening, Basil."

"Your father has spoken to me, and that is why I was so late in coming to you. He asked me to remain here, and I promised him I would."

"You did? Oh, Basil!" Her voice expressed the most perfect joy. She had risen in her excitement, and was now leaning towards him, her lips parted, her eyes glowing.

"Yes, Annette, I promised him, and I promise you. For some years at least we will live together." She threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him.

"That will be for ever, Basil. You have made me do happy, so happy!"

"So that is all settled," he said. "But I shall be a tyrant, Annette."

"I don't mind, Basil; I will be very good and obedient. Do you hear, Bruno, do you hear?" She knelt and kissed the faithful dog, and pressed his head to her bosom. "Basil is not going away. He will remain here forever-for ever!"

Basil was very grateful for the little maid's affection, grateful that his lines had fallen in such pleasant places. What more could man desire? But there was a shadow gathering and swiftly approaching which neither of them could see.

They stopped out later than usual that evening, and when they returned to the house Annette was radiant.

"Basil has promised to remain with us, father," she said, in a voice of great joy.

"He has told you, then, dear child?"

"Yes, father, yes. He will stop with us for ever. I don't wish for anything now."

The three happy beings sat together in the verandah during the few brief minutes that divided day and night. In those latitudes there is but little twilight, and the long peaceful rest of an English sunset is unknown. For a few moments the brilliancy was dazzling. Great clouds of amethyst and ruby spread over the western skies, melting soon into sombre shades of purple and crimson. Then the sun dipped down and disappeared, and the skies were overspread with a veil of faded gold, behind which the white stars glittered.

Their souls were in harmony with the spiritual influence of the lovely scene, and there was an ineffable peace in their hearts. Annette kissed Basil before she retired to rest, and whispered: "Brother Basil, I shall have happier dreams to-night."

He kissed her tenderly, and bade her good-night. Unclouded happiness shone in her eyes as she stole to her room, where she knelt by her bedside, and uttered the name of Basil in her prayers.

Anthony Bidaud gazed at his daughter till she entered the house, and even then kept his eyes fixed upon the door through which she had disappeared.

"It is years," he said to Basil, "since I have felt so thoroughly content as I do to-night. Come to my room early in the morning; I shall not write to my lawyer till then, and I wish you to see the letter."

Shortly after all the inmates of the house were asleep.

* * * * *

And while they slept, there walked across the distant plains towards the plantation, a man and a woman who had had that goal in view for three months past. It was summer when they left their home across the seas. It was summer when they reached the land to which the woman had been summoned. But, judging from their faces, no summer errand was theirs.

"Walk quicker," said the man, surlily. "We must get there before sunrise. My heart is bent upon it."

"I am fit to drop," said the woman. "How much farther have we to go?"

"According to information, fifteen miles. Walk quicker, quicker! Have you travelled so far to faint at the last moment? Remember we have not a penny left to purchase food, and have already fasted too many hours. I see visions of ease and comfort, of wine and food, ay, and of riches too. I am eager to get at them."

"Do you remember," said the woman, "that you were not bidden to come?"

"What of that?" retorted the man. "I have my tale ready. Leave me to play my part. Our days of poverty are over. This is the last of them. Walk quicker, quicker!"

CHAPTER V

A little after sunrise Basil was awake and out, hastening to the river for his morning bath. He had slept well and soundly, but he had had vivid dreams. The events of the day had sunk deep in his mind; it would have been strange otherwise, for they had altered the currents of his whole future life. They had furnished him with a secure and happy home; they had placed him in a position of responsibility which he hailed with satisfaction and a sense of justifiable pride; moreover, they had assured him that he had won the affection of a kind and generous gentleman and of a sweet-tempered and gentle little maid. He was no longer an outcast; he was no longer alone in the world.

Until this void was supplied he had not felt it. Young, buoyant, and with a fund of animal spirits which was the secret of his cheerful nature, sufficient for the day had been the good thereof; but now quite suddenly an unexpected and sweetly serious duty had been offered to him, and he had accepted it. He would perform it faithfully and conscientiously.

Every word Anthony Bidaud had spoken to him had impressed itself upon his mind. He could have repeated their conversation almost word for word. It was this which had inspired his dreams, which formed, as it were, a panorama of the present and the future.

Annette as she was at this moment, a child, appeared to him and he lived over again their delightful rambles; for although it was but yesterday that they were enjoyed, the duty he had taken upon himself seemed to send them far back into the past; but still Annette was a child, and her sunny ways belonged to childhood. The story of "Paul and Virginia" had been a favourite with him when he was a youngster, and his dreams at first were touched by the colour of that simple tale. The life he had lived these last few weeks on Anthony Bidaud's plantation favoured the resemblance: the South Sea Islanders who worked on the land, the waterfalls, the woods, the solitudes, the protecting bond which linked him to Annette—all formed in his sleeping fancies a companion idyll to the charming creation of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. He carried Annette over the river, he wandered with her through the shadows of the mountains, they were lost and found, they sat together under the shade of the velvet sunflower-tree; and in this part of his dreams he himself was a youth and not a man.

So much for the present, and it was due to his light heart and the happiness he had found that his dreams did not take the colour of the subsequent tragedy which brought the lives of these woodland children to their sad and pathetic end. His future and Annette's was brighter than that of Paul and Virginia. He beheld her as a woman, and he was still her protector. She represented the beauty of the entire world of thought and action. Her figure was faultless, her face most lovely, her movements gracefully perfect. There are countenances upon which an eternal cloud appears to rest, and which even when they smile are not illumined. Upon Annette's countenance rested an eternal sunshine, and this quality of light irradiated not only all surrounding visible objects, but all hopes and feelings of the heart. When Basil awoke these felicitous fancies were not obliterated or weakened, as most such fancies are in waking moments, and as he walked towards the river they lightened his footsteps and made him glad. Wending his way along a cattle track dotted with gum-trees, he saw beneath the branches of one a woman whose face was strange to him. She was not English born, and as she reclined in an attitude of fatigue against the tree's trunk there was about her an air of exhaustion which stirred Basil to compassion for her apparently forlorn condition. He remembered his own days and nights of weary tramping through the bush, and, pausing, he looked down upon her, and she peered up at him through her half-closed lids.

"Good morning," said Basil.

"Is it?" she asked, with a heavy sigh.

"Is it what?"

"Good morning. To me it is a bad morning."

Basil looked round. The heavens were luminous with vivid colour, the birds were flying busily to and from their nests, nature's myriad pulses throbbed with gladness. To him it was the best, the brightest of days. But this sad woman before him was pale and worn; there were traces not only of exhaustion but of hunger in her face.

"You are hungry," said Basil.

"Don't mock me," said the woman, in no gracious tone; "let me rest."

"If you follow this track," persisted Basil, "the way I have come, you will see the Home Station. They will give you breakfast there."

For a moment the woman appeared inclined to accept his kindness she made a movement upwards, but almost immediately she relinquished her intention.

"No," she said, "I will wait."

He was loth to leave her in her distressful plight, but her churlish manner was discouraging.

"Will you not let me help you?"

"You can help me," said the woman, "by leaving me."

He had no alternative. "If you think better of it," he said, "you can obtain shelter and food at the Home Station." Then he passed on to the river.

A stranger was there, already stripping for the purpose of bathing. Scarcely looking at him, Basil was about to remove to a more retired spot when he observed something in the water which caused him to run to the man, who was removing his last garment, and seize his arm.

"What for?" demanded the stranger.

He spoke fairly good English, as did the woman who had declined his assistance, but with a foreign accent. He was brown, and thin, and wrinkled, and Basil saw at once that he was not an Englishman.

"I presume you have not breakfasted yet," was Basil's apparently inconsequential answer to the question.

"Not yet," said the stranger impatiently, shaking himself free from Basil's grasp. "Why do you stop me? Is not the river free?"

"Quite free," said Basil; "but instead of eating you may be eaten."

He pointed downwards, and leaning forward the stranger beheld a huge alligator lurking beneath a thin thicket of reeds. The brute was perfectly motionless, but all its voracious senses were on the alert.

"Ugh!" cried the stranger, beginning to dress hurriedly. "That would be a bad commencement of my business."

He did not say "thank you," nor make the slightest acknowledgment of the service Basil had rendered him. This jarred upon the young man, who stood watching him get into his clothes. They were ragged and travel-stained, and the stranger's physical condition was evidently none of the best; but his eyes were keen, and all his intellectual forces were awake. In this respect Basil found an odd resemblance in him to the alligator waiting for prey in the waving reeds beneath, and also a less odd resemblance to the woman he had left lying in the shadow of the gum-trees.

"You have business here, then?" asked the young man.

"I have-important business. Understand that I answer simply to prove that I am not an intruder."

"I understand. Is the woman I met on my way a relative of yours?"

"What woman?" cried the stranger, in sharp accents. "Like you in face, and bearing about her signs of hard travel."

"Did she speak to you? Why do you question me about her? By what right?"

"There is no particular right in question that I can see?" said Basil. "I spoke to her as I am speaking to you, and asked if I could serve her."

"And she!"

"Was as uncivil as yourself, and declined my offer of assistance."

"She acted well. We are not beggars. For my incivility, that is how you take it. You misconstrue me."

"I am glad to hear it. You seem tired."

"I have been walking all day and all night, and all day and all night again, for more days and nights than I care to count I have done nothing but walk, walk, walk, since my arrival at this world's end."

"Have you but just arrived?"

"Yes, but just arrived, wearied and worn out with nothing but walking, walking, walking. Is that what this world's end was made for?"

If the stranger had not stated that he had important business to transact, and had there not been something superior in his speech and deportment to the ordinary tramp with whom every man in the Australian colonies is familiar, Basil would have set him down as a member of that delectable fraternity. Notwithstanding this favourable opinion, however, Basil took an instinctive dislike to the man. He had seen in him an odd likeness to the alligator, and brief as had been their interview up to this point, he had gone the length of mentally comparing him now to a fox, now to a jackal-to any member of the brute species indeed whose nature was distinguished by the elements of rapacity and cunning.

"Have you far to go?" he asked.

"No farther," replied the stranger, with an upward glance at Anthony Bidaud's house, one end of which was visible from the spot upon which they were conversing.

"Is that your destination?" inquired Basil, observing the upward glance.

"That," said the stranger, with a light laugh, "is my destination, if I have not been misinformed."

The laugh intensified Basil's dislike; there was a mocking sinister ring in it, but he nevertheless continued the conversation.

"Misinformed in what respect?"

"That is M. Bidaud's house?"

"It is M. Bidaud's house."

"M. Anthony Bidaud?"

"Yes."

"Originally from Switzerland."

Basil's hazard of the stranger's precise nationality now took definite form.

"As you are," he said.

"As I am," said the stranger, "and as Anthony Bidaud is."

"You are right in your surmise. He is from Switzerland."

"My surmise? Ah? He has a fine estate here."

"He has."

"But his wife-she is dead."

"That is so, unhappily."

"What is one man's meat is another man's poison-a proverb that may be reversed." His small eyes glittered, and his thin pointed features seemed all to converge to one point. ("Fox, decidedly," thought Basil.) The stranger continued. "His health, is it good?"

In the light of Anthony Bidaud's revelation on the previous evening this was a startling question, and Basil answered:

"It is an inquiry you had best make of himself if you are likely to see him."

"It is more than likely that I shall see him," said the stranger, "and he will tell me. He has but one child."

"You are well informed. He has but one."

"Whose name is Annette."

"Whose name," said Basil, wondering from what source the stranger had obtained his information, "is Annette."

"Charming, charming, charming," said the stranger. "Everything is charming, except" – with a loathing gesture at the alligator, which lay still as a log, waiting for prey- "that monster; except also that I am dead with fatigue. I came here for a bath to refresh myself after much travelling. Is there any part of this treacherous river in which a man may bathe in safety?"

"I will show you a place."

"No tricks, young sir, said the stranger, suspicion in his voice.

"Why should I play you tricks? If you do not care to trust me, seek a secure spot yourself."

"No, I will accompany you, who must know the river well. You do, eh?"

"I am thoroughly acquainted with it."

"You guessed my nation; shall I guess yours? Australian."

"I am an Englishman."

"A great nation; a great people. Is this the spot?"

They had arrived at a smooth piece of water, semi-circularly protected by rocks from the invasion of alligators.

"This is the spot," said Basil, "you will be perfectly safe here."

The water was so clear that they could see to the bottom. Black and silver bream, perch, mullet, and barramundi were swimming in its translucent depths. The stranger peered carefully among the rocks to make sure that they were free from foes, and then, without thanking Basil, began to strip off his clothes.

"And you-where will you bathe?"

"A little farther up stream. Good morning."

"Ah, good morning; but I may see you again if you are living near."

"I live," said Basil, "in the house yonder."

