

Hornung Ernest William

The Boss of Taroomba



Ernest Hornung
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Hornung E. W. Ernest William

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CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE MUSICIAN

They were terribly sentimental words, but the fellow sang them as though he meant every syllable. Altogether, the song was not the kind of thing to go down with a back-block audience, any more than the singer was the class of man.

He was a little bit of a fellow, with long dark hair and dark glowing eyes, and he swayed on the music-stool, as he played and sang, in a manner most new to the young men of Taroomba. He had not much voice, but the sensitive lips took such pains with each word, and the long, nervous fingers fell so lightly upon the old piano, that every one of the egregious lines travelled whole and unmistakable to the farthest corner of the room. And that was an additional pity, because the piano was so placed that the performer was forced to turn his back upon his audience; and behind it the young men of Taroomba were making great game of him all the time.

In the moderate light of two kerosene lamps, the room seemed full of cord breeches and leather belts and flannel collars and sunburnt throats. It was not a large room, however, and there were only four men present, not counting the singer. They were young fellows, in the main, though the one leaning his elbow on the piano had a bushy red beard, and his yellow hair was beginning to thin. Another was reading *The Australasian* on the sofa; and a sort of twist to his mustache, a certain rigor about his unshaven chin, if they betrayed no sympathy with the singer, suggested a measure of contempt for the dumb clownery going on behind the singer's back. Over his very head, indeed, the red-bearded man was signalling maliciously to a youth who with coarse fat face and hands was mimicking the performer in the middle of the room; while the youngest man of the lot, who wore spectacles and a Home-bred look, giggled in a half-ashamed, half-anxious way, as though not a little concerned lest they should all be caught. And when the song ended, and the singer spun round on the stool, they had certainly a narrow escape.

"Great song!" cried the mimic, pulling himself together in an instant, and clapping out a brutal burlesque of applause.

"Shut up, Sandy," said the man with the beard, dropping a yellow-fringed eyelid over a very blue eye. "Don't you mind Mr. Sanderson, sir," he added to the musician; "he's not a bad chap, only he thinks he's funny. We'll show him what funniment really is in a minute or two. I've just found the very song! But what's the price of the last pretty thing?"

"Of 'Love Flees before the Dawn?'" said the musician, simply.

"Yes."

"It's the same as all the rest; you see –"

Here the mimic broke in with a bright, congenial joke.

"Love how much?" cried he, winking with his whole heavy face. "I don't, chaps, do you?"

The sally was greeted with a roar, in which the musician joined timidly, while the man on the sofa smiled faintly without looking up from his paper.

"Never mind him," said the red-bearded man, who was for keeping up the fun as long as possible; "he's too witty to live. What did you say the price was?"

"Most of the songs are half a crown."

"Come, I say, that's a stiffish price, isn't it?"

"Plucky stiff for fleas!" exclaimed the wit.

The musician flushed, but tossed back his head of hair, and held out his hand for the song.

"I can't help it, gentlemen. I can't afford to charge less. Every one of these songs has been sent out from Home, and I get them from a man in Melbourne, who makes *me* pay for them. You're five hundred miles up country, where you can't expect town prices."

"Keep your hair on, old man!" said the wit, soothingly.

"My what? My hair is my own business!"

The little musician had turned upon his tormentor like a knife. His dark eyes were glaring indignantly, and his nervous fingers had twitched themselves into a pair of absurdly unserviceable white fists. But now a freckled hand was laid upon his shoulder, and the man with the beard was saying, "Come, come, my good fellow, you've made a mistake; my friend Sanderson meant nothing personal. It's our way up here, you know, to chi-ak each other and our visitors too."

"Then I don't like your way," said the little man, stoutly.

"Well, Sandy meant no offence, I'll swear to that."

"Of course I didn't," said Sanderson.

The musician looked from one to the other, and the anger went out of him, making way for shame.

"Then the offence is on my side," said he, awkwardly, "and I beg your pardon."

He took a pile of new music from the piano, and was about to go.

"No, no, we're not going to let you off so easily," said the bearded man, laughing.

"You'll have to sing us one more song to show there's no ill feeling," put in Sanderson.

"And here's the song," added the other. "The very thing. I found it just now. There you are – 'The World's Creation!'"

"Not that thing!" said the musician.

"Why not?"

"It's a comic song."

"The very thing we want."

"We'll buy up your whole stock of comic songs," said Sanderson.

"Hear, hear," cried the silent youth who wore spectacles.

"I wish you would," the musician said, smiling.

"But we must hear them first."

"I hate singing them."

"Well, give us this one as a favor! Only this one. Do."

The musician wavered. He was a very sensitive young man, with a constitutional desire to please, and an acute horror of making a fool of himself. Now the whole soul of him was aching with the conviction that he had done this already, in showing his teeth at what had evidently been meant as harmless and inoffensive badinage. And it was this feeling that engendered the desperate desire at once to expiate his late display of temper, and to win the good opinion of these men by fairly amusing them after all. Certainly the song in demand did not amuse himself, but then it was equally certain that his taste in humor differed from theirs. He could not decide in his mind. He longed to make these men laugh. To get on with older and rougher men was his great difficulty, and one of his ambitions.

"We must have this," said the man with the beard, who had been looking over the song. "The words are first chop!"

"I can't stand them," the musician confessed.

"Why, are they too profane?"

"They are too silly."

"Well, they ain't for us. Climb down to our level, and fire away."

With a sigh and a smile, and a full complement of those misgivings which were a part of his temperament, the little visitor sat down and played with much vivacity a banjo accompaniment which sounded far better than anything else had done on the antiquated, weather-beaten bush piano. The

jingle struck fire with the audience, and the performer knew it, as he went on to describe himself as "straight from Old Virginia," with his head "stuffed full of knowledge," in spite of the fact that he had "never been to 'Frisco or any other college;" the entertaining information that "this world it was created in the twinkling of two cracks" bringing the first verse to a conclusion. Then came the chorus – of which there can scarcely be two opinions. The young men caught it up with a howl, with the exception of the reader on the sofa, who put his fingers in his ears. This is how it went:

Oh, walk up, Mr. Pompey, oh, walk up while I say,
Will you walk into the banjo and hear the parlor play?
Will you walk into the parlor and hear the banjo ring?
Oh, listen to de darkies how merrily dey sing!

