Hornung Ernest William

At Large

Ernest Hornung

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Содержание

E. W. Hornung
At Large

I
A NUCLEUS OF FORTUNE

A hooded wagon was creeping across a depressing desert in the middle of Australia; layers of boxes under the hood, and of brass-handled, mahogany drawers below the boxes, revealed the licensed hawker of the bush. Now, the hawker out there is a very extensive development of his prototype here at home; he is Westbourne Grove on wheels, with the prices of Piccadilly, W. But these particular providers were neither so universal nor so exorbitant as the generality of their class. There were but two of them; they drove but two horses; and sat shoulder to shoulder on the box.

The afternoon was late; all day the horses had been crawling, for the track was unusually heavy. There had been recent rains; red mud clogged the wheels at every yard, and clung to them in sticky tires. Little pools had formed all over the plain; and westward, on the off-side of the wagon, these pools caught the glow of the setting sun, and filled with flame. Far over the horses' ears a long low line of trees was visible; otherwise the plain was unbroken; you might ride all day on these plains and descry no other horse nor man.

The pair upon the box were partners. Their names were Flint and Edmonstone. Flint was enjoying a senior partner's prerogative, and lolling back wreathed in smoke. His thick bare arms were idly folded. He was a stout, brown, bearded man, who at thirty looked many years older; indolence, contentment, and goodwill were written upon his face.

The junior partner was driving, and taking some pains about it – keeping clear of the deep ruts, and pushing the pace only where the track was good. He looked twenty years Flint's junior, and was, in fact, just of age. He was strongly built and five-feet-ten, with honest gray eyes, fair hair, and an inelastic mouth.

Both of these men wore flannel shirts, buff cord trousers, gray felt wideawakes; both were public-school men, drawn together in the first instance by that mutually surprising fact, and for the rest as different as friends could be. Flint had been ten years in the Colonies, Edmonstone not quite ten weeks. Flint had tried everything, and failed; Edmonstone had everything before him, and did not mean to fail. Flint was experienced, Edmonstone sanguine; things surprised Edmonstone, nothing surprised Flint. Edmonstone had dreams of the future, and golden dreams; Flint troubled only about the present, and that very little. In fine, while Edmonstone saw licensed hawking leading them both by a short cut to fortune, and earnestly intended that it should, Flint said they would be lucky if their second trip was as successful as their first, now all but come to an end.

The shadow of horses and wagon wavered upon the undulating plain as they drove. The shadows grew longer and longer; there was a noticeable change in them whenever young Edmonstone bent forward to gaze at the sun away to the right, and then across at the eastern sky already tinged with purple; and that was every five minutes.

"It will be dark in less than an hour," the lad exclaimed at last, in his quick, anxious way; "dark just as we reach the scrub; we shall have no moon until eleven or so, and very likely not strike the river to-night."

The sentences were punctuated with sharp cracks of the whip. An answer came from Edmonstone's left, in the mild falsetto that contrasted so queerly with the bodily bulk of Mr. John Flint, and startled all who heard him speak for the first time.

"My good fellow, I implore you again to spare the horseflesh and the whipcord – both important items – and take it easy like me."

"Jack," replied Edmonstone warmly, "you know well enough why I want to get to the Murrumbidgee to-night. No? Well, at all events, you own that we should lose no time about getting to some bank or other?"

"Yes, on the whole. But I don't see the good of hurrying on now to reach the township at an unearthly hour, when all the time we might camp in comfort anywhere here. To my mind, a few hours, or even a night or two, more or less – "

"Are neither here nor there? Exactly!" broke in Edmonstone, with increasing warmth. "Jack, Jack! the days those very words cost us! Add them up – subtract them from the time we've been on the roads – and we'd have been back a week ago at least. I shall have no peace of mind until I step out of the bank, and that's the truth of it." As he spoke, the fingers of Edmonstone's right hand rested for a moment, with a curious, involuntary movement, upon his right breast.

"I can see that," returned Flint, serenely. "The burden of riches, you see – and young blood! When you've been out here as long as I have, you'll take things easier, my son."

"You don't understand my position," said Edmonstone. "You laugh when I tell you I came out here to make money: all the same, I mean to do it. I own I had rotten ideas about Australia – all new chums have. But if I can't peg out my claim and pick up nuggets, I'm going to do the next best thing. It may be hawking and it may not. I mean to see. But we must give the thing a chance, and not run unnecessary risks with the gross proceeds of our very first trip. A hundred and thirty pounds isn't a fortune; but it may be the nucleus of one; and it's all we've got between us in this world meanwhile."

"My dear old boy, I'm fully alive to it. I only don't see the point of finishing the trip at a gallop."

"The point is that our little all is concealed about my person," said Edmonstone, grimly.

"And my point is that it and we are absolutely safe. How many more times am I to tell you so?" And there was a squeak of impatience in the absurd falsetto voice, followed by clouds of smoke from the bearded lips.

Edmonstone drove some distance without a word.

"Yet only last week," he remarked at length, "a store was stuck up on the Darling!"

"What of that?"

"The storekeeper was robbed of every cent he had."

"I know."

"Yet they shot him dead in the end."

"And they'll swing for it."

"Meanwhile they've shown clean heels, and nobody knows where they are – or are not."

"Consequently you expect to find them waiting for us in the next clump, eh?"

"No, I don't. I only deny that we are absolutely safe."

Flint knocked out his pipe with sudden energy.

"My dear boy," cried he, "have I or have I not been as many years out here as you've been weeks? I tell you I was in the mounted police, down in Vic, all through the Kelly business; joined in the hunt myself; and back myself to know a real bushranger when I see him or read about him. This fellow who has the cheek to call himself Sundown is not a bushranger at all; he and his mates are mere robbers and murderers. Ned Kelly didn't go shooting miserable storekeepers; and he was the last of the bushrangers, and is likely to remain the last. Besides, these chaps will streak up-country, not down; but, if it's any comfort to you, see here," and Flint pocketed his pipe, made a long arm overhead and reached a Colt's revolver from a hook just inside the hood of the wagon, "let this little plaything reassure you. What, didn't you know I was a dead shot with this? My dear chap, I wasn't in the mounted police for nothing. Why, I could pick out your front teeth at thirty yards and paint my name on your waistcoat at twenty!"