CHAPTER VI

A sudden excitement was observable in the stranger. He paused in his undressing, and laid his hand on Basil's arm, clutching with nervous fingers.

"You are very intimate with M. Anthony Bidaud?" he said.

"We are friends."

"Friends? Ah! You are not related? No, you cannot be, for you are English. Yet there are other ties. His wife is dead, you say, and as I know. Yes, dead. But he may be looking for another, may be already married again." He spoke in feverish haste. ("A touch of the jackal here," thought Basil.) "Tell me, you friend of M. Anthony Bidaud."

"He is not married again," said Basil, "and to my knowledge is not seeking another wife."

The stranger drew a long breath of relief, followed immediately by the exhibition of a new suspicion. "His daughter, Annette-if he spoke truth a child. But men lie sometimes, very often, you, I, all men. He married long, long ago, and this Annette may well be a young woman of twenty." He scowled as he looked at Basil's handsome face. "Is she married, or going to be?"

"Absurd," said Basil, but a little touch of colour came into his face which the sharp eyes of the stranger noted, "she is scarcely fourteen years of age."

"Good, good. Time, let us hope, to prevent mischief. But, pardon me, if you live in the house of M. Bidaud, there must be a reason. You do not look like a common labourer; you are something better, a gentleman-eh?" And again all his thin pointed features seemed, foxlike, to converge to one point.

"I am a gentleman," said Basil, "and I am staying with M. Bidaud as a guest." He referred to the present, not feeling warranted in speaking of the future. The arrangement he had entered into with Anthony Bidaud had yet to be carried into effect.

"Ah, ah, as a guest, only as a guest, but with an eye to the future, perhaps. M. Anthony Bidaud is rich, and in two years his daughter, his only child, will be sixteen and nearly ripe. There is a saying, is there not, among you English that welcomes the coming and speeds the parting guest? I have been in your country, and know something of its literature, and in my own land my education was not neglected. That saying about the coming and parting guest is a good omen, for I have but just arrived, and you-"

But Basil did not wait to hear the conclusion of the sentence. Annoyed at the turn the conversation had taken he turned on his heel, and left the stranger to enjoy his bath. He walked slowly to his own, rather ruffled by the interview.

"Who can he be?" he thought, as he prepared for his swim. "He seems to be acquainted with M. Bidaud and with his personal history. What on earth made me answer his interminable questions? His pertinacity, I suppose, and a kind of magnetism in him which it was hard to resist. But I might have been courteous without being communicative. I said nothing, however, of my own prompting, and his questions followed each other naturally. What he learnt from me he could have learnt from a dozen others, and after all there is no harm done. He certainly has the knack of rubbing the wrong way; an extraordinarily annoying fellow, but neither loutish nor ignorant. That is why I was constrained to follow his lead. This is his destination; his business then, must be with M. Bidaud. Important business, he said-and with Annette's father. I did not like his references to Annette. Will it be right or wrong for me to convey my impressions of this stranger to M. Bidaud? Wrong. I will merely mention that I met with such a man, who was coming to the house upon business. He spoke of having walked a long way. He must be poor, or he would have chosen another mode of conveyance, especially as he seems to be in somewhat feverish haste. Being poor is nothing against him; I am poor myself. Psha! What a worry I am making of nothing!"

He could not dismiss the subject, however, and the currents of his thoughts ran on even as he swam.

"The woman I met on my way to the river; how skilfully he evaded my inquiries as to the relationship between them! His tone when he spoke of her showed that he had power over her. I have not the least doubt he is the kind of man who can make himself intensely disagreeable. Poor woman! There is a resemblance in their features; I have heard that husband and wife frequently grow like each other in face. She was hungry, but she declined the offer of a good meal. Acting, I should say, under her husband's instructions, and too frightened of him to disobey him. Faithful creatures, women. Patient as camels some of them and as docile. A hard tramp she seems to have had of it, and he has not spared her. Well, she can rest here a few days. Would I like them to remain on the plantation? No. He would keep me in a continual state of irritation. His allusions to Annette were in the worst of taste. I dare say before the day is out I shall know the nature of his business. M. Bidaud will tell me. Confound the fellow! I'll not think of him any more."

As a contribution towards this end he plunged half a dozen times into the deepest parts of the river, and finally emerged, glowing. The disturbing impressions produced by the stranger were dissipated, and Basil thought it would look churlish if on his road back to the house he did not go to see whether he could be of any service to him. He saw nothing, however, of the man or the woman, and greatly refreshed, he proceeded to the house. The sun was now high in the heavens, and the labourers were at work on the plantation. He exchanged greetings with a few of the better sort, and inquired whether they had seen anything of the strangers. They replied in the negative; they had seen nothing of them.

"Have you, Roche?" he asked of one who was regarding him with a scowl.

"No," said Roche. "What business is it of mine?"

It was Roche's misfortune to always wear a scowl on his face, but in this scowl there were degrees. To produce an amiable smile was with Roche an impossibility; nature had been cruel, and his parents, one or both of them, had transmitted to him a sour temper as an inheritance; but the state of his feelings could be correctly judged by the kind of scowl he wore; a nice observer could scarcely make a mistake as to whether he tolerated, disliked, or hated the man he was gazing on. There could be no mistake made now; he hated Basil.

There was a reason. Every man has his good points, even the worst of men, and Roche's good point was that he conscientiously performed the duties for which he was engaged. However hard the work before him, done it was with a will-and a scowl. Now, this was a distinct virtue, and Anthony Bidaud gave him credit for it, and appreciated the conscientious worker, as any other master would do of a man who gave him full value for his wage. So far, so good; master and man were satisfied. But before Basil's arrival on the plantation Roche had got it into his head-which was not an intellectual head-that Anthony Bidaud entertained the notion of creating a general supervisor and manager of the estate, and that he, Roche, was the man to be appointed; and since Basil's arrival his ambitious dream was disturbed by the conviction that Basil would step into the shoes he wished to wear.

"I don't know that it is any business of yours," said Basil to Roche, "only I thought you might have seen these persons."

"Well, I haven't," said Roche.

Basil nodded cheerfully, and proceeded towards the house. He was not a man of paroxysms; except upon very special occasions his temperament was equable. As to whether Roche had spoken the truth or no he did not speculate; it was not in Roche he was interested, but in the man and woman with whom he had spoken on his way to the river.

Anthony Bidaud was an early riser, and Basil went to the room in which the master of the plantation was in the habit of transacting his private business. He knocked twice or thrice at the door without receiving an answer, and then, turning the handle, he entered the room.

Anthony Bidaud was reclining in the chair in which he usually sat when engaged in correspondence. His back was towards Basil, and before him on the table writing materials were spread. He sat quite still, and for a moment or two the young man was uncertain what to do. Then he

called Bidaud by name. No answer came, and Basil, surprised at the stillness, advanced to Bidaud, and stood immediately behind him. Still no notice was taken of Basil. Then he laid his hand upon Bidaud's shoulder. The occupant of the chair did not move, and Basil leaned anxiously forward to look into his face. At first Basil believed him to be asleep, but a closer examination sent the blood rushing to the young man's heart in terror. Bidaud's arm hung listlessly by his side, and upon his face dwelt an expression of acute suffering. Again Basil called him by name, and shook him roughly, but no responsive word or movement greeted him from the quiet figure in the chair. Basil thrust his hand into Bidaud's shirt over the region of his heart, and trembled to meet with no pulsation there. He raised Bidaud's arm and released it. It dropped lifeless down.

"Merciful heavens!" cried Basil, looking helplessly around. "Can this be death?"

The question he asked of himself was heard by another man. The stranger he had met on the banks of the river had noiselessly opened the door, and now advanced to the chair.

"Who speaks of death?" asked the stranger. "Ah, it is you, who are a guest in this house. And I find you and him" – he stretched a long bony finger at the recumbent figure of Anthony Bidaud – "here together, alone. You with a face of fear, terror, and excitement; he quite still, quite still!"

He was perfectly composed, and there was a malicious smile on his lips as he confronted Basil. Dazed by the situation, Basil could find no words to reply.

"You are confounded," continued the stranger. "It needs explanation. Who is this man sitting so quietly in his chair?"

"M. Anthony Bidaud," said Basil, with white lips, "the master of this house."

"Ah, M. Anthony Bidaud, the master of this house," said the stranger, echoing Basil's words, but whereas Basil's voice was agitated, his had not a tremor in it. "I will see if you are speaking the truth." He lowered his face, and his eyes rested upon the face of the motionless figure. "Yes, it is he, Anthony Bidaud, worn, alas! and wasted. Sad, sad, sad!" Grief was expressed in the words but not in the tone of the speaker. "What was it you asked a moment ago? Can this be death? I am a doctor. I will tell you."

Lifting the lifeless form in his arms he laid it upon a couch, and tearing open the shirt and waistcoat, placed his ear to Anthony Bidaud's heart; then took his pulse between finger and thumb. He proceeded with his examination by taking from his pocket a little leather case containing a small comb and a narrow slip of looking-glass. Rubbing the surface of the glass dry with a handkerchief that had dropped to the ground, he passed it over the mouth of Anthony Bidaud; then held it up to the light.

"Yes," he said, looking Basil full in the face, "it is death. It is lucky I travelled hither in the night, and did not allow myself to be delayed by fatigue. Fortune, I thank you. You have treated me scurvily hitherto; at length you relent, and smile upon me. Being a lady, I kiss my hand to you."

There was something so inexpressibly heartless in the action that Basil cried indignantly, "Who are you, and by what right have you intruded yourself into this room?"

The stranger did not immediately reply. He felt in his pocket for a snuff-box, and producing it regaled himself with a pinch. He offered the box to Basil, who pushed it aside. He smiled and placed the box in his pocket, and was also about to replace the leather case, when an amusing thought occurred to him. He dressed his hair with the comb, and gazed at himself in the glass with an affectation of vanity. His smile broadened as he noticed the look of horror in Basil's face.

"You wish to know," he said slowly, "who I am, and by what right I intrude myself into this room. You have presumption, you, M. Anthony Bidaud's guest, to use the word 'intrude' to me! I am this dead gentleman's brother. My name is Gilbert Bidaud. Eh? Did you speak?"

CHAPTER VII

So many conflicting emotions had been pressed into the last few minutes that Basil was utterly bewildered. The cold, sardonic face before him, wreathed into mocking smiles even in the presence of death, added to his bewilderment. He passed his hand across his eyes, wondering whether he was dreaming, but removing his hand from his forehead he saw the dead form of Anthony Bidaud on the sofa, and heard the light laugh of the man who called himself Anthony's brother. This laugh recalled him to himself; he was in full possession of his senses, and understood what had occurred, and to some extent what it portended.

Gilbert Bidaud! And the woman with him was not his wife, but his sister, to whom Annette's father had written six months ago, imploring her to come to him, and promising to provide for her and her family. That being so, she was here by authority. She was but an instrument in the hands of Gilbert Bidaud, whose lightest word she was constrained to obey.

Gilbert Bidaud!

"It is hard to speak harshly of one's flesh and blood, but it is the truth that the girl I loved was fortunate in not placing her affections upon him. He would have broken her heart. He was a spendthrift and a libertine, and would stop at little for the gratification of his selfish pleasures."

It was but last evening that these words were spoken by lips that would never speak again, and now this spendthrift and libertine was within touch of him, was standing with a smiling face by the dead body of the brother he would have wronged. There came to Basil's mind the image of Annette, the sweet confiding girl, who was to have been given into his care to guard and protect. All that was over now. Inexorable death had stopped the fulfilment of the fond father's wish. And Annette herself, how would it fare with her? She was ignorant as yet of the crushing, terrible blow which had so suddenly fallen upon her. Who would impart the cruel news to her? Who would comfort her in her bereavement? Even as these reflections crossed his mind he heard the young girl's voice singing outside as she tripped downstairs from her bedroom. He glided to the door, and softly turned the key. Just in time. Annette lingered at the door, tried the handle gently with the intention of kissing her father good-morning, and, finding the door fast, passed on gaily and continued her song.

"That is Annette?" questioned Gilbert Bidaud. Basil nodded. "A sweet voice, the voice of a child, whose nature is not yet moulded. We will mould it, my sister and I. We will instil into her virgin soul, principles. She will be grateful that we have come, being of her blood. I have a number of your English sayings at my fingers' ends. Blood is thicker than water. I represent the one, you the other. She is not a woman-yet. The mind of a child is like a slate! fancies, likings, are easily rubbed off. It is more serious when we grow older. The child forgets, the woman remembers. Do you catch my meaning?"

"I should be sorry to say I did," replied Basil.

"Ah, you would pay me a compliment, gilding me with virtues to which I do not aspire, to which I have never aspired. I am a plain man, I; honest to the backbone; with my heart on my sieve, transparent. It has not paid up to this time, but my hour has come. Why did you lock the door?"