The chorus ended with a whoop which assured the soloist that he was amusing his men; and having himself one of those susceptible, excitable natures which can enter into almost anything, given the fair wind of appreciation to fill their sails, the little musician began actually to enjoy the nonsense himself. His long fingers rang out the tinkling accompaniment with a crisp, confident touch. He sang the second verse, which built up the universe in numbers calculated to shock a religious or even a reasonably cultivated order of mind, as though he were by no means ashamed of it. And so far as culture and religion were concerned he was tolerably safe – each fresh peal of laughter reassured him of this. That the laugh was with him he never doubted until the end of the third verse. Then it was that the roars of merriment rose louder than ever, and that their note suddenly struck the musician's trained ear as false. He sang through the next verse with an overwhelming sense of its inanity, and with the life gone out of his voice and fingers alike. Still they roared with laughter, but he who made them knew now that the laugh was at his expense. He turned hot all over, then cold, then hotter than ever. A shadow was dancing on the music in front of him; he could hear a suppressed titter at the back of the boisterous laughter; something brushed against his hair, and he could bear it all no longer. Snatching his fingers from the keys, he wheeled round on the music-stool in time to catch the heavy youth Sanderson in the mimic act of braining him with a chair; his tongue was out like a brat's, his eyes shone with a baleful mirth, while the red-bearded man was rolling about the room in an ecstasy of malicious merriment.

The singer sprang to his feet in a palsy of indignation. His dark eyes glared with the dumb rage of a wounded animal; then they ranged round the room for something with which to strike, and before Sanderson had time to drop the chair he had been brandishing over the other's head, the musician had snatched up the kerosene lamp from the top of the piano, and was poising it in the air with murderous intent. Yet his anger had not blinded him utterly. His flashing eyes were fixed upon the fat mocking face which he longed to mark for life, but he could also see beyond it, and what he saw made him put down the lamp without a word.

At the other side of the room was a door leading out upon the veranda; it had been open all the evening, and now it was the frame of an unlooked-for picture, for a tall, strong girl was standing upon the threshold.

"Well, I never!" said she, calmly, as she came into their midst with a slow, commanding stride. "So this is the way you play when I'm away, is it? What poor little mice they are, to be sure!"

Sanderson had put down the chair, and was looking indescribably foolish. The boy in the spectacles, though he had been a merely passive party to the late proceedings, seemed only a little less uncomfortable. The man on the sofa and the little trembling musician were devouring the girl with their eyes. It was the personage with the beard who swaggered forward into the breach.

"Good-evening, Naomi," said he, holding out a hand which she refused to see. "This is Mr. Engelhardt, who has come to tune your piano for you. Mr. Engelhardt – Miss Pryse."

The hand which had been refused to the man who was in a position to address Miss Pryse as Naomi, was held out frankly to the stranger. It was a firm, cool hand, which left him a stronger and a saner man for its touch.

"I am delighted to see you, Mr. Engelhardt. I congratulate you on your songs, and on your spirit, too. It was about time that Mr. Sanderson met somebody who objected to his peculiar form of fun. He has been spoiling for this ever since I have known him!"

"Come, I say, Naomi," said the man who was on familiar terms with her, "it was all meant in good part, you know. You're rather rough upon poor Sandy."

"Not so rough as both you and he have been upon a visitor. I am ashamed of you all!"

Her scornful eyes looked black in the lamplight; her eyebrows *were* black. This with her splendid coloring was all the musician could be sure of; though his gaze never shifted from her face. Now she turned to him and said, kindly:

"I have been enjoying your songs immensely – especially the comic one. I came in some time ago, and have been listening to everything. You sing splendidly."

"These gentlemen will hardly agree with you."

"These gentlemen," said Miss Pryse, laying an unpleasant stress on the word, "disagree with me horribly at times. They make me ill. What a lot of songs you have brought!"

"I brought them to sell," said the young fellow, blushing. "I have just started business – set up shop at Deniliquin – a music-shop, you know. I am making a round to tune the pianos at the stations."

"What a capital idea! You will find ours in a terrible state, I'm afraid."

"Yes, it is rather bad; I was talking about it to the boss before I started to make a fool of myself."

"To the boss, do you say?"

"Yes."

"And pray which is he?"

The piano-tuner pointed to the bushy red beard.

"Why, bless your life," cried Naomi Pryse, as the red beard split across and showed its teeth, "*he's* not the boss! Don't you believe it. If you've anything to say to the boss, you'd better come outside and say it."

"But which is he, Miss Pryse?"

"He's a she, and you're talking to her now, Mr. Engelhardt!"

CHAPTER II

A FRIEND INDEED

"Do you mean to say that you have never heard of the female boss of Taroomba?" said Naomi Pryse, as she led the piano-tuner across the veranda and out into the station-yard. The moon was gleaming upon the galvanized-iron roofs of the various buildings, and it picked out the girl's smile as she turned to question her companion.

"No, I never heard of you before," replied the piano-tuner, stolidly. For the moment the girl and the moonlight stupefied him. The scene in the room was still before his eyes and in his ears.

"Well, that's one for me! What station have you come from to-day?"

"Kerulijah."

"And you never heard of me there! Ah, well, I'm very seldom up here. I've only come for the shearing. Still, the whole place is mine, and I'm not exactly a cipher in the business either; I rather thought I was the talk of the back-blocks. At one time I know I was. I'm very vain, you see."

"You have something to be vain about," said the piano-tuner, looking at her frankly.

She made him a courtesy in the moonlit yard.

"Thank you kindly. But I'm not satisfied yet; I understand that you arrived in time for supper; didn't you hear of me at table?"

"I just heard your name."

"Who mentioned it?"

"The fellow with the beard."

"Prettily?"

"I think so. He was wondering where you were. He seems to know you very well?"

"He has known me all my life. He is a sort of connection. He was overseer here when my father died a year or two ago. He is the manager now."

"But you are the boss?"

"I am so! His name, by the way, is Gilroy – my mother was a Gilroy, too. See? That's why he calls me Naomi; I call him Monty when I am not wroth with him. I am disgusted with them all to-night! But you mustn't mind them; it's only their way. Did you speak to the overseer, Tom Chester?"

"Which was he?"

"The one on the sofa."

"No, he hardly spoke to me."

"Well, he's a very good sort; you would like him if you got to know him. The new chum with the eye-glasses is all right, too. I don't believe those two were to blame. As for Mr. Sanderson, I wouldn't think any more about him if I were you; he really isn't worth it."

"I forgive him," said the musician, simply; "but I shall never forgive myself for playing the fool and losing my temper!"

"Nonsense! It did them good, and they'll think all the more of you. Still, I must say I'm glad you didn't dash the kerosene lamp in Mr. Sanderson's face!"

"The what?" cried Engelhardt, in horror.

"The lamp; you were brandishing it over your head when I came in."