Flint stroked the glittering barrel caressingly, and restored the pistol to its hook: there was a cartridge in every chamber.

The other said nothing for a time, but was more in earnest than ever when he did speak.

"Jack," said he, "I can only tell you this: if we were to lose our money straight away at the outset I should be a lost man. How could we go on without it – hawking with an empty wagon? How could I push, push, push – as I've got to – after losing all to start with? A hundred pounds! It isn't much, but it is everything to me – everything. Let me only keep it a bit and it shall grow under my eyes. Take it away from me and I am done for – completely done for."

He forgot that he was using the first person singular instead of plural; it had become natural to him to think out the business and its possibilities in this way, and it was no less in Flint's nature to see no selfishness in his friend's speech. Flint only said solemnly:

"You shouldn't think so much about money, old chap."

"Money and home!" exclaimed Dick Edmonstone in a low, excited tone. "Home and money! It's almost all I do think about."

Jack Flint leaned forward, and narrowly scanned the face of his friend; then lay back again, with a light laugh of forced cheerfulness.

"Why, Dick, you speak as though you had been exiled for years, and it's not three months since you landed."

Dick started. It already seemed years to him.

"Besides," continued the elder man, "I protest against any man growing morbid who can show a balance-sheet like ours. As to home-sickness, wait until you have been out here ten years; wait until you have tried digging, selecting, farming, droving; wait until you have worn a trooper's uniform and a counter jumper's apron, and ridden the boundaries at a pound a week, and tutored Young Australia for your rations. When you have tried all these things – and done no good at any of 'em, mark you – then, if you like, turn home-sick."

The other did not answer. Leaning forward, he whipped up the horses, and gazed once more towards the setting sun. His companion could not see his face; but trouble and anxiety were in that long, steady, westward gaze. He was very young, this lad Edmonstone – young even for his years. Unlike his mate, his thoughts were all of the past and of the future; both presented happy pictures; so happy that his mind would fly from the one to the other without touching the present. And so he thought now, gazing westward, of home, and of something sweeter than home itself; and he blended that which had gone before with that which was yet to come; and so wonderful was the harmony between these two that to-day was entirely forgotten. Then the sun swung half-way below the dark line of the horizon; a golden pathway shone across the sandy track right to the wheels of the wagon; the dark line of scrub, now close at hand, looked shadowy and mysterious; the sunset colours declared themselves finally in orange and pink and gray, before the spreading purple caught and swallowed them. The dreamer's face grew indistinct, but his golden dreams were more vivid than before.

A deadly stillness enveloped the plain, making all sounds staccato: the rhythmical footfall of the horses, the hoarse notes of crows wheeling through the twilight like uncanny heralds of night, the croaking of crickets in the scrub ahead.

Dick was recalled to the antipodes by a mild query from his mate.

"Are you asleep, driver?"

"No."

"You haven't noticed any one ahead of us this afternoon on horseback?"

"No; why?"

"Because here are some one's tracks," said Flint, pointing to a fresh horse-trail on the side of the road.

Edmonstone stretched across to look. It was difficult in the dusk to distinguish the trail, which was the simple one of a horse walking.

"I saw no one," he said; "but during the last hour it would have been impossible to see any one, as close to the scrub as we are now. Whoever it is, he must have struck the track hereabouts somewhere, or we should have seen his trail before sundown."

"Whoever it is," said Flint, "we shall see him in a minute. Don't you hear him? He is still at a walk."

Edmonstone listened, and the measured beat of hoofs grew upon his ear; another moment and a horseman's back was looming through the dusk – very broad and round, with only the crown of a wideawake showing above the shoulders. As the wagon drew abreast his horse was wheeled to one side, and a hearty voice hailed the hawkers:

"Got a match, mateys? I've used my last, and I'm just weakening for a smoke."

"Here's my box," said Dick, pulling up. "Take as many as you like."

And he dropped his match-box into a great fat hand with a wrist like a ship's cable, and strong stumpy fingers: it was not returned until a loaded pipe was satisfactorily alight; and as the tobacco glowed in the bowl the man's face glowed in company. It was huge like himself, and bearded to the eyes, which were singularly small and bright, and set very close together.

"I don't like that face," said Dick when the fellow had thanked him with redoubled heartiness, and ridden on.

"It looked good-natured."

"It was and it wasn't. I don't want to see it again; but I shall know it if ever I do. I had as good a look at him as he had at us."

Flint made no reply; they entered the forest of low-sized malee and pine in silence.

"Jack," gasped Edmonstone, very suddenly, after half-an-hour, "there's some one galloping in the scrub somewhere – can't you hear?"

"Eh?" said Flint, waking from a doze.

"Some one's galloping in the scrub – can't you hear the branches breaking? Listen."

"I hear nothing."

"Listen again."

Flint listened intently.

"Yes – no. I thought for an instant – but no, there is no sound now."

He was right: there was no sound then, and he was somewhat ruffled.

"What are you giving us, Dick? If you will push on, why, let's do it; only we do one thing or the other."

Dick whipped up the horses without a word. For five minutes they trotted on gamely; then, without warning, they leaped to one side with a shy that half-overturned the wagon.

Side by side, and motionless in the starlight, sat two shadowy forms on horseback, armed with rifles, and masked to the chin.

"Hands up," cried one of them, "or we plug."

II
SUNDOWN

There was no time for thought, much less for action, beyond that taken promptly by Flint, who shot his own hands above his head without a moment's hesitation, and whispered to Dick to do the same. Any other movement would have been tantamount to suicide. Yet it was with his eyes open and his head cool that Flint gave the sign of submission.