"Does not that answer you?" pointing to the dead body of Annette's father.

"Ah, she does not know. You are considerate, you." A strange smile came to his lips as he added, "No one knows but you and I."

Basil stepped to the table. Perhaps the letter which Anthony Bidaud intended to write to his lawyer was there; it might contain something by which he could be guided at this dread crisis. But the sheet of paper which Anthony Bidaud had taken from the open desk displayed only the mark of a scrawl at the top. The pen, with the ink scarcely dried in it, lay upon the table. Evidently at the very moment that Anthony Bidaud had put pen to paper he was visited by the death-stroke. The pen had dropped from his fingers, and he had fallen back lifeless in his chair. There was, however,

an addressed envelope, and Basil noted the name and the direction, which were those of the lawyer whom Anthony Bidaud intended to summon to the plantation.

Gilbert Bidaud had followed his movements attentively, and now, when Basil looked up from the table, he repeated the last words he had uttered.

"No one knows but you and I."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Basil.

"What I mean," said Bidaud, touching his forehead with a finger, "I keep here for the present. It is sometimes dangerous to explain meanings too soon. Take heed. When I came to this colony-but a short time since-I was inwardly warned that I might meet with men from whom it would be necessary to protect myself. Therefore I purchased this" – producing a revolver-"and this" – producing a knife-"only to be used in self-defence, against you, against any man."

There was nothing menacing in his tone. He spoke, indeed, rather playfully than otherwise, and handled the revolver and knife as though they were toys instead of dangerous weapons. A wild thought crossed Basil's mind, and he acted upon it instantly.

"You say you are Gilbert Bidaud, brother of this unfortunate gentleman, but I have only your word for it."

"Ah, ah," said Gilbert Bidaud, with an air of great amusement, "you have only my word for it. But what kind of authority do you hold here that you should demand answers to questions upon this or any other subject?"

Basil could not answer this direct challenge; he inwardly recognised the weakness of his position; Anthony Bidaud dead, he was but a cipher on his estate.

"You are as a feather to a rock," said Gilbert Bidaud, with a gesture of contempt, "and I am but amusing myself with you. I stand quietly here for a reason I may presently explain. This house has lost a master." He glanced at his dead brother. "This house has gained a master." He touched his breast triumphantly. "It is but a change, a law of nature. My brother and I have not met for twenty years. He had a good motive for avoiding me; he fled from Switzerland with money of mine, and now, through death, he is compelled to make restitution."

"It is false," cried Basil, chivalrously defending the friend he had lost. "If you are Gilbert Bidaud it was you who attempted to rob him of his inheritance."

"Ah, ah. Did my estimable brother open his heart entirely to you?"

"Sufficiently to reveal your true character-even to the last words you spoke to him before he left Switzerland."

"Favour me with them. It may be excused if I do not faithfully recall them at this distance of time."

"'One day,' you said to him 'I will be even with you. Remember my words-dead or alive, I will be even with you.'"

"I remember. My words were prophetic. Fate was on my side, justice was on my side. They whispered to me, 'Wait.' I waited. And now-look there! So, so, my ingenious young friend; you know the whole story."

"It was related to me by your brother."

"By this lump of clay! It would be the act of a fool to deal tenderly by you; and I, as you may have already learned, am no fool. How came my brother by his death?"

"How came he by his death?" stammered Basil, puzzled by the question, and not seeing the drift of it.

"Ay, how came he by his death? I am not so ignorant as you suppose. I have made inquiries about you; there are men on this estate who bear you no good will. You are here, not as a guest, but an interloper. You and my brother were strangers a few short weeks ago, and you forced yourself upon him and lived here, a beggar, eating his food, drinking his wine, and paying for them neither in service nor money. That is a creditable part to be played by one who calls himself an English

gentleman. Summoned here by M. Anthony Bidaud-I have in my pocket the letter he wrote to our sister-I hasten on the wings of love, tarrying not on the road, but wearing myself near to death in order that I may satisfy his longing desire to embrace me. I meet you by accident on the river's bank, and I perceive that you regard yourself as master here. The river is yours, the land is yours, my brother is yours, his daughter Annette is yours-ah, you wince at that. All this you proclaim in your lordly way, and patronise me-me, whose rightful place you would have usurped. Before meeting you pass my sister, resting in her labour of love, and you offer her charity-you, a beggar, pass this insult upon a lady who, under my direction, will educate my dear brother's little daughter, and teach her-principles. You leave me by the river; I, guileless, unsuspecting, a child in innocence, calmly take my bath, and reflect with delight upon the joy of my brother when he takes me to his arms. Walking to this house, I meet a labourer, whose name is Rocke. He tells me something of you; he directs me to my brother's private room. I open the door; I see you standing by my brother's side. You are in a state of fear and agitation; your face is white, your limbs tremble. I hear you ask the question, 'Can this be death?' To whom or to what do you address this enquiry? To your conscience, for you believe yourself to be alone; you are unconscious that I am present 'Can this be death?' I convince myself, and you. *It is death.* I am deprived of the opportunity of saying to my brother that I forgive him for the wrong he did me in the past. It is most cruel, and you have robbed me of the opportunity; but, before I forget it, I will chance the efficacy of my forgiveness, though he be dead." With a mock humility shocking to witness, he extended his hands, and, looking upwards, said, "Brother, I forgive you. I return to my argument. What passed between you and my brother before I entered this room? Again I ask, how came he by his death! If it is not a natural end, who is the murderer?"

In hot indignation Basil started forward, but by a great effort of will restrained himself. He had been appalled by the careless mocking tone in which Gilbert Bidaud had spoken, by his false assumption of a grief he did not feel, by the evident enjoyment he derived from the glaring insincerity of his professions. For no two things could be more distinctly at variance than Gilbert Bidaud's words and the tone in which he uttered them. It exhibited a refinement of malice, and, what rendered it more revolting, of malice in which the intellectual quality was conspicuous.

"It is well," continued Gilbert Bidaud, "that you exercise self-control. I might call aloud for help; I might, in less time than it takes me to speak it, create in this room the evidences of a struggle, in the course of which I might fire my revolver, produced for self-defence; I might inform those who would break the door down-it is locked by you, remember-that you attempted to murder me, even as you- Ah, I perceive you understand. Yes, all this I might do, and you would be in the toils. Do not move until I have done with you, or you will be in deadly danger. In such parts of the world as this, exasperated men often proceed hastily to summary justice, and it might be executed upon you. I am teaching you lessons, as I shall teach my dear niece Annette, principles. You are young; I, alas, am old. I have nothing to learn; you have much. Tell me, you hanger-on in this house, you beggar of my brother's hospitality, what passed between you and him before I entered this room?"

"Nothing," replied Basil, confounded by the possibilities of a ruthless malice with which Gilbert Bidaud had threatened him. "I have already informed you that when I entered the room he was dead."

"What brought you here?"

"I came by appointment," said Basil. He no longer doubted that the man before him was Anthony Bidaud's brother; and he was surprised that he had not detected the resemblance upon his first meeting with Gilbert.

"What was the nature of the appointment?"

"He wished me to read a letter he intended to write to his lawyer."

"Ah, ah! He intended to write to his lawyer. May I ask this lawyer's name?"

"It is there upon an envelope."

"His place of residence?"

"Sydney, I believe."

"A long way off. The letter was to have been written this morning?"

"Yes. He at first intended to write it last night, but he put it off till to-day. The postponement was most unfortunate."

"To you?"

"To me."

"I should have urged him to carry out his intention last night, as he designed."

"Ah! *Après dommage chacun est sage*-except the dead. Why should you have urged him?"

"It would have been to my interests-and his, I fear."

"Leave his out of the question; he has done with the world. Yours is another matter. How could a simple letter to a lawyer have been in your interests? A letter is not a legal document." His preternatural sharpness as he made this remark was a revelation to an honest nature like Basil's. There seemed to be no limit to Gilbert Bidaud's cunning.

"At least it would have explained matters, and cleared me from your suspicions."

"Words are easily spoken, and weigh no more than air. To what effect was to have been this letter?"

"He desired to make his will."

Gilbert Bidaud drew a deep breath of satisfaction; he had elicited something tangible, something which had wonderfully strengthened his position. "Then there is no will, and the letter, which would have been valueless, was not written. Your expression of regret leads me to infer that the will was to have been in your favour."

"To a certain extent."

"False. He intended to repair the injustice from which I have so long suffered; his property would have been divided between me and the little Annette. It is too late for him to do that now; but I stand as natural guardian to my niece. I am truly the master here; the law will declare me so. Console yourself. You shall depart from this house a free man. You are not in danger. Bear witness to my magnanimity; my brother died a natural death. I will testify it, to save you."

"That will not do," said Basil. "From what cause he died shall be proved by proper evidence."

"It shall. I, a doctor, will supply it."

"I reject your proof; you are an interested party. It shall be independent evidence that shall establish the cause of death."

"So be it, young Daniel," said Gilbert Bidaud, briskly. "Meanwhile, I release you from suspicion; I, the gentleman you have insulted, believe you to be innocent. I go to seek my niece, to introduce myself to her, and to break to her the sad, the melancholy news. But before I go I give you notice of your discharge. For one week from this day you shall enjoy my hospitality, but for no longer, for not an hour longer. Accept it, beggar, or leave at once."

He paused at the door, opened it, removed the key to the outside, and with a contemptuous motion, ordered Basil to quit the room. The young man had no choice but to obey. Whatever might be Gilbert Bidaud's character, he stood in the house as legal representative of the dead. Annette was but a child, and her uncle was her lawful guardian. Grieved, sorrow-stricken, and humiliated, Basil left the room, and heard Gilbert Bidaud turn the key.

CHAPTER VIII

What should he do now, how should he act? To accept Gilbert Bidaud's hospitality was impossible. The old man was his bitter enemy, and would show him no consideration. Indeed, what consideration could he expect? There was no denying that he had no right to remain on the estate, but he felt he could not leave it for ever without seeing Annette once more, without speaking to her perhaps for the last time. Nor could he well take his final departure without making an attempt to clear himself from the foul suspicions which, in his absence, he felt convinced Gilbert Bidaud would set in circulation against him. He had led a spotless life, and the thought that a stain should now be cast upon it was unbearable. But what means could he take to clear himself from the breath of slander? He could think of no way at present, and he walked into the open with a heavy weight of melancholy at his heart.

He wandered into the woods and gathered some fruit; he had a vigorous appetite, and it would be a folly to starve himself. But the food of which he partook had never tasted less sweet than on this sad morning. His hunger appeased, he returned to the vicinity of the house.

He heard a cry of distress in the distance, and saw men and women hurrying to the spot from which the cry proceeded. The voice was Annette's.

Presently he saw the men and women coming towards the house. They were headed by Gilbert Bidaud and his sister, and one of the men-before the group came close to him he saw that it was Rocke was carrying in his arms the insensible form of Annette. Impelled by love and infinite compassion for the child, he started forward, but was haughtily waved off by Gilbert Bidaud.

"That man," said Gilbert to those in his rear, "has my permission to remain on this estate for one week. When that time has expired he will be a trespasser."

As he finished speaking Annette opened her eyes-they fell upon Basil.

"Basil, Basil!" she cried, extending her arms to him.

"Annette!"

Once more he attempted to go to her; once more Gilbert Bidaud waved him off, and stepped before him.

"If he touches her, if he follows her, arrest him. I give you authority."

Basil fell back. Annette's mournful eyes were fixed upon his face in dumb despair.

"Hurry in-hurry in," said Gilbert Bidaud in a harsh tone.

They passed into the house, and Basil was left alone. It was a favourite trick of his to put his thoughts into unspoken words; he had encouraged the habit, finding it led to clearness and generally, when he was in doubt, to some definite issue. In his disturbed mood he found this a suitable time for this mental indulgence. Something should be done, clearly; but what?

"Poor Annette!" he thought. "Poor child! What will now become of her? What will be her future? That brute-he is no less-who boasts so sardonically that he intends to teach her principles, will poison her mind against me. If I do not see her again she will grow to hate me. It is dreadful to think of. She has none but kind thoughts of me now; and though in a short time we may be parted for ever, and all chance of ever seeing her again will be lost, I should dearly like to feel that if she thinks of me in the future it will be with gentleness and affection. I have done nothing to forfeit her affection, except that I am unfortunate.

"My bright dreams are suddenly snapped. A few short hours have changed happiness to woe. Still-still I have committed no wrong. Of that I am sure, and it is a comfort-but poor Annette! If I could assure her that I am not to blame, I could bear it. She would believe me, and I could go on my way with a less sorrowful heart.