"The lamp! To think that I caught up the lamp! I can't have known what I was doing!"

He stood still and aghast in the sandy yard; they had wandered to the far side of it, where the kitchen and the laundry stood cheek-by-jowl with the wood-heap between them, and their back-walls to the six-wire fence dividing the yard from the plantation of young pines which bordered it upon three sides.

"You were in a passion," said Miss Pryse, smiling gravely. "There's nothing in this world that I admire more than a passion – it's so uncommon. So are you! There, I owed you a pretty speech, you know! Do you mind giving me your arm, Mr. Engelhardt?"

But Engelhardt was gazing absently at the girl, and the road between ear and mind was choked with a multitude of new sensations. Her sudden request made no impression upon him, until he saw her stamping her foot in the sand. Then, and awkwardly enough, he held out his arm to her, and her firm hand caught in it impatiently.

"How slow you are to assist a lady! Yet I feel sure that you come from the old country?"

"I do; but I have never had much to do with ladies."

The piano-tuner sighed.

"Well, it's all right; only I wanted you to take my arm for Monty Gilroy's benefit. He's just come out on to the veranda. Don't look round. This will rile him more than anything."

"But why?"

"Why? Oh, because he showed you the hoof; and when a person does that, he never likes to see another person being civil to the same person. See? Then if you don't, you'd better stand here and work it out while I run into the kitchen to speak to Mrs. Potter about your room."

"But I'm not going to stay!" the piano-tuner cried, excitedly.

"Now what are you giving us, Mr. Engelhardt? Of course you are going to stay. You're going to stay and tune my poor old piano. Why, your horse was run out hours ago!"

"But I can't face those men again – "

"What rubbish!"

"After the way I made a fool of myself this evening!"

"It was they who made fools of themselves. They'll annoy you no more, I promise you. In any case, they all go back to the shed to-morrow evening; it's seven miles away, and they only come in for Sunday. You needn't start on the piano before Monday, if you don't like."

"Oh, no, I'll do it to-morrow," Engelhardt said, moodily. He now felt bitterly certain that he should never make friends with the young men of Taroomba, and shamefully thankful to think that there would be a set occupation to keep him out of their way for the whole of the morrow.

"Very well, then; wait where you are for two twos."

Engelhardt waited. The kitchen-door had closed upon Miss Naomi Pryse; there was no sense in watching that any longer. So the piano-tuner's eyes climbed over the waterspout, scaled the steep corrugated roof, and from the wide wooden chimney leapt up to the moon. It was at the full. The white clear light hit the young man between his expressive eyes, and still he chose to face it. It gave to the delicate eager face an almost ethereal pallor; and as he gazed on without flinching, the raised head was proudly carried, and the little man looked tall. To one whom he did not hear when she lifted the kitchen-latch and opened the door, he seemed a different being; she watched him for some moments before she spoke.

"Well, Mr. Engelhardt?"

"Well," said he, coming down from the moon with an absent smile, and slowly.

"I have been watching you for quite a minute. I believe it would have been an hour if I hadn't spoken. I wish I hadn't! We're going to put you in that little building over there – we call it the 'barracks.' You'll be next door to Tom Chester, and he'll take care of you. There's no occasion to thank me; you can tell me what you've been thinking about instead."

"I wasn't thinking at all."

"Now, Mr. Engelhardt!" said Naomi, holding up her finger reprovingly. "If you weren't thinking, I should like to know what you were doing?"

"I was waiting for you."

"I know you were. It was very good of you. But you were smiling, too, and I want to know the joke."

"Was I really smiling?"

"Haven't I told you so? Have you signed the pledge against smiles? You look glum enough for anything now."

"Yes?"

"Very much yes! I wish to goodness you'd smile again."

"Oh, I'll do anything you like." He forced up the corners of his mouth, but it was not a smile; his eyes ran into hers like bayonets.

"Then give me your arm again," she said, "and let me tell you that I'm very much surprised at you for requiring to be told that twice."

"I'm not accustomed to ladies," Engelhardt explained once more.

"That's all right. I'm not one, you know. I'm going to negotiate this fence. Will you have the goodness to turn your back?"

Engelhardt did so, and saw afar off in the moonlit veranda the lowering solitary figure of the manager, Gilroy.

"Yes, he sees us all right," Miss Pryse remarked from the other side of the fence. "It'll do him good. Come you over, and we'll make his beard curl!"

The piano-tuner looked at her doubtfully, but only for one moment. The next he also was over the fence and by her side, and she was leading him into the heart of the pines, her strong kind hand within his arm.

"We'll just have a little mouch round," she said, confidentially. "You needn't be frightened."

"Frightened!" he echoed, defiantly. The hosts of darkness could not have frightened such a voice.

"You see, I'm the boss, and I'm obliged to show it sometimes."

"I see."

"And you have given me an opportunity of showing it pretty plainly."

"Oh!"

"Consequently, I'm very much obliged to you; and I do hope you don't mind helping me to shock Monty Gilroy?"

"I am proud."

But the kick had gone out of his voice, and to her hand his arm was suddenly as a log of wood. She mused a space. Then —

"It isn't everyone I would ask to help me in such — in such a delicate matter," she said, in a troubled tone. "You see I am a woman at the mercy of men. They're all very kind and loyal in their own way, but their way *is* their own, as *you* know. I thought as I had given you a hand with them — well, I thought you would be in sympathy."

"I am, I am — Heaven knows!"

The log had become exceedingly alive.

"Then let us skirt in and out, on the edge of the plantation, so that Mr. Gilroy may have the pleasure of seeing my frock from time to time."

"I'm your man."

"No, not that way — this. There, I'm sure he must have seen me then."

"He must."

"It's time we went back; but this will have done him all the good in the world," said Naomi.

"It's a pity you haven't a manager whom you can respect and like," the piano-tuner remarked.

Naomi started. She also stopped to lace up her shoe, which necessitated the withdrawal of her hand from the piano-tuner's arm; and she did not replace it.

"Oh, but I do like him, Mr. Engelhardt," she explained as she stooped. "I like Mr. Gilroy very much; I have known him all my life, you know. However, that's just where the disadvantage comes

in – he's too much inclined to domineer. But don't you run away with the idea that I dislike him; that would never do at all."

The piano-tuner felt too small to apologize. He had made a deadly mistake – so bad a one that she would take his arm no more. He looked up at the moon with miserable eyes, and his brain teemed with bitter self-upbraiding thoughts. His bitterness was egregiously beyond the mark; but that was this young man's weakness. He would condemn himself to execution for the pettiest sin. So ashamed was he now that he dared not even offer her his hand when they got back to the veranda, and she consigned him to the boy in spectacles, who then showed him his room in the barracks. And his mistake kept him awake more than half that night; it was only in the gray morning he found consolation in recollecting that although she had declared so many times that she liked Monty Gilroy, she had never once said she respected him.