The horsemen sat dark and motionless as the trees of the sleeping forest around them. They were contemplating the completeness of their triumph, grinning behind their masks.

Flint saw his chance. Slowly, very slowly, his left arm, reared rigidly above his head, swayed backward; his body moved gently with his arm; his eyes never left the two mysterious mounted men.

He felt his middle finger crowned by a cool ring. It was the muzzle of his precious Colt. One grasp, and at least he would be armed.

He turned his wrist for the snatch, gazing steadily all the while at the two vague shadows of men. Another second – and a barrel winked in the starlight, to gleam steadily as it covered Flint's broad chest. He who had called upon them to throw up their hands spoke again; his voice seemed to come from the muzzle of the levelled rifle.

"Stretch an inch more, you on the near-side, and you're the last dead man."

Flint shrugged his shoulders. The game was lost. There was no more need to lose his head than if the game had been won. There was no need at all to lose his life.

"I give you best," said he, without the least emotion in his extraordinary voice.

"Fold your arms and come down," said the man with the rifle, his finger on the trigger.

Flint did as he was ordered.

"The same – you with the reins."

Edmonstone's only answer was a stupefied stare.

"Jump down, my friend, unless you want helping with this."

Dick obeyed apathetically; he was literally dazed. At a sign from the man with the rifle he took his stand beside Flint; three paces in front of the luckless pair shone the short barrel of the Winchester repeater. The other robber had dismounted, and was standing at the horses' heads.

In this position, a moment's silence fell upon the four men, to be broken by the coarse, grating laughter of a fifth. Edmonstone turned his head, saw another horseman issuing from the trees, and at once recognised the burly figure of the traveller who had borrowed his match-box less than an hour before. At that moment, and not until then, Dick Edmonstone realised the situation. It was desperate; all was lost! The lad's brain spun like a top: reason fled from it; his hand clutched nervously at the pocket where the money was, and he swore in his heart that if that went, his life might go with it.

In another instant the hairy ruffian had ridden his horse close up to Edmonstone, whipped his foot from the stirrup, and kicked the youngster playfully in the chest – on that very spot which his thoughtless gesture had betrayed.

At this the other bushrangers set up a laugh – a short one.

With a spring like a young leopard, Dick Edmonstone had the big horseman by the beard, and down they came to the ground together. There, in the sand, they rolled over each other, locked in mortal combat – writhing, leaping, twisting, shifting – so that the leader of the band, though he pointed his rifle at the struggling men, dared not fire, for fear of hitting the wrong one. But there came a moment when the struggling ceased, when Flint sprang forward with a hoarse cry on his lips and Sundown took careless aim with the Winchester.

Dick Edmonstone was lying on his back with white, upturned face. Two crushing weights pinned down each arm below the shoulder; his adversary was kneeling on him with grinding teeth and

a frightful face, and one hand busy at his belt. His hand flew up with a gleam. It was at that moment that the man with the rifle raised it and fired.

The bearded ruffian shook his hand as though hit, and the haft of a knife slipped from it; the bullet had carried away the blade. With a curse he felt for his revolver.

"Don't be a fool, Jem Pound," said the marksman quietly, lowering his smoking piece. "Before you bring the lot of us to the gallows, I'll put a bullet through your own fat head. Get up, you big fool! Cut the mokes adrift, and turn everything out of the wagon."

The man Pound rose sulkily, with a curious last look at the young Englishman's throat, and hell-fire in his little eyes.

"Ben, watch this cove," the chief went on, pointing to Flint, "and watch him with the shooter. I'll see to the youngster myself. Come here, my friend."

The speaker was plainly no other than the rascal who called himself Sundown; the hawkers heard the sobriquet on the lips of the other masked man, and their glances met. He was wrapped in a cloak that hid him from head to heels, stooped as he walked, and was amply masked. What struck Flint – who was sufficiently cool to remain an attentive observer – was the absence of vulgar bluster about this fellow; he addressed confederates and captives alike in the same quiet, decisive tones, without either raising his voice to a shout or filling the air with oaths. It appeared that Ned Kelly had not been the last of the real bushrangers, after all.

"You come along with me," said he, quietly; and drew Dick aside, pointing at him the rifle, which he grasped across the breech, with a finger still upon the trigger.

"Now," continued Sundown, when they had withdrawn a few yards into the scrub, "turn out that pocket." He tapped Edmonstone on the chest with the muzzle of the rifle.

Dick folded his arms and took a short step backward.

"Shoot me!" he exclaimed, looking the robber full in the face. "Why did you save me a minute ago? I prefer to die. Shoot me, and have done with it."

"Open your coat," said the bushranger.

Edmonstone tore open not only his coat, but his shirt as well, thus baring his chest.

"There. Shoot!" he repeated hoarsely.

Sundown stared at the boy with a moment's curiosity, but paid no heed to his words.

"Empty that pocket."

Dick took out the pocket-book that contained all the funds of the firm.

"Open it."

Dick obeyed.

"How much is in it?"

"A hundred and thirty pounds."

"Good! Cheques!"

"More notes."

The robber laughed consumedly.

"Take them, if you are going to," said Dick, drawing a deep breath.

Sundown did take them – pocket-book and all – still covering his man with the rifle. The moon was rising. In the pale light the young fellow's face was ghastly to look upon; it had the damp pallor of death itself. The bushranger eyed it closely, and half-dropped the bushranger's manner.

"New chum, I take it!"

"What of that?" returned Dick bitterly.

"And not long set up shop?"

Dick made no answer. Sundown stepped forward and gripped his shoulder.

"Say, mate, is this hundred and odd quid so very much to you?"

Still no answer.

"On oath, now: is it so very much?"

Dick looked up wildly.