"That brute will try his hardest to prevent my seeing her. The blow that has fallen upon her may prostrate her. She may die-it is horrible, horrible! If that should happen, Gilbert Bidaud will come

into possession of everything. Is that the end to which he will work? He is capable of it, capable of any villainy. Can I do nothing to save her?

"I am powerless. I have no claim upon her; I have no right to be here. But I will not go away without seeing, without speaking to her. If he takes her from this place, which is likely enough, I will follow them. She must not, she must not be left to the tender mercies of that jackal.

"All very fine to talk, Basil. You will follow them? Why, man, you must live. It is a necessity. And to live you must work. How much money have you in your pocket to commence the fight of existence with? – to say nothing of the grand things you are going to do for sweet Annette.

"She has got hold of my heart-strings. I shall never, never forget her. Certain words spoken by my dear friend, Anthony Bidaud, last night, come to my mind. Let me recall them, exactly as he spoke them.

"'We are drawn to each other,' he said. And before that: 'By accident you enter into our lives. I use the term accident, but I believe it to be a providence.' How if it should be so? The shadow of death was hanging over him, and at such times some men have been gifted with prophetic insight. If it were so with Anthony Bidaud, this is not the end. The thought I have expressed, the very word 'insight' I have used, were his. 'I have observed you closely,' he said, 'and am satisfied to deliver into your hands a sacred charge, the charge of a young girl's future. At such moments as these there comes to some men a subtle, unfathomable insight. It comes to me. I firmly believe that there is a link between you and my child, which, if you do not recognise it now, you will be bound to recognise in the future. It may be broken in the present, but the threads will be joined as surely as we stand here side by side.'"

"With all my heart I hope so, but it is the wildest, the most unreasonable of hopes.

"Can nothing, nothing be done?"

"He said he had made no will; but he may have left papers expressing his wishes. How to get a sight of them? If I had sufficient means to take me to Sydney I would hasten there, to Anthony Bidaud's lawyer, and lay the case before him. But my purse is empty. I have, however, something about me of value. My gold watch and chain, given to me by my dear father. That is worth a certain sum, but it would not carry me to Sydney. It would carry me, however, to Gum Flat, where perhaps I can find a lawyer who will advise her. In the saddle I could reach there to-night, and be back to-morrow. Where can I obtain a horse? I dare not take one from the plantation. Gilbert Bidaud would accuse me of theft, and he would be within his right. Ah! Old Corrie!"

Here he stopped. His unspoken thoughts had led him to a definite issue.

Gum Flat was the name of the nearest township, if township it could be called. In the Australian colonies they delight in singular names for places. Old Corrie was a man who, by permission of Anthony Bidaud, occupied a hut which he had built with his own hands on the plantation, some two miles from the spot upon which Basil at that moment stood. He was not employed on the estate, but did odd jobs in wood splitting and the felling of trees for the master of the plantation. The man had "taken" to Basil, as the saying is, and in his odd way had shown a liking for the young man, who always had a pleasant word for any agreeable person he chanced to fall across.

Old Corrie was not an old man, his age being about forty, but he was dubbed Old Corrie because he was angular, because he was crooked, because he had a mouth all awry, because he chose to keep himself from his fellows. He owned a horse, and it occurred to Basil that he might lend it to him for the journey to Gum Flat, which was distant some forty-five miles. To Old Corrie's hut, therefore, Basil betook himself, stepping out with a will.

In less than half-an-hour he reached the old fellow's dwelling. Old Corrie was not at home, but Basil heard the sound of his axe in the woods. It was not very near, but men's ears get trained to fine sounds in the bush. Guided by the thud of the axe Basil in a short time found himself face to face with the woodman.

Old Corrie went on with his work, merely glancing up and giving Basil a friendly nod. From another living creature Basil received a more boisterous greeting, a laughing jackass which Old

Corrie had tamed bursting into an outrageous fit of laughter without the least apparent cause. This bird, which is sometimes called the bushman's clock, was an uncouth-looking object, as big as a crow, of a rich chestnut-brown colour with light-blue wings; its beak was long and pointed, and its mouth inordinately large. These characteristics, in alliance with a formidable crest, invested it with a ferocious air; but this particular specimen was exceedingly gentle despite the extravagant sounds it emitted, which might have been excruciatingly prolonged had not its sharp eye caught sight of a carpet snake wriggling through the underwood. Down darted the laughing jackass, and commenced a battle with the snake which terminated in the bird throwing the dead body of the reptile into the air, with a series of triumphant chuckles; after which it sat silent on a branch, contemplating the dead snake with an air partly comical, partly profound, and waiting in grim patience for a movement on the part of its victim which would furnish an excuse for a renewal of hostilities.

Basil had time to note all this, for Old Corrie did not speak, and the young man was debating how to commence.

"Well, Master Basil," said Old Corrie, presently, throwing down his axe and taking out his pipe, a common short clay which he would not have exchanged for thrice its weight in gold, "what brings you this way? Any message from Mr. Bidaud?"

"No, Corrie," replied Basil sadly, "you will receive no more messages from him."

"I was thinking myself," said Corrie, glancing at Basil; and not immediately recognising the gravity of the reply, "that there mightn't be any more."

"What made you think that?" asked Basil, in doubt whether the man knew of Anthony Bidaud's death.

"I'm down with the fever, Master Basil."

"I am sorry to hear that, Corrie," said Basil in surprise, for Old Corrie was the picture of health and strength. "Can I do anything for you?"

"No, Master Basil," said Old Corrie, with a smile and a kindly look at Basil. "The fever I'm down with ain't the kind of fever that's in your mind. It's the gold fever I'm down with."

"Oh," said Basil, "I understand."

"The wonder is that I've never been down with it before. If I don't strike a rich claim or find a big nugget or two, I can always come back to this."

"Have you heard any news, then?"

"Well, two men camped out here last night, and we had a talk. I gave 'em some tea, and their tongues got loosened a bit. There's a new goldfield discovered somewhere in the north, and they're after it. A regular Tom Tiddler's ground, Mr. Basil, only it's all gold and no silver. Twenty ounces to the tub."

"And you're off?"

"When I've finished this job for Mr. Bidaud."

"How long will that take you?"

"About three weeks."

"Is it a contract job?"

"Yes."

"Signed on paper?"

"No, we never had need of that. Mr. Bidaud's word is as good as his bond; so's mine."

"I would not go on with it, Corrie, if I were you, till I made sure."

"Why?"

"Because the gentleman who made the contract with you by word of mouth is dead."

"Dead!"

"Died this morning, suddenly, I grieve to say."

Old Corrie took his pipe from his mouth, and sent a look of reproach in the direction of the laughing jackass, from whose throat proceeded a faint gurgle of laughter. At this look the quaint bird-

as odd a specimen of the feathered tribes as Old Corrie was of the human race—checked-its mirth, and cocking its head knowingly on one side, inquired with its speaking eye what was the matter.

"That's bad news, Master Basil."

"The worst of news, Corrie."

"Died suddenly?"

"Quite suddenly. It is a great shock."

"What's to become of the little lady?" asked Old Corrie, in a sympathising tone. The inquiry was addressed as much to himself as to Basil.

"That is one of the things that are troubling me, Corrie. You are a favourite of hers."

"I've seen her grow up, and remember her mother well. I've cause. Once when I was down with the colonial fever—almost as bad as the gold fever, Master Basil—Mrs. Bidaud as good as nursed me through it, coming or sending every day for two months and more, till I got strong. When I was well I went up to the house to thank her. The little lady was just toddling about, and made friends with me. I shall never forget Mrs. Bidaud; I went to her funeral. You stopped at my hut before you came here, I expect."

"Yes; I thought you might be there."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Only the sound of your axe in the woods."

"I mean inside the hut. There's a magpie there that's got the sense of a human being and a voice like a flute. I only got it a fortnight ago, and I've tamed it already, surprising. Back as white as snow, Master Basil, and breast and wings shining like black satin. A handsome bird, and quite young. It says 'Little lady; Little lady!' and 'Miss Annette!' in a way that'll astonish you. I'm doing it for the little lady herself, and I'm glad I began it because I'm going away."

"It will please her greatly, Corrie, if she is allowed to accept it."

"What's to prevent her? Poor little lady! First her mother, then her father. I thought there was trouble in your face when I saw it. Would you mind explaining, Master Basil, about this wood-splitting contract of mine? Why shouldn't I finish it till I made sure."

Then Basil told of the arrival of the dead man's brother and sister, and was not delicate in expressing his opinion of Gilbert Bidaud.

"You're not the sort of man," said Old Corrie thoughtfully, "to speak, ill behind another's back without good reason. Little lady's uncle must be a bad lot. A man and a woman, you say, foreign looking. They must be the pair that passed my hut early this morning when I was getting up. They didn't stop; she wanted to, I think, but he wouldn't let her. 'Curse you!' I heard him say, 'What are you lagging for? Put life into your miserable limbs; we haven't got far to go.' It seemed to me as if he laid hands on her to drag her along. I came out of the hut, and saw them ahead, the woman walking as if she was dead beat, and the man lugging her on. They never turned to look behind, and I watched till they were out of sight. I'm sorry for the little lady. I'll go up to the house to-day, and judge for myself."

"You may hear something against me, Corrie. Don't believe it."

"I won't, without reason. I make up my mind slow, Master Basil. Perhaps you've got something more to tell me. It won't be thrown away."

Wishing to stand well with Old Corrie, Basil became more communicative, and put the woodman in possession, of the particulars of what had passed between himself and Anthony Bidaud on the previous evening, and also of his interviews with Anthony's brother.

"It looks black," said Old Corrie. "It's a pity you didn't leave him to the alligator. And now, Master Basil, you've something else in your mind. Out with it."

"I came to ask you to do me a great service."

"Give it mouth."

"It may be that poor Annette's father has left some papers with respect to her future which the law might declare valid. If that is so, and her uncle finds them, he will destroy them; it may be to his

interest to do so, and in that case he will allow no considerations of right and wrong to stand in his way. The presence of a lawyer may prevent this. Then there is the slanderous talk he is sure to set going against me; I want to clear myself of it. The precise cause of Anthony Bidaud's death should be ascertained and declared by a competent and disinterested person, and I thought of going to Gum Flat and enlisting the services of a lawyer and a doctor, whom I would bring back with me."

"It would be a proper thing to do," said Corrie.

"But I am in a difficulty. I could walk the distance, but I could not get there till to-morrow. Coming and going, four days at least would be wasted, and in that time Annette's uncle could work his own ends without interruption. Now, if I had a horse I could get there this evening, and back to-morrow."

"You want me to lend you my mare?"

"That is what I came to ask you."

"You can have her; she's a willing creature, and 'll go till she drops."

"It is kind of you, Corrie."

"Not at all. I do it a little bit for your sake, but a good deal more for the sake of the little lady."

"You run a risk, Corrie. My story may not be true; I may never come back."

"I'll take security, then."

"I have no money. The only thing I possess of value is this watch and chain."

"I won't take that; you may need it to pay the lawyer and the doctor with. Besides that isn't the security I mean. I'll take your word."

"You're a real good fellow, Corrie. Some day I may be able to repay you."

"If I had any idea of looking out for that day I shouldn't do what I'm doing. Look here, Master Basil. I know a gentleman when I see one; and you're a gentleman. I believe every word you've told me. This fellow that's turned up, the little lady's uncle, is a scoundrel, or he wouldn't have spoken the words I heard to a woman nearly dead with fatigue-his own sister, too. Come along; let's saddle the mare."

Before that was done, however, Old Corrie insisted that Basil should eat a hearty meal and see the magpie he was training for Annette. Then Basil mounted the willing mare, and with a grip of the hand and a hearty "Good luck, mate," from Old Corrie, the young man started for Gum Flat.

CHAPTER IX

It was three months since Basil had passed through the conglomeration of canvas tents and stores which rejoiced in a title which certainly could not be called euphonious, and then, although those were its most prosperous days, it struck him as being a wretched hole. Rumours of rich finds of gold had originally attracted a population to Gum Flat township, but the glowing anticipations of the gold diggers who flocked to the false El Dorado were doomed to disappointment. It was not a gold-diggers' but a storekeepers' rush, and the result was a foregone conclusion; after a time the miners who had flocked thither began to desert the place. Not, however, before they gave it a fair trial. They marked out claims, they prospected the hills and gullies, they turned the waters of a large creek, they sank shafts in many a likely-looking spot, they followed spurs of stones on the ranges in the hope that they would lead them to a rich quartz reef, but their labours were unrewarded. A couple of specks to the dish and the faintest traces of gold in the quartz were not sufficient to pay for powder and tobacco, and the men gradually began to leave the uninviting locality. A few remained, but not to dig for gold; these were chiefly loafers, and lived on each other, playing billiards during the day on the one billiard table that had been left behind, and cards during the nights, for fabulous and visionary sums of money which, really lost and won, would have transformed beggars into millionaires and millionaires into beggars. The poorer they grew the larger the stakes they played for, and their delusions created for their delectation the most delicious paroxysms of infinite joy and overwhelming despair. These they enjoyed to the full, reckoning up their losses and gains with wild eyes and radiant countenances. One beggarly loafer, who for the last five years had not had five pounds to bless himself with, went to the creek one dark night after a visionary loss of a hundred thousand pounds or so, and insisted upon drowning himself. It required a vast amount of insistence on his part, for the creek just then was not more than three feet deep. Anyway, he was found dead the next morning, with a letter in his pocket to the effect that he was financially ruined and could not survive the disgrace; whereupon his principal creditor, who, in the matter of finances, was no better off than the drowned man, perambulated High Street in a state of fury, fiercely denouncing his debtor who had not the courage to live and pay his debts of honour.