Had he heard a conversation which took place in the station-yard later that night, but only a little later, and while the full moon was in much the same place, the piano-tuner might have gone to sleep instead of lying awake to flagellate his own meek spirit; though it is more likely that he would have lain quietly awake for very joy. The conversation in question was between Naomi Pryse and Montague Gilroy, her manager, and it would scarcely repay a detailed report; but this is how it culminated:

"I tell you that I found you bullying him abominably, and whenever I find you bullying anybody I'll make it up to that body in my own way. And I won't have my way criticised by you."

"Very good, Naomi. Very good indeed! But if you want to guard against all chance of the same thing happening next week, I should recommend you to be in for supper next Saturday, instead of gallivanting about the run by yourself and coming in at ten o'clock at night."

"The run is mine, and I'll do what I like while I'm here."

"Well, if you won't listen to reason, you might at least remember our engagement."

"You mean *your* engagement? I remember the terms perfectly. I have only to write you a check for the next six months' salary any time I like, to put an end to it. And upon my word, Monty, you seem to want me to do so to-night!"

CHAPTER III "HARD TIMES"

It was the middle of the Sunday afternoon, when the young men of Taroomba were for the most part sound asleep upon their beds. They were wise young men enough, in ways, and to punctuate the weeks of hard labor at the wool-shed with thoroughly slack Sundays at the home station was a practice of the plainest common-sense. To do otherwise would have been to fly in the face of nature. Yet just because Naomi Pryse chose to settle herself in the veranda outside the sitting-room door with a book, the young man who had worked harder than any of the others during the week must needs be the one to spend the afternoon of rest at her feet, and with nothing but a lean veranda-post to shelter his broad back from the sun.

This was Tom Chester, of whom Naomi had spoken highly to her *protégé*, the piano-tuner. Tom was newly and beautifully shaved, and he had further observed the Sabbath by putting on a white shirt and collar, and a suit of clothes in which a man might have walked down Collins Street; but he seemed quite content to sit in them on the dirty veranda boards, for the sake of watching Naomi as she read. She had not a great deal to say to him, but she had commanded him to light his pipe, and as often as she dropped the book into her lap to make a remark, she could reckon upon a sympathetic answer, preceded by a puff of the tobacco-smoke she loved.

"It is a dreadful noise, though, isn't it?" Naomi had observed more than once.

"It is so," Tom Chester would answer, with a smile and another puff.

"He made such a point of setting to work this morning, you know, and it's so good of him to work on Sunday. I don't see how we can stop him."

Then Naomi would sit silent, but not reading, and would presently announce that she had counted the striking of that note twenty-nine times in succession. Once she made it sixty-six; but the piano-tuner behind the closed door had broken his own record, and seemed in a fair way of hammering out the same note a hundred times running, when Monty Gilroy came tramping along the veranda with blinking yellow eyelashes, and his red face pale with temper. Miss Pryse was keeping tally aloud when the manager blundered upon the scene.

"I say, Naomi, how long is this to go on?" exclaimed Gilroy, in a tone that was half-complaining, half-injured, but wholly different from that which he had employed toward her the night before.

"Eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five," counted Naomi, giving him a nod and a smile.

"I hadn't been asleep ten minutes when he awoke me with his infernal din."

"Ninety, ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three – "

"It's no joke when a man has been over the board the whole week," said Gilroy, trying to smile nevertheless.

"Ninety-seven, ninety-eight – well, I'll be jiggered!"

"Ninety-eight it is," said Tom Chester.

"Yes, he's changed the note. He might have given it a couple more! Still, it's the record. Now, Monty, please forgive us; we're trying to make the best of a bad job, as you see."

"It is a bad job," assented Gilroy, whose rueful countenance concealed (but not from the girl) a vile temper smouldering. "It's pretty rough, I think, on us chaps who've been working like Kanakas all the week."

"Well, but you were pretty rough upon poor Mr. Engelhardt last night; so don't you think that it serves you quite right?"

"Poor Mr. Engelhardt!" echoed Gilroy, savagely. "So it serves us right, does it?" He forced a laugh. "What do you say, Tom?"

"I think it serves you right, too," answered Tom Chester, coolly.

Gilroy laughed again.

"So you're crackin', old chap," said he, genially. He generally was genial with Tom Chester, for whom he entertained a hatred enhanced by fear. "But I say, Naomi, need this sort of thing go on all the afternoon?"

"If it doesn't he will have to stay till to-morrow."

"Ah! I see."

"I thought you would. The piano was in a bad way, and he said there was a long day's work in it; but he seems anxious to get away this evening, that's why he began before breakfast."

"Then let him stick to it, by all means, and we'll all clear out together. I'll see that his horse is run up – I'll go now."

He went.

"That's the most jealous gentleman in this colony," said Naomi to her companion. "He'd rather suffer anything than leave this little piano-tuner and me alone together!"

"Poor little chap," said Chester of the musician; he had nothing to say about Gilroy, who was still in view from the veranda, a swaggering figure in the strong sunlight, with his hands in his cross-cut breeches' pockets, his elbows sticking out, and the strut of a cock on its own midden. Tom Chester watched him with a hard light in his clear eye, and a moistening of the palms of his hands. Tom was pretty good with his fists, and for many a weary month he had been spoiling for a fight with Monty Gilroy, who very likely was not the only jealous gentleman on Taroomba.

All this time the piano-tuner was at his fiendish work behind the closed door, over which Naomi Pryse had purposely mounted guard. Distracting repetitions of one note were varied only by depressing octaves and irritating thirds. Occasionally a chord or two promised a trial trip over the keys, but such promises were never fulfilled. At last Naomi shut her book, with a hopeless smile at Tom Chester, who was ready for her with an answering grin.

"Really, I can't stand it any longer, Mr. Chester."

"You have borne it like a man, Miss Pryse."

"I wanted to make sure that nobody bothered him. Do you think we may safely leave him now?"

"Quite safely. Gilroy is up at the yards, and Sanderson only plays the fool to an audience. Let me pull you out of your chair."

"Thanks. That's it. Let us stroll up to the horse-paddock gate and back; then it will be time for tea; and let's hope our little tuner will have finished his work at last."

"I believe he has finished now," Tom Chester said, as they turned their backs on the homestead. "He's never run up and down the board like *that* before."