"Much? It is everything. You have robbed me of all I have! You have saved my life when I'd as soon lose it with my money. Yes, it's all I have in the world, since you want to know! Do you want to madden me, you cur? Shoot me – shoot, I tell you. If you don't I'll make you!" And the young madman clenched his fist as he spoke.

That instant he felt himself seized by the neck and pushed forward, with a ring of cold steel pressing below his ear.

"Here you – Jem Pound – have your revenge and bind this cub. Bind tight, but fair, for I'm watching you."

In five minutes the blood would scarcely circulate in a dozen different parts of Edmonstone's body; he was bound as tightly as vindictive villain could bind him, to the off hind-wheel of his own wagon. Sundown stood by with the rifle, and saw it done.

Flint had already been bound to the near hind-wheel, so that the partners were lashed back to back – both able to watch their property looted at the rear of the wagon, but unable to exchange glances.

Sundown strolled about during the operation, which his subordinates conducted with deepening disgust, till he returned and asked what they had got.

"Precious little," was the answer. "Stock sold out – boxes mostly empty."

Nevertheless some few varieties of bush merchandise strewed the ground, and hats, boots, and pipes were quickly selected by Jem Pound and the man addressed as Ben; though as for Sundown, he seemed content with a supply of smoking materials, and, indeed, to be more or less preoccupied while the plunder went forward. At length, at a word from him, the other men mounted their horses, while their leader walked round to where Flint was spread-eagled against the wheel.

"Is there anything you want before we go?" the bushranger inquired, as civilly as you please.

"Yes," said Flint; "I want you to fill my pipe, stick it in my mouth, and put a match to it, if you will be so good."

The other laughed, but complied with the full request before turning his attention to young Edmonstone.

"As for you," he said, "here's your pocket-book. I couldn't take such a treasure from you. Better keep it in memory of the fortune (the immense fortune of a hundred and thirty pounds) it once contained. Not that I have quite emptied it, though; I may be a devil, but I never clean a man out quite; so you'll find enough left to get you a night's lodging and some tucker. And – and don't forget old Sundown altogether; you may be able to put in a good word for him some day!"

These last words, though spoken after a pause, were thrown off lightly enough; yet somehow they were unlike the rest that had gone before. Before their sound had died away Sundown was in his saddle, and the sound of horses galloping through the scrub was growing faint and far away.

Flint was the first to free himself. It took him hours. His teeth ached, his fingers bled, before the last knot that bound his hands was undone. His knife quickly did the rest.

He went straight to Edmonstone, who had not spoken since the gang decamped. Flint found him pale and cold, with a very hard expression upon his face. Dick allowed himself to be set free without a word – without so much as an intelligent glance.

The horses could be heard munching bits of bushes close at hand. They were easily caught. Nor was it a difficult task to a ready-handed fellow like Flint to splice the traces, which the bushrangers had cut.

The crestfallen partners were on the point of reentering the wagon, when Flint saw the pocket-book lying where it had been dropped.

"Better take it," said Flint sorrowfully.

In utter apathy Dick picked it up.

"Wouldn't you see if they've cleaned it entirely?" suggested Flint.

With listless fingers Edmonstone withdrew the elastic and opened the pocket-book.

By this time the moon had mounted high in the clear southern sky; by her pure white rays they might have read small print. Flint's heart smote him; it was by his doing they had carried so many notes, through a fad of his about opening their banking account with hard cash; at cheques the bushrangers might easily have turned up their noses, as bushrangers had done before. But now, as it was – poor, poor young devil!

A cry broke the silence, and rang out loud and wild upon the still night air. It came from Flint's side. He turned to find his companion tottering and trembling.

Dick Edmonstone had dropped the pocket-book, and was nervously counting a roll of crisp, crackling papers.

"They are all here! – all! all!" he whispered in a strange, broken voice.

"Never!"

"Yes, all – all! Only think of it; our fortune is not lost, after all – it's made – the key to it is in my hand again! Jack, the fellow had pity on me. No, I mean on us. I don't mean to be selfish, Jack; it's share and share alike, between you and me, and always will be. But if you knew – if you knew! Jack, I'll put in that good word for him – I'll make it more than words, if ever I get the chance! For I do owe him something," said the poor fellow, carried away by reaction and excitement, so that his breaking voice trembled between sobs and laughter. "I do owe that Sundown something. God bless him – that's all *I* say."

But Flint said nothing at all; he was much too amazed for words.

III
AFTER FOUR YEARS

One chilly night in June, 1886, the ship *Hesper*, bound from Melbourne to London, sailed into the Channel. She carried the usual wool cargo and twenty saloon passengers besides. When the Lizard light was sighted, the excitement – which had increased hourly since the Western Islands were left astern – knew no reasonable bounds. For the *Hesper* was a hundred and eight days out; and among her passengers were grizzled Colonists, to whom this light was the first glimmer of England for thirty years; men who had found in the Colonial Exhibition at South Kensington an excuse to intrust vast flocks and herds to the hands of overseers, and to consummate that darling scheme of every prosperous Colonial, which they render by their phrase "a trip home." Sweepstakes on the date of sighting England, got up in the tropics, were now promptly settled; quarrels begun in the Southern Ocean were made up in the magic element of British waters; discontent was in irons, and joy held the ship. Far into the middle-watch festive souls perambulated the quarter-deck with noisy expressions of mirth, though with the conviction that the vessel was behaving badly; whereas the vessel was a good deal more innocent of that charge than the gentlemen who preferred it. But even when the last of these roysterers retired there was still one passenger left on the poop.

A young man leaned with folded arms upon the port rail, staring out into the night. It seemed as though his eye penetrated the darkness, and found something bright beyond, so wistful was its gaze. One bell rang out from the forecastle, two bells followed half an hour later at one o'clock, but the figure of this dreamer remained motionless. For an hour he did not stir; but, as his imagination became more vivid, the expression of his eyes grew softer, until their yearning melted into a thin, thin film, and the firm lines of the mouth relaxed, and facial creases carved by a few hard years were smoothed away. He was only a few hours ahead of the *Hesper* after all: she was off the Cornish coast, and he (in fancy) far up the Thames.