Some means of subsistence, however inadequate, Gum Flat must have had; these were found in the persons of a half-a-dozen drivers of bullock drays, who every two weeks brought their earnings there and spent them royally. This process lasted on each occasion exactly three days, during which time the population, numbering in all not more than thirty souls, were in clover. When the bullock drivers returned to their avocations the loafers declared that the colonies were going to the dogs, and resumed the routine of their dismal days, gambling, drinking, quarrelling, until the six solvent men returned again to gladden their hearts.

Even this miserable state of affairs came to an end after a time, and reached a more deplorable stage. The bullock drivers discovered more agreeable quarters, and in their turn deserted the township. Driven by sheer necessity the loafers, one by one, followed their example, and slunk from the place, until only four remained. Such was the condition of Gum Flat as Basil rode towards the township on a day eventful enough in the story of his life, but scarcely less eventful than the night which followed it was destined to be. Had he been aware of this he would have thought twice before he made up his mind to proceed thither in search of lawyer and doctor; but such is the irony of circumstances that, had he not set forth on his present journey, the entire course of his future life would have drifted into channels which would, almost to a certainty, have separated him from Annette for ever. Accident or fate, which you will; but the course of many lives is thus determined.

He rode all day through the tracks he remembered, and concerning which he had been refreshed by Old Corrie, who was as ignorant as himself of the deplorable change that had taken place. The road for a few miles lay along great plains of rich black soil, dotted here and there with masses of

blue and barley grass, among which might be found the native leek and wild cucumber; then followed a tract of country somewhat lightly timbered but heavily grassed, where he came across a nasty bit of "devil devil" land, fortunately of not great extent, for he had to ride with a loose rein and leave it to his horse to pick the safest way. On his left were large lagoons in which a wondrous variety of wild fowl abounded; on his right was a belt of impenetrable scrub; but the track was well defined, and after riding twenty miles he entered a thickly wooded forest, for the shade of which he was grateful, the sun now being high in the heavens. Emerging from this forest he halted near a vast sheet of water, in which tall reeds grew, and where he found the wild banana. Off this fruit and some cold meat and bread which Old Corrie had forced upon him, he made a sufficient meal, and then resumed his journey. In the afternoon the road lay through a more even country, and he reckoned upon reaching Gum Flat before sundown. But he reckoned without his host, for the distance was longer than he calculated, and at sunset he was still, according to the information given to him by the driver of a bullock dray, eight or ten miles from the township. This man was the only human being he had met in his lonely ride. Many a time in the course of the day had he fallen into contemplation of the pregnant events of the last twenty-four hours, thinking, "This time yesterday I was walking with Annette in the woods, gathering wildflowers for her mother's grave. She slipped, and I caught her in my arms." And again: "This time yesterday Anthony Bidaud, Annette, and I, were sitting in the verandah, watching the sunset; and a moment afterwards white stars were glittering in the clouds of faded gold. How peaceful, how happy we were! And now?" he shuddered as he thought of the dead form of Anthony Bidaud lying in his room and of the sense of desolation which must have fallen upon Annette. He strove to direct his thoughts into more cheerful grooves, but he was not successful.

The gorgeous colours in the heavens melted away; the sun dipped beneath the horizon; it was night. Fortunately it was light, and he could see the road he was riding over. The willing animal he bestrode plodded on, more slowly now, and Basil did not attempt to quicken the pace. It was ten o'clock when he reached the township of Gum Flat.

He recognised it by the outlines of the tents. He had expected to see lights in the dwellings, arguing that Gum Flat must have increased in importance since his last visit, but all was dark on the outskirts. He was surprised at the darkness, but grateful that his journey was over. He rode along the High Street, and with still deeper surprise observed that on some of the stores the canvas lay loose, and that the calico over the frame was torn and rent. "Can I have mistaken the road?" he thought. In the middle of the High Street he paused. The door of a store was thrown suddenly open, and three men, whose movements had been inspired by the sound of the horse's hoofs, emerged therefrom, and stood looking up at Basil. Each had cards in his hand, denoting that when they were disturbed they had been gambling. The picture at that moment was Rembrandtesque. The street was in darkness; not a light was visible. One of the men standing at the door held above his head a lighted candle stuck in a whiskey bottle, and this dim light enabled the three-gamblers and Basil not exactly to see each other but to define outlines. Through the open door Basil saw a table upon which was another candle, and sitting at which was another man, also with cards in his hand. This man, leaning forward, was striving to pierce the gloom in which his companions and Basil stood. He rose and joined them, and going close to Basil, laid his hand upon the horse's neck. Thus, Basil and he confronted each other. And at that moment was commenced the weaving of a strand which was to connect the lives of these two men, for weal or woe.

CHAPTER X

Each man of this small group represented in his own person the epitome of a drama more or less stirring and eventful. With three of these we have little to do, and no good purpose will be served by recounting their antecedents. The history of the fourth—he who stood with his hand on the neck of Old Corrie's horse, looking up at Basil—will presently be unfolded.

He was a full-bearded man, the light brown hair so effectually concealing his features that only his cheekbones and forehead were visible. To a physiologist, therefore, the index was imperfect. He was a young man, of about the same age as Basil, and his name was Newman Chaytor. This was his true name; it will be as well to say as much, for there was much that was false about him.

The man who held the candle was known as Jim the Hatter; Jim belonged properly to him by right, the Hatter was patronymic he had earned by working on various goldfields alone, without a mate. Why they call men on the gold-diggings thus inclined, Hatters, is one of the mysteries, but it is a fact. Of the other two it will be sufficient to refer to them as Nonentity Number One and Nonentity Number Two. Jim the Hatter was a large-boned, loose-limbed man, of great strength. Upon his first arrival in Australia his time, to put it gently, was not his own; it belonged to his country. He was now free, but his morals had not been improved by the lesson his country had administered to him.

It will thus be seen that Basil had unfortunately fallen among thieves.

For a few moments the man on horseback and the men on foot preserved silence, and opportunity was afforded for a striking picture. Jim the Hatter was the first to speak.

"Well, mate?" he said.

"Is this the township of Gum Flat?" inquired Basil.

"It is. If you're looking for it, you're dead on the gutter."

"I thought I must have mistaken my way," said Basil. "What has come over the place?"

Newman Chaytor answered him. "It has gone," he said, "to the dogs."

"Like yourselves," thought Basil, gazing at the men, but deeming it prudent not to express himself aloud upon a point so personal. He spoke, however. "It is the place I was making for. I suppose I can put up here for the night?"

"There's nothing to prevent you. Gum Flat township just now is Liberty Hall."

"Stop a bit, stop a bit," said Nonentity Number One, considering it necessary to his dignity that he should take part in the conference. "Is the gentleman prepared to pay for accommodation?"

"That's a proper question," said Nonentity Number Two, thus asserting himself.

"Of course he is," said Jim the Hatter, answering for Basil, who, with an empty purse, was saved from awkwardness.

A diversion occurred here. Newman Chaytor snatched the candle from Jim the Hatter, in order that he might obtain a clearer view of Basil.

"Manners, mate," said Jim the Hatter.

"Manners be hanged!" retorted Newman Chaytor, holding the candle high. "They're out of stock."

This was evident. To smooth matters Basil volunteered an explanation. "I have come hereupon business, but I am afraid I have lost my time."

"Perhaps not," said Jim the Hatter. "We're all business men here; ready at a moment's notice to turn a honest penny. That's true, ain't it, mate?"

He addressed Newman Chaytor, but that worthy did not reply. Having obtained a clearer view of Basil's face, he seemed to be suddenly struck dumb, and stared at it as though he were fascinated.

"Still," continued Jim the Hatter, "it's as well to be particular in these times. I'm very choice in the company I keep, and I don't as a rule do business with strangers, unless," he added, with a

grin which found its reflection on the lips of Nonentities Numbers One and Two, "they pay their footing first."

"If you wish to know my name," said Basil, "it is Basil Whittingham."

"What!" cried Newman Chaytor, finding his tongue; but the exclamation of undoubted astonishment appeared to be forced from him instead of being voluntarily uttered.

"Basil Whittingham," repeated Basil. "Being here, I must stop for the night. Is there a stable near?"

"There's one at the back," said Newman Chaytor, with sudden alacrity, "or rather there was one. I'll show you."

"Thank you," said Basil, and followed his guide to the rear of the shanty.

The three men looked after them with no good will.

"He's a swell," said Nonentity Number One.

"He's got a watch and chain," said Nonentity Number Two.

"And a horse," said Jim the Hatter.

Then they re-entered the store, and settled down to their game of cards.

"Stop here a moment," said Newman Chaytor to Basil. "I'll get a light."

Returning with a candle stuck in a bottle, the fashionable form of candlestick in Gum Flat, he waved it about, sometimes so close to Basil that it shone upon his features.

"You stare at me," said Basil, "as if you knew me."

"Never saw you before to my knowledge." (A falsehood, but that is a detail.) "You're not a colonial."

"I am an Englishman, like yourself, I judge."

"Yes, I am English."

"You have the advantage of me—you know my name. May I ask yours?"

"Certainly," said Chaytor, but he spoke, nevertheless, with a certain hesitation, as if something of importance hung upon it. "My name is Newman, with Chaytor tacked to it." Then, anxiously, "Have you heard it before?"

"Never. This is a tumble-down place. It is a courtesy to call it a stable."

"It will serve, in place of a better."

"Oh, yes, it is better than nothing."

"Everything is tumble-down in Gum Flat. I am an Englishman town-bred. And you?"

"My people hail from Devonshire."

"I am not dreaming, then," said Chaytor, speaking for the second time involuntarily.

"Dreaming!" exclaimed Basil.

"I was thinking of another matter," said Chaytor, with readiness. "Speaking my thoughts aloud is one of my bad tricks."

"One of mine, too," said Basil smiling.

"That is not the only thing in which we're alike."

"No."

"We are about the same age, about the same build, and we are both gentlemen. Your horse is blown; you have ridden a long distance."

"From Bidaud's plantation."

"I have heard of it. And you come upon business? I may be able to assist you."

"I shall be glad of assistance," said Basil, recognising in his companion an obvious superiority to the men they had left. "When I passed through Gum Flat a few months ago I thought it a township likely to thrive, and now I find it pretty well deserted."

"It has gone to the dogs, as I told you. There's nothing but grass for your horse to nibble at. So you're from Devonshire. Do your people live there still?"

He mixed up the subjects of his remarks in the oddest manner, and cast furtive glances at Basil with a certain mental preoccupation which would have forced itself upon Basil's attention had he not been so occupied with his own special cares.

"There are none left," said Basil. "I am the only one remaining."

"The only one?"

"Well, I have an old uncle, but we are not exactly on amicable terms."

"You are better off than I am. I have no family left." He sighed pathetically. "I fancy I can lay my hands on a bundle of sweet hay."

"I should feel grateful."

"Don't leave the stable till I come back; I shan't be gone long."

He was absent ten minutes or so and though he went straight about his errand, he was thinking of something very different. "It is the most wonderful thing in the world," ran his thoughts-"that I should meet him here again, in this hole, not changed in the slightest! It can't be accident; it was predestined, and I should be a self-confessed idiot if I did not take advantage of it. But how is it to be worked? His uncle is still alive. What did he say? 'We are not exactly on amicable terms.' That is because he is proud. I am not. I should be a better nephew to the old fellow than this upstart. He is very old, in his second childhood most likely. This is the turning-point of my life, and I will not throw away the chance. Just as I was at the bottom of the ladder, too. I'll climb to the top-I will, I will!" He raised his hand to the skies, as though registering an oath.

"There," he said, throwing down a bundle of hay which the horse immediately began to munch, "with a bucket of water your mare will do very well. I'll fetch it."

"You are very kind," said Basil, warming to Newman Chaytor.

"Not at all. *Noblesse oblige*." This was said with a grand air.