"The board!" said Miss Pryse, laughing. "No, don't you believe it; he won't finish for another hour."

Tom Chester was right, however. As Naomi and he passed out of earshot, the piano-tuner faced about on the music-stool, and peered wistfully through the empty room at the closed door, straining his ear for their voices. Of course he heard nothing; but the talking on the veranda had never been continuous, so that did not surprise him. It gladdened him, rather. She was reading. She might be alone; his heart beat quicker for the thought. She had sat there all day, of her own kind will, enduring his melancholy performance; now she should have her reward. His eyes glistened as he searched in his memory for some restful, dreamy melody, which should at once soothe and charm her ears aching from his crude unmusical monotonies. Suddenly he rubbed his hands, and then stretching them out and leaning backward on the stool he let his fingers fall with their lightest and daintiest touch upon Naomi's old piano.

He had chosen a very simple, well-known piece; but it need not be so well known in the bush. Miss Pryse might never have heard it before, in which case she could not fail to be enchanted. It was the "Schlummerlied" of Schumann, and the piano-tuner played it with all the very considerable feeling and refinement of which he was capable, and with a smile all the time for its exceeding

appropriateness. What could chime more truly with the lazy stillness of the Sunday afternoon than this sweet, bewitching lullaby? Engelhardt had always loved it; but never in his life had he played it half so well. As he finished – softly, but not so softly as to risk a single note dropping short of the veranda – he wheeled round again with a sudden self-conscious movement. It was as though he expected to find the door open and Naomi entranced upon the threshold. It is a fact that he sat watching the door-handle to see it turn, first with eagerness, and at last with acute disappointment. His disappointment was no greater when he opened the door himself and saw the book lying in the empty chair. That, indeed, was a relief. To find her sitting there unmoved was what his soul had dreaded.

But now that his work was done, the piano-tuner felt very lonely and unhappy. To escape from these men with whom he could not get on was his strongest desire but one; the other was to stay and see more of the glorious girl who had befriended him; and he was torn between the two, because his longing for love was scarcely more innate than his shrinking from ridicule and scorn. He knew this, too, and had as profound a scorn for himself as any he was likely to meet with from another. His saving grace was the moral courage which enabled him to run counter to his own craven inclinations.

Thus in the early morning he had apologized to Sanderson, the store-keeper, for the loss of his temper overnight; after lying awake for hours chewing the bitterness of this humiliating move, he had determined upon it in the end. But determination was what he had – it takes not a little to bring you to apologize in cold blood to a rougher man than yourself. Engelhardt had done this, and more. At breakfast and at dinner he had made heroic efforts to be affable and at ease with the men who despised him; though each attempt touched a fresh nerve in his sensitive, self-conscious soul. And now, because from the veranda he could descry Gilroy and Sanderson up at the stock-yards, and because these men were the very two whose society he most dreaded, his will was that he must join them then and there.

He was a man himself; and if he could not get on with other men, that was his own lookout. No doubt, too, it was his own fault. It was a fault of which he swore an oath that he would either cure himself or suffer the consequences like a man. He may even have taken a private pride in being game against the grain. There is no fathoming the thoughts that generate action in egotistical, but noble, natures, whose worst enemy is their own inner consciousness.

Gilroy and Sanderson were in the horse-yard, leaning backward against the heavy white rails. Their pipes were in their mouths, and they were watching Sam Rowntree stalk a wiry bay horse that took some catching. Sam was the groom, and he had just run up all the horses out of the horse-paddock. The yard was full of them. Gilroy hauled a freckled hand out of a cross pocket to point at the piano-tuner's nag.

"Poor-looking devil," said he.

"Yes, the kind you see when you're out without a gun," remarked the wit. "Quite good enough for a thing like him, though." Some association of ideas caused him to glance round toward the homestead through the rails. "By the hokey, here's the thing itself!" he cried.

The pair watched Engelhardt approach.

"I'd like to break his beastly head for him," muttered the manager. "The cheek of him, spoiling our spell with that cursed row!"

The piano-tuner came up with a pleasant smile that was an effort to him, and pretended not to notice Sanderson's stock remark, that "queer things come out after the rain."

"You'll be glad to hear, gentlemen, that I've finished my job," said he, airily.

"Thank God," growled Gilroy.

"I know it's been a great infliction – "

"Oh, no, not at all," said Sanderson, winking desperately. "We liked it. It's just what we *do* like. You bet!"

The wiry bay horse had been caught by this time, and Sam Rowntree was saddling it, by degrees, for the animal was obviously fresh and touchy. Engelhardt watched the performance with a bitter

feeling of envy for all Australian men, and of contempt for himself because they contemned him. The fault was his, not theirs. He was of a different order from these rough, light-hearted men – of an altogether inferior order, as it seemed to his self-criticising mind. But that was no excuse for his not getting on with them, and as a rider puts his horse at a fence again and again, so Engelhardt spurred himself on to one more effort to do so.

"That's your horse, Mr. Gilroy?"

"Yes."

"I saw the 'G' on the left shoulder."

"You mean the near shoulder; a horse hasn't a left."

"No? I'm not well up in horses. What's his name?"

"Hard Times."

"That's good! I like his looks, too – not that I know anything about horses."

Here Sanderson whispered something to Gilroy, who said carelessly to Engelhardt:

"Can you ride?"

"I can ride my own moke."

"Like a turn on Hard Times?"

"Yes! I should."

This was said in a manner that was all the more decided for the moments of deliberation which preceded it. The piano-tuner was paler even than usual, but all at once his jaw had grown hard and strong, and there was a keen light in his eyes. The others looked at him, unable to determine whether it was a good rider they were dealing with or a born fool.

"Fetch him out of the yard, Sam," said Gilroy to the groom. "This gentleman here is going to draw first blood."

Sam Rowntree stared.

"You'd better not, mister," said he, looking doubtfully at the musician. "He's fresh off the grass – hasn't had the saddle on him for two months."

"Get away, Sam. The gentleman means to take some of the cussedness out of him. Isn't that it, Engelhardt?"

"I mean to try," said Engelhardt, quietly.

A lanky middle-aged bushman, who had loafed across from the men's hut, here spat into the sand without removing the pipe from his teeth, and put in his word.

"Becod, then ye're a brave man! He bucks like beggary. He's bucked me as high as a blessed house!"

"We'll see how high he can buck me," said Engelhardt.

Gilroy was losing interest in the proceedings. The little fool could ride after all; instead of being scored off, he was going to score. The manager thrust his hands deep in his cross pockets, and watched sullenly, with his yellow eyelashes drooping over his blue eyes. Suddenly he strode forward, crying:

"What the blazes are you up to, you idiot?"