Three-bells aroused the dreamer. He stood upright with a start. He passed his hand quickly across his forehead, as if to rid his brain of weak thoughts. He began tramping the deck rapidly. Now the whole man was changed: his step was brisk, his frame instinct with nervous animation, his chest swelled proudly, his eyes sparkled with triumph. He had hung over the rail like any sentimental home-comer; he marched the deck like a conquering hero.

Yet this was one of the youngest men on board, and his years of absence from England were but a tithe of some of his fellow-passengers. During a long voyage the best and the worst of a man's character come out; but this man's display had been less complete than any one else's, and he was probably the better liked on board in consequence. Though reserved and quiet, he had, indeed without being conscious of it, become very popular. Perhaps one factor in this was the accidental discovery, half-way through the voyage, that he could draw uncommonly well; for it opened up a source of unexpected entertainment at a time when the stock amusements of the high seas had begun to flag. But there was one thing about him which, had his fellow-passengers suspected it, in all probability would have interfered considerably with his popularity: this was the astounding fact that at the age of twenty-five he had already made his fortune.

One scene from the bush life of this exceedingly lucky young gentleman has already been set forth. It will be sufficient to briefly glance at the remainder of his Colonial career, since details of unbroken success are voted a bore by common consent.

The firm of Flint and Edmonstone did well out of licensed hawking. Perhaps their honesty – which was as transparent as it was original in that line of business – had much to do with their success; for although squatters were at first sceptical of the new firm, their eyes were at once opened to the iniquitous prices of the Jews, who had hitherto enjoyed a monopoly of their custom. The newcomers

thus gained experimental patronage, which they retained on their merits. After a year they advanced a step in the mercantile scale of the Colony: they set up a general store at a rising settlement on the Darling. The store had not been opened six months when the senior partner's chequered life in the Colonies was terminated in a manner utterly unforeseen. Word came that he had inherited, through an accommodating series of deaths, money and property in Ireland. It was no brilliant heritage, but it held out advantages greater on the whole than back-block storekeeping could be expected to afford. Withdrawing a temperate share of the profits, Mr. John Flint kicked the dust of the Riverina from his long boots, and finally disappeared from the face of the desert, and Edmonstone was left sole proprietor of a most promising "concern."

The luck that had hitherto attended him was soon to be enhanced; for, gold being discovered close to the little township on the Darling, a "rush" from all parts of Australia followed. As in most similar cases of late years, expectations were by no means realised on the new diggings. Still, people came, and the storekeeper was a made man.

A colonist of less than three years' standing, he joined three congenial spirits in the enterprise of stocking a station in the new Kimberley district of Western Australia. Here a huge success seemed certain in process of time; when, in the full tide of prosperity, with all he touched turning to gold beneath his fingers, with the lust of wealth upon him, there came a sudden revulsion of feeling. He realised that he had already amassed a fortune – small enough as fortunes go, but beyond his wildest hopes when quitting England. He saw that to go farther was to pursue wealth for wealth's sake – which was a rather lofty view of it; and that luck might not last for ever – which was shrewd; and that, with the sufficiency he had won, a rather better kind of existence was within reach. In short, he sickened of money-grubbing in a single night, and turned desperately home-sick instead; and, as it was not a game of cards, he was able, without incurring anything worse than compassion, to rise a winner. He determined to go home, invest his "pile," live on the interest, and – devote himself to art! He journeyed forthwith to Melbourne, and there succeeded in disposing of his share in the Kimberley station for a sum little short of five figures.

Dick Edmonstone was opposed to sensational methods, or he would have taken the first mail-steamer and dropped like a thunderbolt among his people in England, with his money in his pocket. Besides, an exceptional amount of experience crammed into four years had robbed him, among other things, of nearly (though not quite) all his boyish impetuosity. So he merely wrote two letters by the first mail to his mother and to a certain Colonel Bristo. Thereafter he took his passage by the clipper *Hesper*, then loading at Williamstown, and prepared for a period of reflection, anticipation, and well-earned rest.

Dick Edmonstone had altered a good deal during his four years in Australia. In the first place, the big boy had become a man, and a man who held up his head among other men; a man who had made his way by his own indomitable perseverance, and who thereby commanded your respect; a man of all-round ability in the opinion of his friends (and they were right); a man of the world in his own (and he was wrong). And all at twenty-five! The old tremendous enthusiasm had given place to a thoroughly sanguine temperament of lusty, reliant manhood. He was cooler now, no doubt, but his heart was still warm and his head still hot. Strangers took him for thirty. His manner was always independent, could be authoritative, and was in danger of becoming arrogant. This much, successful money-hunting had naturally brought about. But a generous disposition had saved him from downright selfishness through it all, and the talisman of a loyal, honest, ardent love had led him blameless through a wild and worldly life. And he was still young – young in many ways. His hopes and beliefs were still boundless; they had all come true so far. He had not found the world a fraud yet. On the contrary, he liked the world, which was natural; and thought he knew it, which did not follow because he happened to know some rough corners of it.

One curious characteristic of young Edmonstone as a public schoolman and a modern young Englishman was the entire absence in him of false pride. Though transported pretty directly from

Cambridge to Australia, he had taken to retail trade (of a humble kind at that) with philosophical sang-froid. On leaving England he had asked himself, What was his chief object in going out? And he had answered, To make money and return. Did it matter how he made it, once out there? No. No manual toil need degrade him, no honest business put him to shame. In England it is different; but in her democratic Colonies her younger sons – whether from Poplar or from Eton – must take the work that offers, as they covet success. Dick Edmonstone jumped at his first opening; that it chanced to be in the licensed hawking line cost him hardly a pang.