Basil held out his hand, and Chaytor pressed it effusively. Then, at Chaytor's request, Basil spoke of the errand upon which he was engaged, and being plied skilfully with questions, put his companion in possession of a great deal he wished to know, not only in relation to the affairs of Bidaud's plantation, but his own personal history as well.

"It is curious," said Chaytor, "that we two should have met at such a time and in such a place. Who knows what may come of it? I am, strange to say, a bit of a doctor and a bit of a lawyer, and if you will accept my services I shall be glad to accompany you back to Bidaud's plantation."

"But why?" asked Basil, touched by the apparently unselfish offer. "I have no claim upon you."

"Except the claim that one gentleman has upon another-which should count for something. It always has with me."

"Upon my word I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't try. It is myself I am rendering a service to, not you. This deserted hole, and the association of those men" – jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the tent-"sicken me. Does there not come to some men a crisis in their lives which compels them to turn over a new leaf, as the saying is, to cut themselves away entirely from the past and commence life anew?"

"Yes," said Basil, struck by the application of this figure of speech to his own circumstances, "it has come to me."

"And to me. I intended to leave Gum Flat to-morrow, and I did not know in which direction. I felt like Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, without a friend, without a kindred soul to talk to, to associate with. If you will allow me to look upon you as a friend you will put me under a deep obligation. Should the brother of the poor gentleman who died so suddenly this morning-the father of that sweet young lady of whom you speak so tenderly-succeed in having things all his own way, you will be cast adrift, as I am. It is best to look things straight in the face, is it not? – even unpleasant things."

"It is the most sensible course," said Basil.

"Exactly. The most sensible course-and the most manly. Why should not you and I throw in our fortunes together? I am sure we should suit each other."

"I can but thank you," said Basil. "It is worth thinking over."

"All right; there is plenty of time before us. Let us go into the store now. A word of warning first. The men inside are not to be trusted. I was thrown into their company against my will, and I felt that the association was degrading to me. We can't pick and choose in this part of the world."

"Indeed we cannot. I will not forget your warning. To speak honestly, I am not in the mood or condition for society. I have had a hard day, and am dead beat."

"You would like to turn in," said Chaytor. "I can give you a shakedown, and for supper what remains of a tin of biscuits and a tin of sardines. There, don't say a word. The luck's on my side. Come along."

The Nonentities and Jim the Hatter were in the midst of a wrangle when they entered, and scarcely noticed them. This left Chaytor free to attend to Basil. He placed before him the biscuits and sardines, and produced a flask of brandy. Basil was grateful for the refreshment; he was thoroughly exhausted, and it renewed his strength and revived his drooping spirits. Then he filled his pipe, and conversed in low tones with his new friend, while the gamblers continued their game.

"If I stop up much longer," said Basil, when he had had his smoke, "I shall drop off my seat."

Chaytor rose and preceded him to the further end of the store. The building, if such a designation may be allowed to an erection composed of only wood and canvas, had been the most pretentious and imposing in the palmy days of the township, and although now it was all tattered and torn, like the man in the nursery rhyme, it could still boast of half a dozen private compartments in which sleepers could find repose and solitude. The walls of course were of calico, and for complete privacy darkness was necessary.

Chaytor and the three gamblers who were bending over their cards in the dim light of the larger space without, each occupied one of these sleeping compartments. Two remained vacant, and into one of these Chaytor led Basil.

There was a stretcher in the room, a piece of strong canvas nailed upon four pieces of batten driven into the ground. The canvas was bare; there were no bedclothes.

"I have two blankets," said Chaytor, "I can spare you one."

Basil was too tired to protest. Dressed as he was he threw himself upon the stretcher, drew the blanket over him, and bidding his hospitable friend good-night, and thanking him again, was fast asleep almost as the words passed his lips.

Newman Chaytor stood for a moment or two gazing upon the sleeping man. "I can't be dreaming," he thought; "he is here before me, and I am wide awake. I drink to the future." He held no glass, but he went through the pantomime of drinking out of one.

Taking the lighted candle with him he joined his mates, and left Basil sleeping calmly in darkness. They were no longer playing cards, but with heads close together were debating in whispers. Upon Chaytor's entrance they shifted their positions and ceased talking.

"Have you put your gentleman to bed?" asked Jim the Hatter, in a sneering tone in which a sinister ring might have been detected.

"Much obliged to you for the inquiry," replied Chaytor, prepared to fence; "he is sound asleep."

"Interesting child! A case of love at first sight, mates."

Nonentities Numbers One and Two nodded, with dark looks at Chaytor, who smiled genially at them and commenced to smoke.

"Or," said Jim the Hatter, "perhaps an old acquaintance."

"Take your choice," observed Chaytor, who, in finesse and coolness, was a match for the three.

"Doesn't it strike you, Newman, that it's taking a liberty with us to feed and bolster him up, and stand drinks as well, without asking whether we was agreeable?"

"Not at all. The sardines were mine, the biscuits were mine, the grog was mine. If you want to quarrel, say so."

"I'm for peace and quietness," said Jim the Hatter, threateningly. "I was only expressing my opinion."

"And I mine. Look here, mates, I don't want to behave shabbily, so I'll tell you what is in my mind."

"Ah, do," said Jim the Hatter, with a secret sign to the Nonentities which Chaytor did not see; "then we shall know where we are."

"I'll tell you where we are, literally, mates. We're in a heaven-forsaken township, running fast to bone, which leads to skeleton. Now I'm not prepared for that positive eventuality just yet. This world is good enough for me at present, and I mean to do my best to enjoy it."

"Can't you enjoy it in our company?" asked Jim the Hatter.

"I think not," said Chaytor, with cool insolence. "The best of friends must part."

"Oh, that's your little game, is it?"

"That is my little game. I am growing grey. If I don't look out I shall be white before I am thirty. Really I think it must be the effect of the company I have kept."

"We're not good enough for you, I suppose?"

"If you ask for my deliberate opinion I answer, most distinctly not. No, mates, not by a long way good enough."

"Don't be stuck up, mate. Better men than you have had to eat humble pie."

"Any sort of pie," said Chaytor, philosophically, "is better than no pie at all. Take my advice. Bid good-bye to Gum Flat, gigantic fraud that it is, and go in search of big nuggets. That is what I am going to do."

"With your gentleman friend?"

"With my gentleman friend. We may as well part civilly, but if you choose the other thing I am agreeable." The three men rose with the intention of retiring. They did not respond to his invitation to part friends. "Well, good-night, and good luck to you." They nodded surlily and entered their sleeping apartments, after exchanging a few words quietly between themselves.

Newman Chaytor helped himself to brandy from his flask then filled his pipe, and began to smoke.

That he had something serious to think of was evident, and that he was puzzled what use to make of it was quite as clear. An enterprise was before him, and he was disposed to pledge himself to it; but he was in the dark as to what end it would lead him. In the dark, also, how it could be so conducted as to result in profit to himself. He was in desperately low water, and had lost confidence in himself. His ship was drifting anchorless on a waste of waters; suddenly an anchor had presented itself, which, while it would afford him peace and safety for a time, might show him a way to a golden harbour. An ugly smile wreathed his lips, the sinister aspect of which was hidden by his abundant hair: but it was there, and remained for many musing moments. He took from his pocket a common memorandum book, and on a few blank pages he wrote the names, Newman Chaytor and Basil Whittingham, several times and in several different styles of handwriting. Then he wrote upon one, in the form of a check, "Pay to Newman Chaytor, Esq., the sum of forty thousand pounds. Basil Whittingham." He contemplated this valueless draft for a long time before destroying it at the candle's light, as he destroyed the other sheets of paper upon which he had written the signatures.

"All the pleasures of existence," he mused, "all the light, everything in the world worth having, are on the other side of the water. Was I born to grind out my days in a prison like this? No, and I will not. Here is the chance of escape" – he turned his head to the room in which Basil was sleeping – "with possibilities which may give me all I desire. It would be flying in the face of Providence to neglect it. The first law of nature is Self. I should be a born fool not to obey the first law of nature."

In these reflections he passed an hour, when he determined to go to bed.

All was still. He stepped on tip toe to each of the four compartments occupied by Basil, Jim the Hatter, and the Nonentities, and listened at the doors to assure himself that he was the only wakeful person in the store. Deeming himself safe he entered his own room, and taking a small round mirror in a zinc frame from the top of a packing case which served as washstand and dressing-table, gazed at his face with strange intentness. Putting the hand mirror down he cast wary looks around. Yes, he was alone; there were no witnesses. Then he did a curious thing. He took off his beard and whiskers.

In the room on his right lay Basil asleep; in the room on his left was Jim the Hatter, whom he supposed to be. But in this he reckoned without his host, as many another sharp rogue has done in his time. Jim the Hatter, despite his deep breathing, which had deceived Newman Chaytor, was wide awake. The moment Chaytor entered his room Jim the Hatter had slipped noiselessly from his stretcher, and his face was now glued to the wall of calico through which the light of Chaytor's candle was shining. There was a small slit in the calico, which enabled Jim the Hatter to see what was passing in Chaytor's room. Chaytor's back, however, was towards the wall through which he was peeping. The watcher was puzzled; he could not exactly discover what it was Chaytor had done.

Upon Chaytor's face, now beardless and whiskerless, there was a natural growth of hair in the shape of a moustache. This moustache was the precise colour of that which Basil grew and cherished. It was not so long, but a few week's growth would make the resemblance perfect, if such was Chaytor's wish. In other respects the resemblance between him and Basil was remarkable. Height, figure, complexion-even the colour of the eyes-all tallied.

In his anxiety to discover exactly what was going on, Jim the Hatter made a slight movement, which was heard by Chaytor. He turned suddenly, and the astonished watcher beheld the counterpart of Basil.

"By Jove!" he said inly; "twins!"

Then, warned by Chaytor's attitude that he was in danger of himself being discovered, he slipped between his blankets as noiselessly as he had slipped out of them. Waiting only to resume his disguise of beard and whiskers, Chaytor, candle in hand, went quietly and swiftly into the adjoining room and looked down upon the recumbent form of Jim the Hatter. Undoubtedly asleep, and sleeping like a top. Chaytor passed the candle across the man's face, who never so much as winked. Assured that there was no cause for alarm, Chaytor stepped back to his own recess, put out the light, and went to bed.

CHAPTER XI

Leaving this schemer to his ill-earned repose, we strip the veil from his past and lay it bare.

Nature plays tricks, but seldom played a stranger than that of casting Newman Chaytor physically in the same mould as Basil. Born in different counties, with no tie of kinship between their families, their likeness to each other was so marvellous that any man seeing them for the first time side by side, without some such disguise as Chaytor wore on Gum Flat, and the second time apart, would have been puzzled to know which was which. But not less strange than this physical likeness was the contrast between their moral natures. One was the soul of guilelessness and honour, the other the soul of cunning and baseness. One walked the straight paths of life, the other chose the crooked.

Chaytor was born in London, and his parents occupied a respectable position. They gave him a good education, and did all they could to furnish him worthily for the battle of life. The affection they displayed was ill-requited. In his mother's eyes he was perfection, but his father's mind was often disturbed when he thought of the lad's future. Perhaps in his own nature there was a moral twist which caused him to doubt; perhaps his own youth was distinguished by the vices he detected in his son. However that may be, he took no blame to himself, preferring rather to skim the surface than to seek discomfort in psychological depths.

The parents discussed their son's future.

"We will make a doctor of him," said the father.

"He will be a great physician," said the mother.

At this time Chaytor was eighteen years of age. At twenty it was decided that he was in the wrong groove; at least, that was the statement of the doctor who had undertaken his professional education. It was not an entirely ingenuous statement; the master was eager to get rid of his pupil, whose sharp practices distressed him.

"What would you like to be?" asked his father.

"A lawyer," replied Chaytor.

"He will be Lord Chancellor," said his mother.

Thereupon Newman Chaytor was articled to a firm of lawyers in Bedford Row, London, W.C., an old and respectable firm, Messrs. Rivington, Sons, and Rivington, who kept its exceedingly lucrative business in the hands of its own family. It happened, fatefully, that this firm of lawyers transacted the affairs of Bartholomew Whittingham, Basil's uncle, with whom our readers have already made acquaintance.

In the course of two or three years Chaytor's character was fully developed. He was still the idol of his mother, whose heart was plated with so thick a shield of unreasoning love that nothing to her son's disparagement could make an impression upon it. Only there were doors in this shield which she opened at the least sign from the reprobate, sheltering him there and cooing over him as none but such hearts can. Her husband had the sincerest affection for her, and here was another safeguard for Chaytor.

The surroundings of life in a great and gay city are dangerous and tempting even to the innocent. How much more dangerous and tempting are they to those who by teaching or inclination are ripe for vice? It is not our intention to follow Chaytor through these devious paths; we shall simply touch lightly upon those circumstances of his career which are pertinent to our story. If for a brief space we are compelled to treat of some of the darker shadows of human nature, it must be set down to the undoubted fact that life is not made up entirely of sweetness and light.