Engelhardt had shown signs of mounting on the off-side, but was smiling as though he had done it on purpose.

"He's all right," said the long stockman with the pipe. "He knows a thing or two, *my* word."

But his style of mounting in the end hardly tallied with this theory. The piano-tuner scrambled into the saddle, and kicked about awkwardly before finding his stirrups; and the next thing he did was to job the horse's mouth with the wanton recklessness of pure innocence. The watchers held their breath. As for Hard Times, he seemed to know that he was bestridden by an unworthy foeman, to appreciate the humor of the situation, and to make up his evil mind to treat it humorously as it deserved. Away he went, along the broad road between homestead and yards, at the sweetest and most guileless canter. The rider was sitting awkwardly enough, but evidently as tight as he knew how. And he needed all the grip within the power of his loins and knees. Half-way to the house, without a

single premonitory symptom, the wiry bay leapt clean into the air, with all its legs gathered up under its body, its head tucked between its knees, and its back arched like a bent bow. Down it came, with a thud, then up again like a ball, again and again, and yet again.

At the first buck Engelhardt stuck nobly; he evidently had been prepared for the worst. The second displayed a triangle of blue sky between his legs and the saddle; he had lost his stirrups and the reins, but was clinging to the mane with all ten fingers, and to the saddle with knees and shins.

"Sit tight!" roared Gilroy. "Stick to him!" yelled Sanderson. "Slide off as he comes down!" shouted the groom.

But if Engelhardt heard them he did not understand. He only knew that for the first time in his life he was on a buck-jumper, and that he meant to stay there as long as the Lord would let him. A wild exhilaration swamped every other sensation. The blue sky fell before him like a curtain at each buck; at the fifth his body was seen against it like a burst balloon; and after that, Hard Times was left to the more difficult but less exciting task of bucking himself out of an empty saddle.

They carried Engelhardt toward the house. But Naomi came running out and met them half-way, and Tom Chester was at her back. From the veranda the two had seen it happen. And in all that was done during the next minutes Naomi was prime mover.

"You call yourselves men. Men indeed! There's more manhood lying here than ever there was or will be in the two of you put together!"

"Hear, hear!"

The voices were those of Miss Pryse and Tom Chester. They were the first that Engelhardt heard when his senses came back to him. But the first thing that was said to him when he opened his eyes was said by Gilroy:

"Why the devil didn't you tell us you couldn't ride?"

He did not answer, but Tom Chester said coolly before them all:

"He can ride a jolly sight better than you can, Gilroy. You sit five bucks and I'll give you five notes."

There was bad blood in the air. The piano-tuner could not help it. His head was all wrong, and his right arm felt red-hot from wrist to elbow; he discovered that it was bare, and in the hands of Miss Pryse. He felt ashamed, it was such a thin arm. But Miss Pryse smiled at him kindly, and he smiled faintly back at her; he just saw Tom Chester tearing the yellow backs off a novel, and handing them to the kneeling girl; then once more he closed his eyes.

"He's off again," said Naomi. "Thank God I can set a joint. There's nothing to watch, all of you! Sam, you may as well turn out this gentleman's horse again. If anybody thought of getting rid of him to-night, they've gone the wrong way about it, for now he shall stay here till he's able to go on tuning pianos."

And as she spoke Naomi looked up, and sent her manager to the rightabout with a single stare of contempt and defiance.

CHAPTER IV

THE TREASURE IN THE STORE

When Engelhardt regained consciousness he found himself spread out on his bed in the barracks, with Tom Chester rather gingerly pulling off his clothes for him as he lay. The first thing he saw was his own heavily splintered arm stretched stiffly across his chest. For the moment this puzzled him. His mind was slow to own so much lumber as a part of his person. Then he remembered, and let his lids fall back without speaking. His head ached abominably, but it was rapidly clearing, both as to what had happened and what was happening now. With slight, instinctive movements, first of one limb, then another, he immediately lightened Tom Chester's task. Presently he realized that he was between the sheets and on the point of being left to himself. This put some life in him for perhaps the space of a minute.

"Thank you," he said, opening his eyes again. "That was awfully good of you."

"What was?" asked the other, in some astonishment. "I thought you were stunned."

"No, not this last minute or two; but my head's splitting; I want to sleep it off."

"Poor chap! I'll leave you now. But what induced you to tackle Hard Times, when you weren't a rider, sweet Heaven only knows!"

"I was a fool," said Engelhardt, wearily.

"You leave that for us to say," returned the other. "You've got some pluck, whatever you are, and that's about all you want in the bush. So long."

He went straight to Naomi, who was awaiting him outside with considerable anxiety. They hovered near the barracks, talking all things over for some time longer. Then Naomi herself stole with soft, bold steps to the piano-tuner's door. There she hesitated, one hand on the latch, the other at her ear. It ended in her entering his room on tiptoe. A moment later she was back in the yard, her fine face shining with relief.

"He's sleeping like a baby," she said to Chester. "I think we may perhaps make our minds easy about him now – don't you? I was terribly frightened of concussion; but that's all right, or he wouldn't be breathing as he is now. We'll let him be for an hour or two, and then send Mrs. Potter to him with some toast and tea. Perhaps you'll look him up last thing, Mr. Chester, and give him a hand in the morning if he feels well enough to get up?"

"Certainly I would, Miss Pryse, if I were here; but we were all going out to the shed to-night, as usual, so as to make an early start – "

"I know; I know. And very glad I shall be to get quit of the others; but I have this poor young man on my mind, and you at least must stop till morning to see me through. I shall mention it myself to Mr. Gilroy."

"Very well," said Chester, who was only too charmed with the plan. "I'll stop, with all my heart, and be very glad to do anything that I can."

With Chester it was certainly two for himself and one for the unlucky Engelhardt. He made the most of his evening with Naomi all to himself. It was not a very long evening, for Gilroy delayed his departure to the last limit, and then drove off in a sullen fury, spitting oaths right and left and lashing his horses like a madman. This mood of the manager's left Chester in higher spirits than ever; he had the satisfaction of feeling himself partly responsible for it. Moreover, he had given Gilroy, whom he frankly detested, the most excellent provocation to abuse him to his face before starting; but, as usual, the opening had been declined. Such were the manager of Taroomba and his subordinate the overseer; the case was sufficiently characteristic of them both. As for Chester, he made entertaining talk with Naomi as long as she would sit up, and left her with an assurance that he would attend to the

piano-tuner like a mother. Nor was he much worse than his word; though the patient knew nothing until awakened next morning by the clatter and jingle of boots and spurs at his bedside.