Indeed, he looked back lovingly in his success on those early days, when all he possessed in the world was invested in that daring venture. He thought of the anxiety that consumed him at the time, and of Jack Flint's cooling influence; and whenever he thought of those days one episode rose paramount in his brain, obliterating other memories. That episode was the "sticking-up" of the wagon on the first trip by Sundown and his men, which must have meant his ruin but for the extraordinary behaviour of the bushranger with regard to the pocket-book and its contents. He did not forget that the bushranger had preserved his life as well as restored his money. And that hundred pounds actually turned out to be the nucleus of a fortune! Sundown – poor fellow – was captured; perhaps by this time hanged, or imprisoned for life. Just before the *Hesper* sailed, word of the outlaw's arrest in a remote district of Queensland was telegraphed from Brisbane. He had been heard of from time to time during the preceding years, but on the whole his gang had done less mischief and shed less blood than some of their predecessors. As for Dick, when he read of the capture he was downright sorry. It may be a passive order of kindness that refrains from robbing a man; yet Dick was so peculiarly constituted as to feel in secret more than a passing regret at the news.

But as the *Hesper* drew towards the Channel he thought less and less of the life he had left behind, and more and more of the life before him. He longed all day to feel the springy turf of England under foot once more; to have the scent of English flowers in his nostrils; to listen to English larks carolling out of sight in the fleecy clouds of an English sky. How green the fields would seem! How solid the houses, how venerable the villages, how historic the rivers of the Old World! And then how he longed to plunge into the trio he styled "his people" – his mother the widow, his brother the City clerk, his sister the saint! Yet what were these yearnings beside one other! What the dearest kin beside her who must yet be nearer and dearer still! – the young girl from whom he had fled to seek his fortune – for whom he had found it. In her his honest yearning centred, in her his high hopes culminated. Of her he thought all day, gazing out over the sun-spangled waves, and all night, tossing in his berth. A thousand times he cursed his folly in choosing canvas before steam; the time was so long – and seemed longer; the brightest days were interminable ages; favouring gales were lighter than zephyrs.

He allowed no doubts to interfere with the pleasures of anticipation; no fears, no anxieties. If he thought of what might have happened at home during the last four or five months since he had received news, the catalogue of calamities was endless. He did not believe disappointment possible through any sort of a calamity. If those he loved still lived – as he knew they did five or six months ago – then he was sure of his reception; he was sure of hearts and hands; he was sure of his reception from every one – yes, from every one.

The future seemed so splendid and so near! Yet it was giving the future hardly a fair chance to expect as much of it as young Edmonstone expected during the last days of his homeward voyage.

IV
HOW DICK CAME HOME

A crowd of the usual dock order had gathered on the quay at Blackwall by the time the *Hesper* made her appearance, towed by two Channel tugs. Some time, however, passed before the vessel swung near enough to the quay for recognitions to begin; and by then the dingy line of dock loafers and watermen was enhanced by a second rank of silk hats and a slight leaven of bonnets. With intolerable sloth the big ship swung closer and closer, broadside on; greetings were excitedly exchanged, and at length the gangway was thrown across and held by a dozen eager hands.

Dick Edmonstone, at the break of the poop, bent forward to search among the faces on the quay, apparently without finding any he knew. But presently, as his eye glanced rapidly up and down the line, he became conscious of one gaze fixed steadily upon him; twice he overlooked this face; the third time, a mutual stare, a quick smile of delight, a bound across the gangway, and Dick was grasping his brother's hand.

"Dick!"

"Maurice!"

Then they seemed to gasp in the same breath:

"Never should have known you!" "Nor I you – from Adam!"

And then they were silent for a whole minute, scrutinising one another from head to heels; until Maurice said simply that he had got away from the bank and needn't go back, and fell to asking about the voyage, and the weather, and the passengers, and had the cabin been comfortable? and what a stunning ship! To all of which Dick replied coherently; and for five minutes they talked as though they had parted last week. Only for such trifles could they find ready words; so much was inexpressible just at first.

They went into Dick's cabin; and there their tongues loosened a little. All were well at home, and happy, and comfortable; the news was good all round, as Dick phrased it, with thankfulness in his heart. That was the first delicious fact to be realised. After that, words flew with marvellous rapidity; the brothers were soon like two competitive human looms, turning them out one against the other. Fortunately the pace was too quick to last; in ten minutes both were breathless. Then they fastened upon stewards and Customs officials, and, by dint of some bullying and a little bribing, managed finally to get clear of the ship with Dick's luggage.

Dick was in tremendous spirits. He was back in old England at last, and testified his appreciation of the fact every minute.

Between Blackwall and Fenchurch Street he made odious comparisons touching Colonial travelling; in the four-wheeler across to Waterloo he revelled in the rattle and roar of the traffic; along the loop-line his eyes feasted on the verdant fields that had haunted his dreams in the wilderness.

The Edmonstones lived in a plain little house in a road at Teddington, in which all the houses were little, plain, and uniformly alike. They called their house "The Pill Box"; but that was a mere nickname, since all the houses in that plain little road were fearfully and wonderfully christened, and theirs no exception to the rule. Its name – blazoned on the little wooden gate – was Iris Lodge; and being sane people, and sufficiently familiar with suburban ideas, the Edmonstones had never attempted to discover the putative point of the appellation. They were satisfied to dub the house "The Pill Box," with malicious candour, among themselves. For the Edmonstones did not take kindly (much less at first) to road or house. And naturally, since five years ago, before Mr. Edmonstone's death, they had lived in a great, square, charming villa, with a garden-wall running a quarter of a mile along the towing-path, within sight of Kingston Bridge. But then Richard Edmonstone senior had dropped dead, at the height of his reputed success on the Stock Exchange and of his undoubted

popularity in the clubs. To the surprise of all but those who knew him most intimately, he had left next to nothing behind him; the house by the river had been hurriedly sold, young Richard had as promptly emigrated, and the rest of them had bundled into as small a house as they could find in the neighbourhood.