Chaytor's father, looking through his bank-book, discovered that he had a balance to his credit less by a hundred pounds than he knew was correct. He examined his returned cheques and found one with his signature for the exact amount, a signature written by another hand than his. He informed his wife, pending his decision as to what steps to take to bring the guilt home. His wife informed her son.

"Ah," said he, "I have my suspicions." And he mentioned the name of a clerk in his father's employ.

The ball being set rolling, the elder Chaytor began to watch the suspected man, setting traps for him, across which the innocent man stepped in safety. Mr. Chaytor was puzzled; he had, by his wife's advice, kept the affair entirely secret, who in her turn had been prompted by her son to this course, and warned not to drag his name into it. The father, therefore was not aware that the accusation against the clerk proceeded from his son.

Chaytor had a design in view: he wished to gain time to avoid possible unpleasant consequences.

Some three weeks afterwards, when Mr. Chaytor had resolved to take the forged cheque to the bank with the intention of enlisting its services in the discovery of the criminal, he went to his desk to obtain the document. It was gone, and other papers with it. He was confounded; without the cheque he could do nothing.

"Have I a thief in my house," he asked of himself, "as well as a forger at my elbow."

The man he had suspected was in the habit of coming to his private house once a week for clerking purposes. Without considering what he was laying himself open to, he accused his clerk of robbing him, and the result was that the man left his service and brought an action for slander against him, which he was compelled to compromise by an apology and the payment of a sum of money.

"It is father's own fault," said Chaytor to his mother; "had he waited and watched, he would have brought the guilt home to the fellow. But don't say anything more to him about it; let the matter rest."

It did rest, but Mr. Chaytor did not forget it.

Being in pursuit of pleasure Chaytor found himself in continual need of money, and he raised and procured it in many discreditable ways, but still he managed to keep his secret. Then came another crime. Some valuable jewels belonging to his mother were stolen. By whom?

"By one of the female servants, of course," said Chaytor.

He was not only without conscience, he was without heart.

Mr. Chaytor proposed to call in a detective. Mrs. Chaytor, acting upon the secret advice of her son, would not hear of it. The father had, therefore, two forces working against him, his wife, whom he could answer, because she was in the light, and his son, with whom he could not cope, because he was in the dark.

"It would be a dreadful scandal," said young Chaytor to his mother. "If nothing is discovered and thieves are very cunning, you know-we shall be in worse trouble than father got into with the clerk who forged his name to the cheque. We should be the laughing-stock of everyone who knows us, and should hardly be able to raise our heads."

His word was law to her; he could twist her round his little finger, he often laughingly said to himself; and as she, in her turn, dominated her husband, the deceits he practised were not too difficult for him to safely compass. Every domestic in the house was discharged, and a new set engaged. When they sent for characters no answer was returned. Thus early in life young Chaytor was fruitful in mischief, but he cared not what occurred to others so long as he rode in safety.

One day an old gentleman paid a visit to Messrs. Rivington, Sons, and Rivington. This was Mr. Bartholomew Whittingham, Basil's uncle. He had come upon the business of his will, the particulars of which he had written down upon paper. He was not in the office longer than ten minutes, and he left at half-past one o'clock, the time at which Chaytor was in the habit of going to lunch. Following the old gentleman Chaytor saw him step into a cab, in which a young gentleman had been waiting. The young gentleman was Basil, and Chaytor was startled at the resemblance of this man to himself. Relinquishing his lunch, Chaytor jumped into a cab, and bade the driver follow Basil and his uncle. They stopped at Morley's Hotel, Charing Cross, and Chaytor had another opportunity of verifying the likeness between himself and Basil. It interested him and excited him. He had not the least idea what he could gain by it, but the fact took possession of his mind and he could not dislodge it. He ascertained the names of Basil and his uncle by looking over the hotel book, and when he returned

to the office in Bedford Row the task was allotted to him of preparing the rough draft of the will. Mr. Bartholomew Whittingham was very rich, and every shilling he possessed was devised to Basil, without restrictions of any kind.

"The old fellow must be worth forty thousand pounds," mused Chaytor, and he rolled out the sum again and again. "For-ty thou-sand pounds! For-ty thou-sand pounds! For-ty thousand pounds! And every shilling is left to Mr. Basil Whittingham, my double. Yes, my Double! My own mother would mistake him for me, and his doddering old uncle would mistake me for him. What wouldn't I give to change places with him! For-ty thou-sand pounds! For-ty thou-sand pounds! It's maddening to think of. He has a moustache; I haven't. But I can grow one exactly like. His hair is the colour of mine. I'll keep my eye on him."

It was an egregiously wicked idea, for by the wildest stretch of his imagination he could not see how this startling likeness could be worked to his advantage. Nevertheless he was fascinated by it, and he set himself the task of seeing as much of Basil as possible. During the week that Basil was living at Morley's Hotel, Chaytor in his spare hours shadowed him, without being detected. Basil never once set eyes on him, and as the young gentleman never entered the office of Messrs. Rivington, Sons, and Rivington, no one there had opportunity to note the resemblance between the men.

Chaytor for a week was in his element; he ascertained from the hall porter in the hotel the places of amusement which Basil visited of an evening, and he followed him to them; he waited outside the hotel to catch glimpses of him; he studied every feature, every expression, every movement attentively, until he declared to himself that he knew him by heart. He began to let his moustache grow, and he practised little tricks of manners which he had observed. He was like a man possessed.

"He is a gentleman," he said. "So am I. I am as good looking as he is any day of the week. Why shouldn't I be, being his Double?"

"He pondered over it, he dreamt of it, he worked himself almost into a fever concerning it. Distorted possibilities presented themselves, and monstrous views. The phantom image of Basil entered into his life, directed his thoughts, coloured his future. He walked along the streets with this spectral Double by his side; he leant over the river's bridges and saw it reflected in the water; he felt its presence when he woke up in the dark night. One night during this feverish week, after being in the theatre which Basil visited, after sitting in the shadow of the pit and watching him for hours in a private box, after following him to Morley's Hotel and lingering so long in Trafalgar Square that he drew the attention of a policeman to his movements, he walked slowly homeward, twisting this and that possibility with an infatuation dangerous to his reason, until he came quite suddenly upon a house on fire. So engrossed was he that he had not noticed the hurrying people or their cries, and it was only when the blazing flames were before him that he was conscious of what was actually taking place. And there on the burning roof as he looked up he beheld the phantom Basil on fire. With glaring eyes he saw it with the flames devouring it, dwindling in proportions until its luminous outlines faded into nothingness, until it was gone out of the living world for ever. A deep sigh of satisfaction escaped him.

"Now he is gone," he thought, "I will take his place. His uncle is an old man; I can easily deceive him; and perhaps even *he* will die before morning."

In the midst of this ecstatic delirium a phantom hand was laid upon his shoulder, a phantom face, with a mocking smile upon it, confronted him. He struck at it with a muttered curse. It came to rob him of forty thousand pounds.

Had this mental condition lasted long he must have gone mad. The reason for this would have been that he had nothing to grapple with, nothing to fight, nothing but a shadow, which he had magnified into a mortal enemy who had done him a wrong which could only be atoned for by death. It was fortunate for him, although he deserved no good fortune, that Basil's residence at Morley's lasted but a week, and that he and his double did not meet again in the Old World; for although Basil passed much of his time in his father's house in London he lived at a long distance from Chaytor's usual haunts, and the young men's lives did not cross. Gradually Chaytor's reason reasserted itself,

and he became sane. Grimly, desperately sane, with still the leading idea haunting him, it is true, but no longer attended by monstrous conceptions of what might occur in a day, in an hour, in a moment, and he on the spot ready to take advantage of it.

Shortly after Basil's departure he asked his mother if she ever had twins.

"What on earth do you mean, my dear?" she asked, laughing at him.

"It is plain enough," he answered incautiously. "I dream sometimes of a brother the exact counterpart of myself."

"You work too hard," said his mother, pityingly. "You must take a holiday, my darling."

"Who's to pay for it?" he asked gloomily.

"I am," she said fondly. "I have saved fifty pounds for you."

"Give it to me," he said eagerly, and with the money he went to Paris for a fortnight and squandered it on himself and his pleasures.

The foolish mother was continually doing this kind of thing, saving up money, wheedling her husband out of it upon false pretexts, stinting herself and making sacrifices for the worthless, ungrateful idol of her loving heart. So time passed, and Chaytor was still in the office of Rivington, Sons, and Rivington, picking up no sound knowledge of the law, but extracting from it for future use all the sharp and cunning subtleties of which some vile men make bad use. To the firm came a letter from Mr. Bartholomew Whittingham, with the tenor of which Chaytor made himself familiar. He was a spy in the office, and never scrupled at opening letters and reading them on the sly to master their contents. In the letter which Basil's uncle wrote occurred these words:

"Send me in a registered packet, by first post, my will, the will I made in favour of my nephew, Mr. Basil Whittingham. He has acted like a fool, and I am going to destroy it and disinherit him. At some future time I will give you instructions to draw up another, making different dispositions of my property. I am not a young man, but I shall live a good many years yet, and there is plenty of time before me. Meanwhile bear witness by this letter that I have disinherited my nephew Basil Whittingham."

Of course they followed his instructions, and the will was forwarded to him.

"He has stolen forty thousand pounds from me," thought Chaytor.

Within a week thereafter he overheard a conversation between two of the principals. He was never above listening at doors and creeping up back staircases. The lawyers were speaking of Bartholomew Whittingham and the will.

"Will he destroy it?" asked one.

"I think not," replied the other. "It is my opinion he will keep it by him, half intending to destroy it, half to preserve it, and that it will be found intact and unaltered when he dies."

"I do not agree with you. He will destroy it one day in a rage, and make another the next."

"In favour of whom?"

"Of his nephew. He has in his heart an absorbing love for the young gentleman, and he is a good fellow at bottom. Mr. Basil Whittingham will come into the whole of the property."

The conversation was continued on these lines, and the partners ultimately agreed that after all Basil would be the heir. "There is a chance yet," thought Chaytor, for although the dangerous period of ecstasy was passed there still lingered in his mind a hope of fortunate possibilities.

He continued his evil courses, gambled, drank, and led a free life, getting deeper and deeper into debt. His mother assisted him out of many a scrape, and never for one single moment wavered in her faith in him, in her love for him. It was a sweet trait in her character, but love without wisdom is frequently productive of more harm than good. Chaytor's position grew so desperate that detection and its attendant disgraceful penalty became imminent. He had made himself a proficient and skilful imitator of handwriting, and more than once had he forged his father's name to cheques and bills. The father was aware of this, but out of tenderness for his wife had done nothing more than upbraid his son for the infamy. Many a stormy scene had passed between them, which both carefully concealed

from the knowledge of the fond woman whose heart would have been broken had she known the truth. On every one of these occasions Chaytor had humbled himself and promised atonement, with tears and sighs and mock repentance which saddened but did not convince the father.

"For your mother's sake," invariably he said.

"Yes, yes," murmured the hypocrite, "for my dear mother's sake-my mother, so good, so loving, so tender-hearted!"

"Let this be the last time," said the father sternly.

"It shall be, it shall be!" murmured the son.

It was a formula. The father may sometimes have deceived himself into belief; the son, never. Even while he was humbling himself he would be casting about for the next throw.

This continued for some considerable time, but at length came the crash. Chaytor and his parents were seated at breakfast at nine o'clock. The father had the morning letters in his pocket; he had read them and put them by. He cast but one glance at his son, and Chaytor turned pale and winced. He saw that the storm was about to burst. As usual, nothing was said before Mrs. Chaytor. The meal was over, she kissed her son, and left the room to attend to her domestic affairs.

"I must be off," said Chaytor. "Mustn't be late this morning. A lot to attend to at the office."

"You need not hurry," said the father. "I have something to say to you."

"Won't it keep till the evening?"

"No. It must be said here and now." He stepped to the door and locked it. "We will spare her as long as possible; she will know soon enough."

"Oh, all right," said Chaytor sullenly. "Fire away."

The father took out his letters, and, selecting one, handed it to his son who read it, shivered, and returned it.

"What have you to say to it?" asked the father.

"Nothing. It is only for three hundred pounds."

"A bill, due to-day, which I did not sign."

"It was done for all our sakes, to save the honour of the family name. I was in a hole and there was no other way of getting out of it."

"The bill must be taken up before twelve o'clock."

"Will it be?"

"It will, for your mother's sake."

"Then there is nothing more to be said. I am very sorry, but it could not be helped. I promise that it shall never occur again. I'll take my oath of it if you like."

"I take neither your word nor your oath. You are a scoundrel."

"Here, draw it mild. I am your son."