"What is it?" he cried, struggling to sit up.

"Me," said Chester. "Lie perfectly tight. I only came to tell you that your breakfast's coming in directly, and to see how you are. How are you? Had some sleep?"

"Any quantity," said Engelhardt, with a laugh that slipped into a yawn. "I feel another man."

"How's the arm?"

"I don't feel to have one. I suppose it's broken, is it?"

"No, my boy, only dislocated. So Miss Pryse said when she fixed it up, and she knows all about that sort of thing. How's the head?"

"Right as the bank!"

"I don't believe you. You're the color of candles. If you feel fit to get up, after you've had something to eat, I'm to give you a hand; but if I were you I'd lie in."

"Die first," cried the piano-tuner, laughing heartily with his white face.

"Well, we'll see. Here comes Mother Potter with your breakfast. I'll be back in half an hour, and we'll see about it then."

Chester came back to find the piano-tuner half dressed with his one hand. He was stripped and dripping to the waist, and he raised his head so vigorously from the cold water, at the overseer's entrance, that the latter was well splashed.

"Dry me," he cried.

The overseer did his best.

"I feel as fit as a Strad," panted Engelhardt.

"What may that be?"

"A fiddle and a half."

"Then you don't look it."

"But I soon shall. What's a dislocated arm? Steady on, I say, though. Easy over the stones!"

Chester was nonplussed.

"My dear fellow, you're bruised all over. It'd be cruel to touch you with a towel of cotton-wool."

"Go on," said Engelhardt. "I must be dried and dressed. Dry away! I can stand it."

The other exercised the very greatest care; but ribs and shoulders on the same side as the injured arm were fairly dappled with bruises, and it was perfectly impossible not to hurt. Once he caught Engelhardt wincing. He was busy at his back, and only saw it in the mirror.

"I am hurting you!" he cried.

"Not a bit, sir. Fire away!"

The white face in the mirror was still racked with pain.

"Where did you get your pluck?" asked Chester, casually, when all was over.

"From my mother," was the prompt reply; "such as I possess."

"My boy," said Chester, "you've as much as most!" And, without thinking, he slapped the other only too heartily on the bruised shoulder. Next moment he was sufficiently horrified at what he had done, for this time the pain was more than the sufferer could conceal. In an instant, however, he was laughing off his friend's apologies with no less tact than self-control.

"You're about the pluckiest little devil I've ever seen," said the overseer at last. "I thought so yesterday – I know so to-day."

The piano-tuner beamed with joy. "What rot," however, was all he said.

"Not it, my boy! You're a good sort. You've got as much pluck in one hair of your head – though they *are* long 'uns, mind – as that fellow Gilroy has in his whole composition. Now I must be off to the shed. I should stroll about in the air, if I were you, but keep out of the sun. If you care to smoke, you'll find a tin of cut-up on the corner bracket in my room, and Miss Pryse'll give you a new pipe out of the store if you want one. You'll see her about pretty soon, I should say. Oh, yes,

she had breakfast with me. She means to keep you by main force till you're up to piano-tuning again. Serve Gilroy jolly well right, the brute! So we'll meet again this week-end; meanwhile, good-by, old chap, and more power to the arm."

Engelhardt watched the overseer out of sight, with a mingled warmth and lightness of heart which for the moment were making an unusually happy young man of him. This Chester was the very incarnation of a type that commonly treated him, as he was too ready to fancy, with contempt; and yet that was the type of all others whose friendship and admiration he coveted most. All his life he had been so shy and so sensitive that the good in him, the very best of him, was an unknown quantity to all save those who by accident or intimacy struck home to his inner nature. The latter was true as steel, and brave, patient, and enduring to an unsuspected degree; but a cluster of small faults hid this from the ordinary eye. The man was a little too anxious to please – to do the right thing – to be liked or loved by those with whom he mixed. As a natural consequence, his anxiety defeated his design. Again, he was a little too apt to be either proud or ashamed of himself – one or the other – he never could let himself alone. Wherefore appreciation was inordinately sweet to his soul, and the reverse proportionately bitter. Mere indifference hurt him no less than active disdain; indeed, where there was the former, he was in the bad habit of supposing the latter; and thus the normal current of his life was never clear of little unnecessary griefs of which he was ashamed to speak, but which he only magnified by keeping them to himself. Perhaps he had his compensating joys. Certainly he was as often in exceedingly high spirits as in the dumps, and it is just possible that the former are worth the latter. In any case he was in the best of spirits this morning; nor by any means ashamed of his slung arm, but rather the reverse, if the whole truth be told. And yet, with a fine girl like Naomi, and a smart bushman like Tom Chester, both thinking well of him together, there surely was for once some slight excuse for an attack of self-satisfaction. It was transitory enough, and rare enough, too, Heaven knows.

In this humor, at all events, he wandered about the yard for some time, watching the veranda incessantly with jealous eyes. His saunterings led him past the rather elaborate well, in the centre of the open space, to the store on the farther side. This was a solid isolated building, very strongly built, with an outer coating of cement, and a corrugated roof broken on the foremost slope by a large-sized skylight. A shallow veranda ran in front, but was neither continued at the ends nor renewed at the back of the building. Nor were there any windows; the piano-tuner walked right round to see, and on coming back to the door (a remarkably strong one) there was Naomi fitting in her key. She was wearing an old black dress, an obvious item of her cast-off mourning, and over it, from her bosom to her toes, a brilliantly white apron, which struck Engelhardt as the most charming garment he had ever seen.

"Good business!" she cried at sight of him. "I know how you are from Mr. Chester. Just hold these things while I take both hands to this key; it always is so stiff."

The things in question, which she reached out to him with her left hand, consisted of a box of plate-powder, a piece of chamois leather, a tooth-brush, and a small bottle of methylated spirits; the lot lying huddled together in a saucer.

"That does it," continued Naomi as the lock shot back with a bang and the door flew open. "Now come on in. You can lend me your only hand. I never thought of that."