But squat, snug, bourgeois as it was, Dick felt that the plain little house was nevertheless home, as the cab rattled over the railway bridge and along the road to the left, and so on towards "The Pill Box." It was raining (that June was not an ideal month), and the vehicle was the detestable kind of victoria so much affected by the honest cabmen of the Thames valley; still, Dick insisted on having the hood down to sniff the air of his native heath. Yet, though in sufficiently good spirits, his heart was beating quickly within him. These homecomings are no small things, unless the rover be old or loveless, and Dick was neither.

After all, the meeting was got over, as such meetings have been got over before, with a few tears and fewer words and melting looks and warm embraces. And so Dick Edmonstone was given back to the bosom of his family.

When the first and worst of it was over, he could not rest in a chair and talk to them, but must needs roam about the room, examining everybody and everything as he answered their questions. How well his mother was looking! and how her dark eyes beamed upon him! – the more brightly, perhaps, from their slight moisture. Her hand was as smooth and white as ever, and her hair whiter; how well it suited her to wear no cap, and have the silver mass pushed back like that! He had declared to himself he had never seen so pretty a woman over five-and-thirty – and his mother was fifty, and looking every year of it. And Fanny – well, she, perhaps, was as far from beauty as ever; but her wavy chestnut hair was matchless still, and as for expression, had there ever been one so sweet and gentle in the world before? It was Maurice who had all the good looks, though. But Maurice was pale and slim and rather round-shouldered; and instantly the image of the lad bending all day over the desk rose in Dick's mind and made him sad. What a different man the bush would make of Maurice! Then he looked round at the old familiar objects; the Landseer engravings and Fanny's water-colour sketches; the cottage piano, the writing-table, old pieces of odd ware which he remembered from his cradle, the fancy ormolu clock, which he had hated from his earliest days of discernment. He looked no further – a telegram was stuck up in front of the clock, and flaunted in his face:

"Edmonstone, Iris Lodge, Teddington, – Ship *Hesper* signalled Start Point ten this morning. – Bone and Phillips."

He read it curiously.

"Why, that's three days old!" he said, laughing. "Do you mean to say you have been staring at that bit of paper ever since – a sort of deputy-me, eh?"

"It was the first we heard," said the mother simply; and a subtle something brought back her tears. "I half think I'll frame it!" she added, smiling at her own weakness.

"I found out your other signallings," said Maurice. "I was in Bone's office half-a-dozen times yesterday."

Dick continued his survey of the room.

"Well, I think I recognise everything," he said presently; "but, I say, Fanny, I've got a thing or two for you to arrange in your high-art fashion; some odds and ends you haven't seen the like of before, I expect."

"No!" said Fanny.

"Oh, but I have, though; and some of 'em expressly for you."

"No! – really? – then what?"

"Aha, you'll see," said Dick. "Maurice, we'll unpack them now – if that brute of a Customs functionary has left a whole thing in the box." And the two left the room.

"To think," said Fanny musingly, "that our Dick is back! Really back, and never going out again; and been through all kinds of fearful adventures; and sailed round the world, and been away four years and a half – one can scarcely realise any of it. But above all, to think that he has made his fortune!"

Mrs. Edmonstone started.

"Oh, Fanny," cried she, "I had forgotten that! He never once spoke of it, and I didn't think of it. Oh, my boy, my boy!" She burst fairly into sobs. Her joy had been too great to bear before she was reminded of this overwhelming fact; it had brought the tears again and again to her eyes; now it became akin to pain.

Yet she did nothing but smile after her sons returned, laden with treasures and curios which they laid out all over the room. There was a famous rug of Tasmanian opossum skins, a dozen emu eggs, the tail of a lyre-bird, the skin of an immense carpet-snake, a deadly collection of boomerangs and spears, and a necklace of quandong stones mounted with silver. Mrs. Edmonstone beheld in silent wonder. As for Fanny, she was in ecstasies ("It is as good as the Exhibition," she said). So the time slipped away, and before half the quaint things had been examined and described it was dinner-time. They were all so happy together that first afternoon!

Few and simple were the courses at Iris Lodge, but at dessert Maurice produced some particular old Benedictine (which had been in the family as long as he had), and Dick's health was drunk with unspeakable enthusiasm. Dick blushed; for it made what he burned to say more awkward; but at last he blurted out, apparently appealing to the mildewed Benedictine bottle:

"I say – will you all think me an awful brute if I clear out for an hour or two? Mother, will you? You know what I have still to do – whom to see – to complete my first day in old England."

"Why, of course!" from the younger ones; and Mrs. Edmonstone simply pronounced the question: "Graysbrooke?"

"Yes," said Dick. "I must go and see them, you know. You know why, too," he added simply.

No one said anything. There was a rather awkward pause, which it fell to Fanny to break.

"By the bye," she said tentatively, "they have a visitor there."

She was prepared to add further information, but Dick looked at her blankly, and clearly was not listening. They rose from the table, and almost directly the three who went into the drawing-room heard the front door open and shut.

Dick was thankful to be out in the cool and the twilight, and alone. The day had been showery and dull, but late in the afternoon the clouds had broken up, and now they floated serenely in the still air, just touched with a pale pink rim to westward. The gravelly ground was wet enough to sound crisply underfoot – nothing more. Drip-drip fell the drops from the laburnums in the gardens all down the road; drip-drip all round, from tree, shrub, and flower; every leaf distilling perfume every minute. Dick appreciated the evidence of his nostrils with the relish of a man who has smelt nothing but brine for four months, nothing like this for four years. Nevertheless, he walked on briskly, down into the London road, that here lies parallel with the river, then down a curve to the left, as the highroad bends away from the river to form the High Street of Teddington; then to a full stop at a corner opposite the old churchyard. He had intended to walk along the lower road towards Kingston, straight to the gates of Graysbrooke, which fronted the river. But now the thought occurred to him (prompted by the sweetness of the evening, and backed up by the fact that it was as yet rather early to drop in casually for the evening anywhere – even at the house of one's sweetheart whom one hadn't seen for over four years). How about hiring a boat and rowing to Graysbrooke? It was no distance; and then, only to be afloat again on the dear old Thames! Dick did not hesitate at the corner long, but turned sharp down to the left, and hired his shallop at the ferry landing.