"Unhappily. If your mother were not living you should be shown into the dock for the forgery."

"But she is alive. I shall not appear in the dock, and you may as well let me go. Look here, father, what's the use of crying over spilt milk?"

"Not much; and as I look upon you as hopeless, I would go on paying for it while your mother lived. If she were taken from me I should leave you to the punishment you deserve, and risk my name being dragged through the mire."

"I hope," said Chaytor, with vile sanctimoniousness, "that my dear mother will live till she is a hundred."

"There is, I must remind you, another side to the shield. I said 'as long as I can afford it.'"

"Well, you can afford it."

"I cannot," said Mr. Chaytor, with a sour smile. "My career snaps to-day, after paying this forged bill with money that properly belongs to my creditors. Newman Chaytor, you have come to the end of your tether."

"You are saying this to frighten me," said Chaytor, affecting an indifference he did not feel. "Why, you are rolling in money."

"You are mistaken. Speculations into which I have entered have failed disastrously. If you had not robbed me to the tune of thousands of pounds—the sum total of your villainies amounts to that—I might have weathered the storm, but as I am situated it is impossible. It is almost a triumph to me to stand here before you a ruined man, knowing you can no longer rob me."

"Still I do not believe you," said Chaytor.

"Wait and see; you will not have to wait long."

The tone in which he uttered this carried conviction with it.

"Do you know what you have done?" cried Chaytor furiously. "You have ruined *me!*"

"What!" responded Mr. Chaytor, with savage sarcasm. "Is there any more of this kind of paper floating about?" Chaytor bit his lips, and his fingers twitched nervously, but he did not reply. "If there is to be advised, and prepare for it. In the list of my liabilities, which is now being prepared, there will be no place for them. How should there be, when I am in ignorance of your prospective villainies. Do you see now to what you have brought me?"

"Do *you* see to what you have brought *me?*" exclaimed Chaytor in despair. "Why did you not tell me of it months ago?"

"Because I hoped by other speculations to set myself straight. But everything has gone wrong—everything. Understand, I cannot trouble myself about your affairs; I have enough to do with my own. I have one satisfaction; your mother will not suffer."

"How is that?"

"The settlement I made upon her in the days of my prosperity is hers absolutely, and only she can deal with it. In the settlement of my business there shall be no sentimental folly; I will see to that. Her money shall not go to pay my debts.

"But it shall go," thought Chaytor, with secret joy, "to get me out of the scrape I am in. It belongs to me by right. *I* will see that neither you nor your creditors tamper with it." He breathed more freely; he could still defy the world.

"I have not told you quite all," continued Mr. Chaytor. "Here is a letter from Messrs. Rivington, Sons, and Rivington, advising me that it will be better for all parties that you do not make your appearance in their office. Indeed, the place you occupied there is already filled up."

"Do they give any reason for it?" asked Chaytor, inwardly not greatly astonished at his dismissal.

"None; nor shall I ask any questions of them or you. You know how the land lies. Good morning."

He unlocked the door, and left the house. This was just what Chaytor desired. His vicious mind was quick in expedients; his mother was his shield and his anchor. Her settlement would serve for many a long day yet. To her he went, and related his troubles in his own way. She gave him, as usual, her fullest sympathy, and promised all he asked.

"Between ourselves, mother," he said.

"Yes, my darling, between ourselves."

"Father must not know. He was always hard on me. He thinks he can manage everybody's affairs, but he cannot manage his own." Then he disclosed to her his father's difficulties. "If he had allowed me to manage for him it would not have happened. Trust everything to me, mother, and this day year I will treble your little fortune for you. Let me have a chance for once. When I have made all our fortunes you shall go to him and say, 'See what Newman has done for us.'"

"It shall be exactly as you say, darling. You are the best, the handsomest, the cleverest son a foolish mother ever had."

Kisses and caresses sealed the bargain. Within twenty-four hours he knew that everything his father had told him was true. The family were ruined, and but for Mrs. Chaytor's private fortune would have been utterly beggared. They moved into a smaller house and practised economy. Little

by little Chaytor received and squandered every shilling his mother possessed, and before the year was out the sun rose upon a ship beating on the rocks.

"Are you satisfied?" asked his father, from whom Chaytor's doings could no longer be concealed.

"Satisfied!" cried Chaytor, trembling in every limb. "When your insane speculations have ruined us!"

Then he fell into a chair and began to sob. He had the best of reasons for tribulation. With his mind's eye he saw the prison doors open to receive him. It was not shame that made him suffer; it was fear.

Again, and for the last time, he went to his mother for help.

"What can I do, my boy?" quavered the poor woman. "What can I do? I haven't a shilling in the world."

He implored her to go to his father. "He can save me," cried the terror-stricken wretch. "He can, he can!"

She obeyed him and the father sent for his son.

"Tell me all," he said. "Conceal nothing, or, as there is a heaven above us, I leave you to your fate."

The shameful story told, the father said, "Things were looking up with me, but here is another knock-down blow, and from my own flesh and blood. I accept it, and will submit once more to be ruined by you."

"Bless you, father, bless you," whined Chaytor, taking his father's hand and attempting to fondle it. Mr. Chaytor plucked his hand away.

"There is, however, a condition attached to the promise."

"What condition?" faltered Chaytor.

"That you leave England and never return. Do you hear me? Never. You will go to the other end of the world, where you will end your days.

"To Australia?"

"To Australia. When you quit this country I wish never to hear from you; I shall regard you as dead. You shall no longer trade upon your mother's weak love for you. I will not argue with you. Accept or refuse."

"I accept."

"Very well. Go from this house and never let me look upon your face again."

"Can I not see my mother?" whined Chaytor, "to wish her good-bye?"

"No. You want to hatch further troubles. You shall not do so. Quit my house."

With head bent low in mock humility, Chaytor left the house. He had no sincere wish to see his mother; he had got out of her all he could, and she was of no use to him in the future. The promise his father made was fulfilled; the fresh forgeries he had perpetrated were bought up, but one still remained of which he had made no mention. This was a bill for a large amount which he had accepted in the name of Rivington, Sons and Rivington. It had still two months to run, and Chaytor determined to remain in England till within a week or two of its becoming due; something might turn up which would enable him to meet it. He loved the excitement of English life; Australia was banishment; but perhaps after all, if he were forced to go it might be the making of him. He had read of rough men making fortunes in a week on the goldfields. Why should not he?

The last blow proved too much for Mr. Chaytor; it broke him up utterly. He was seized with a serious illness which reduced him to imbecility. The home had to be sold, and he and his wife removed to lodgings, one small room at the top of a house in a poor neighbourhood. There poverty fell upon them like a wolf. Five weeks afterwards Chaytor, slouching through the streets on a rainy night, saw his mother begging in the roadway. The poor soul stood mute, with a box of matches in her hand. Chaytor turned and fled.

"I am the unluckiest dog that ever was born," he muttered. "Just as I was going to see if I could get anything out of her!"

It was now imperative that he should leave England, and he managed to get a passage in a sailing vessel as assistant steward at a shilling a month. He obtained it by means of forged letters of recommendation, and he went out in a false name. This he would have retained had it not been that shortly after his arrival in Australia he met a man who had known him in London, and who addressed him by his proper name. It was not the only inconvenience to which an alias subjected him. There was only one address in the colonies through which he could obtain his letters, and that was the Post Office. Obviously, if he called himself John Smith he could not expect letters to be delivered to him in the name of Newman Chaytor. Now, he was eager for letters from the old country; before he left it he had written to his mother to the effect that he was driven out of it by a hard-hearted father, and that if she had any good news to communicate to him he would be glad to hear from her. At the same time he imposed upon her the obligation of not letting anyone know where he was. Therefore, when his London acquaintance addressed him by his proper name, saying, "Hallo, Chaytor, old boy!" he said to himself, "Oh hang it! I'll stick to Newman Chaytor, and chance it. If mother writes to me I shall have to proclaim myself Chaytor; an alias might get me into all sorts of trouble."

Why did he write to his poor mother, for whom he had not the least affection, and what did he mean by expecting her to have any good news to communicate to him? The last time he saw her, was she not begging in the streets? Well, there was a clear reason; he seldom did anything without one; and be sure that the kernel of that reason was Self. His father, from the wreck of his fortune, had managed to preserve a number of shares in some companies which had failed, among them two mining companies which had come to grief. Now, it had happened before and might happen again, that companies which were valueless one day had leaped into favour the next, that shares which yesterday could have been purchased for a song, to-morrow would be worth thousands of pounds. Suppose that this happened to the companies, or to one of them, in which his pauper father held shares. He was his father's only child, and his mother would see that he was not disinherited. Chaytor was a man who never threw away a chance, and he would not throw away this, remote as it was. Hence his determination to adhere at all hazards to his proper name. The perilous excitements of the last two or three years had driven Basil Whittingham out of his mind, but having more leisure and less to occupy his thoughts in the colonies, he thought of him now and then, and wondered whether the old uncle had relented and had taken his nephew again into his favour. "Lucky young beggar," he thought. "I wish I stood in his shoes, and he in mine. I would soon work the old codger into a proper mood." His colonial career was neither profitable nor creditable, and he had degenerated into what he was when he and Basil came face to face in Gum Flat, an unadulterated gambler and loafer. The strange encounter awoke within him forces which had long lain dormant. He recognised a possible chance which might be worked to his benefit, and he fastened to it like a limpet. When he said to Basil that he was in luck he really meant it.

A word as to his false beard and whiskers. In London he had had a behind-the-scenes acquaintance, and in a private theatrical performance in which he played a part he had worn these identical appendages as an adjunct to the character he represented. He had brought them out with him, thinking they might be serviceable one day. Before he came to Gum Flat he had got into a scrape on another township, and when he left it, had assumed the false hair as a kind of disguise. Making his appearance on Gum Flat thus disguised, he deemed it prudent to retain it, and when he came into association with Basil he thanked his stars that he had done so; otherwise he might have drawn upon himself from the man he called his double a closer attention than he desired.

CHAPTER XII

In the middle of the night Basil awoke. He had had a tiring day, but when he had slept off the first effects of the fatigue he had undergone, the exciting events of the last two days became again the dominant power. He dreamt of all that had occurred from the interview between himself and Anthony Bidaud, in which he had accepted the guardianship of Annette, to the moment of his arrival on Gum Flat. Of Newman Chaytor he dreamt not at all; this new acquaintance had produced no abiding impression upon him.

He lay awake for some five minutes or so in that condition of quiescent wonder which often falls upon men when they are sleeping for the first time in a strange bed and in a place with which they are not familiar. Where was he? What was the position of the bed? Where was the door situated: at the foot, or the head, or the side of the bed? Was there a window in the apartment, and if so, where was it? Then came the mental question what had aroused him?

It was so unusual for him to wake in the middle of the night that he dwelt upon this question. Something must have disturbed him. What?

Was it fancy that just at the moment of his awakening he had heard a movement in the room, that he had felt a hand upon him, that he had heard a man's breathing? It must have been, all was so quiet and still. Suddenly he sat straight up on the stretcher. He remembered that he was in the township of Gum Flat, sleeping in a strange apartment, and that men with whom he had not been favourably impressed must be lying near him. This did not apply to Newman Chaytor, who had been kind and attentive, and whom he now thought of with gratitude. There was nothing to fear from him, but the other three had gazed at him furtively and with no friendly feelings. He had exchanged but a few words with these men, and those had been words of suspicion. When he entered the store, after attending to his horse, they had not addressed a word to him. It was Chaytor, and Chaytor alone, who had shown kindness and evinced a kindly feeling. And now he was certain that someone had been in the room while he slept, and had laid hands on him. For what purpose?

He slid from the stretcher, and standing upright stretched out his hands in the darkness. Where was the door?

Outside the canvas building stood Chaytor's three mates, wide awake, with their heads close together, as they had been inside on the return of Basil and Chaytor from the stable. They were conversing in whispers.

"Did he hear you?"

"No. If he had moved I would have knocked him on the head."

"Have you got it?"

"Yes, it is all right."

"Pass it round."

"No; I will keep it till it's sold; then we'll divide equally."

"What do you think it's worth?"

"Twenty pounds, I should say."

"Little enough."

"Hush!"

The sound of Basil moving about his room, groping for the door, had reached them.

"If he comes out, Jim, you tackle him."

"Leave him to me. Don't waste any more time. Get the horse from the stable."

Basil, unable to find the door, stumbled against the calico portion which divided his room from that in which Chaytor slept.

"Who's there?" cried Chaytor, jumping up.

"Oh, it's you," said Basil, recognising the voice. "Have you got a light?"

"Wait a moment."

But half dressed he represented himself to Basil, with a lighted candle in his hand.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Basil, "but I am not easy in my mind. Perhaps it is only my fancy, but I have an idea that someone has been in my room."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.