Engelhardt followed her into the store. Inside it was one big room, filled with a good but subdued light (for as yet the sun was beating upon the hinder slope of corrugated iron), and with those motley necessaries of station life which are to be seen in every station store. Sides of bacon, empty ration-bags, horse-collars and hames, bridles and reins, hung promiscuously from the beams. Australian saddles kept their balance on stout pegs jutting out from the walls. The latter were barely lined with shelves, like book-cases, but laden with tinned provisions of every possible description, sauces and patent medicines in bottles, whiskey and ink in stone jars, cases of tea, tobacco, raisins, and figs. Engelhardt noticed a great green safe, with a couple of shot-guns and a repeating-rifle in a rack beside

it, and two or three pairs of rusty hand-cuffs on a nail hard by. The floor was fairly open, but for a few sacks of flour in a far corner. It was cut up, however, by a raised desk with a high office-stool to it, and by the permanent, solid-looking counter which faced the door. A pair of scales, of considerable size and capacity, was the one encumbrance on the counter. Naomi at once proceeded to remove it, first tossing the weights onto the flour bags, one after the other, and then lifting down the scales before Engelhardt had time to help her. Thereafter she slapped the counter with her flat hand, and stood looking quizzically at her guest.

"You don't know what's under this counter," she said at last, announcing an obvious fact with extraordinary unction.

"I don't, indeed," said the piano-tuner, shaking his head.

"Nor does your friend Mr. Sanderson, though he's the store-keeper. He's out at the shed during shearing-time, branding bales and seeing to the loading of the drays. But all the rest of the year he keeps the books at that desk or serves out rations across this counter; and yet he little dreams what's underneath it."

"You interest me immensely, Miss Pryse."

"I wonder if I dare interest you any more?"

"You had better not trust me with a secret."

"Why not? Do you mean that you couldn't keep one?"

"I don't say that; but I have no right –"

"Right be bothered," cried Naomi, crisply; "there's no question of right."

Engelhardt colored up.

"I was only going to say that I had no right to get in your way and perhaps make you feel it was better to tell me things than to turn me out," he explained, humbly. "I shall turn myself out, since you are too kind to do it for me. I meant in any case to take a walk in the pines."

"Did I invite you to come in here, or did I not?" inquired Miss Pryse.

"Well, only to carry these things. Here they are."

He held them out to her, but she refused to look at them.

"When I tell you I don't want you, then it will be time for you to go," she said. "Since you don't live here, there's not the least reason why you shouldn't know what no man on the place knows, except Mr. Gilroy. Besides, you can really help me. So now will you be good?"

"I'll try," said Engelhardt, catching her smile.

"Then I forgive everything. Now listen to me. My dear father was the best and kindest man in all the world; but he had his fair share of eccentricity. I have mine, too; and you most certainly have yours; but that's neither here nor there. My father came of a pretty good old Welsh family. In case you think I'm swaggering about it, let me tell you I'd like to take that family and drop the whole crew in the well outside – yes, and heat up the water to boil 'em before they'd time to drown! I owe them nothing nice, don't you believe it. They treated my father shamefully; but he was the eldest son, and when the old savage, *his* father, had the good taste to die, mine went home and collared his dues. He didn't get much beyond the family plate; but sure enough he came back with that. And didn't the family sit up, that's all! However, his eccentricity came in then. He must needs bring that plate up here. It's here still. I'm sitting on it now!"

Indeed, she had perched herself on the counter while speaking; and now, spinning round where she sat, she was down on the other side and fumbling at a padlock before her companion could open his mouth.

"Isn't it very dangerous?" he said at length, as Naomi stood up and set the padlock on the desk.

"Hardly that. Mr. Gilroy is absolutely the only person who knows that it is here. Still, the bank would be best, of course, and I mean to have it all taken there one of these days. Meanwhile, I clean my silver whenever I come up here. It's a splendid opportunity when my young men are all out at the shed. I did a lot last week, and I expect to finish off this morning."

As she spoke the top of the counter answered to the effort of her two strong arms, and came up with a jerk. She raised it until it caught, when Engelhardt could just get his chin over the rim, and see a huge, heavily clamped plate-chest lying like a kernel in its shell. There were more locks to undo. Then the baize-lined lid of the chest was raised in its turn. And in a very few minutes the Taroomba store presented a scene which it would have been more than difficult to match throughout the length and breadth of the Australian bush.

CHAPTER V

MASTERLESS MEN

Naomi had seated herself on the tall stool at the bookkeeper's desk, on which she had placed in array the silver that was still unclean. This included a fine old epergne, of quaint design and exceedingly solid proportions; a pair of candlesticks, in the familiar form of the Corinthian column – more modern, but equally handsome in their way; a silver coffee-pot with an ivory handle; and a number of ancient skewers. She tackled the candlesticks first. They were less tarnished than might have been expected, and in Naomi's energetic hands they soon regained their pristine purity and lustre. As she worked she talked freely of her father, and his family in Wales, to Engelhardt, for whose benefit she had unpacked many of the things which she had already cleaned, and set them out upon the counter after shutting it down as before. He, too, was seated, on the counter's farther edge, with his back half-turned to the door. And the revelation of so much treasure in that wild place made him more and more uneasy.

"I should have thought you'd be frightened to have this sort of thing on the premises," he could not help saying.

"Frightened of what?"

"Well – bushrangers."

"They don't exist. They're as extinct as the dodo. But that reminds me!"

She broke off abruptly, and sat staring thoughtfully at the door, which was standing ajar. She even gave the steps of her Corinthian column a rest from tooth-brush and plate-powder.

"That reminds you?"

"Yes – of bushrangers. We once had some here, before they became extinct."

"Since you've had the plate?"

"Yes; it was the plate they were after. How they got wind of it no one ever knew."

"Is it many years ago?"

"Well, I was quite a little girl at the time. But I never shall forget it! I woke in the night, hearing shots, and I ran into the veranda in my night-dress. There was my father behind one of the veranda posts, with a revolver in each hand, roaring and laughing as though it were the greatest joke in the world; and there were two men in the store veranda, just outside this door. They were shooting at father, all they knew, but they couldn't hit him, though they hit the post nearly every time. I'll show you the marks when we go over to lunch. My father kept laughing and shooting at them the whole time. It was just the sort of game he liked. But at last one of the men fell in a heap outside the door, and then the other bolted for his horse. He got away, too; but he left something behind him that he'll never replace in this world or the next."

"What was that?" asked Engelhardt with a long breath.

"His little finger. My father amputated it with one of his shots. It was picked up between this and the place where he mounted his horse. Father got him on the wing!" said Naomi, proudly.

"Was he caught?"

"No, he was never heard of again."

"And the man who was shot?"

"He was as dead as sardines. And who do you suppose he turned out to be?"

Engelhardt shook his head.

"Tigerskin the bushranger! No less! It was a dirty burgling business for a decent bushranger to lose his life in, now wasn't it? For they never stuck up the station, mind you; they were caught trying to burst into the store. Luckily, they didn't succeed. The best of it was that at the inquest, and all

that, it never came out what it was they really wanted in our store. Soon afterward my father had the windows blocked up and the whole place cemented over, as you see it now."

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