Down with the stream a hundred yards, and he was level with the lock; a few strong strokes against the stream, and the way already on the boat, and her nose grounded on the rollers; a minute's exertion, a minute's fumbling for coppers, and he floated out into the narrow reach beyond the lock. He paddled slowly along, bestowing friendly glances on the banks. The cottages on the left, close to

the lock, he remembered just as he saw them; but the poplars on the island, inverted in the glassy water – he felt convinced they had grown. With each stroke of the oars the voice of the weir grew louder; it seemed to be roaring its rough welcome to him, just as yonder alders, right across the stream, through the danger-posts, were bowing theirs. How glorious it was, this first row on the Thames!

But now the house was almost in sight, and he could think no longer of the river. Slowly, as he sculled on, Graysbrooke discovered itself: a gray, stone, turreted building, set in leafy trees. There were battlements along the coping, which might have looked venerable but for the slates that peeped between them; yet the stone was mellowed by time; and altogether there was nothing either offensively new or unwholesomely ancient in the appearance of the house. Dick saw it all in his mind even before he stopped rowing to satisfy the cravings of his hungry eyes. Still twilight, and the river here a mirror without flaw, every stone had its duplicate in the clear depths below; that parallelogram of ruddy light that fastened Dick's attention showed with especial sharpness in the reflection. The light was in the drawing-room. They had finished dinner. He could storm them now – at once.

A little inlet entered one end of the lawn; in here he sculled and moored his boat. Then he sprang upon the close-cropped grass and stood transfixed.

The light in the dining-room was turned low; but that in the room to the right of the hall-door – the room with the French window – was shining brightly. And through the open window there burst, as Dick's feet touched the grass, the sound of a girl's song. The voice was low and clear, and full of youth and tenderness; it rose, and fell, and trembled, for the singer possessed feeling; it hastened here and lingered there, and abused none of these tricks, for she sang with what is rarer than feeling – taste. Dick trembled violently; he wanted to rush into the room then and there, but he was thrilled, and rooted to the ground; and after a bar or two the voice soothed him and set his spirit at rest, like the touch of a true friend's hand in the hour of pain. Then he stood quite humbly, hoping it would never, never end. What the song was he didn't know, and never thought of finding out afterwards; he might have heard it a hundred times or never before; he knew nothing during these few transported minutes – nothing, except that he was listening to her voice.

As the last low note was borne out upon the air, and voices within the room murmured the conventional grace after song, Dick stepped forward, meaning to boldly enter. Two yards from the window, however, he silently halted; it was so dark that he could see into the room without himself being seen from within. The temptation to avail himself of so obvious an advantage was too strong to be resisted.

There were three persons in the room, but for the eyes of Dick only one – the two men made no immediate impression on his physical perception. It was a supreme moment in his life. He had left England for the sake of a young girl, to make his way in the world so that he might return and proudly claim her: for he had won her heart. And now he had made his way through toil and privation to a small fortune, and had come back to woo her hand. She was here – this girl for whom he had given his early manhood's strength, his brain's essence, the best drops of his life's blood; this girl whose image had beckoned him onward when he grew faint, and urged him still further in the hour of success; whose name had risen to his lips in despair and in peril, inspiring new courage – here, within ten feet of him; he striving to realise it, and to grow cool before going into her presence, yet yearning to fling himself at her feet.

It was good that she was ignorant of his approach, for it showed her to him in a fair light straight away – completely natural and unconscious of herself. She had seated herself after her song at a low table, and was making an indolent attack on some trifling work with her scissors. The lamplight, from under its crimson shade, fell upon her hair and face and neck with marvellous results, for it made her beautiful. She was not at all beautiful. She had a peerless complexion, a good nose, matchless teeth; otherwise her features were of no account. But she was exceedingly pretty; and as she sat there with the warm lamplight changing her ordinary light-coloured hair into a ruddy gold fit for any goddess,

a much less prejudiced person than Dick Edmonstone might have been pardoned the notion that she was lovely, though she was not.

When at last he managed to raise his eyes from her they rested upon a face that was entirely strange. A tall, massive man, in evening dress, leaned with an elbow on the chimneypiece, his head lightly resting on his hand, one foot on the edge of the fender. There could be no two opinions as to the beauty of this face – it was handsome and striking to the last degree. Burnt, like Dick's, to the colour of brick-dust, it was framed in dark curly hair, with beard and whiskers of a fairer hue, while the mouth was hidden by a still fairer, almost golden, moustache. The effect was leonine. Dick caught his profile, and saw that the steady, downward gaze was bent upon the dainty little head that glowed in the lamplight. From his vantage-post outside the window he glanced from observer to observed. They were a sufficiently good-looking pair, yet he overrated the one and underrated the other. He was by no means attracted to this unknown exquisite; there was an ease about his pose which bespoke freedom also; and his scrutiny of the unconscious girl was of a kind that would at least have irritated any man in Dick's position.

Dick allowed his attention to rest but briefly upon the third occupant of the room – a man with snowy hair and whiskers, who was apparently dropping off to sleep in a big armchair. Somehow or other, the sight of the men – but particularly of the stranger – acted on his heart like a shower-bath on a man's head; his pulse slackened, he regained with interest the self-possession with which he had first approached the window. He took three steps forward, and stood in the middle of the room.

A startled cry escaped the old man and the girl. The man by the fireplace dropped his forearm and turned his head three inches.

Dick strode forward and grasped an outstretched hand.

"Colonel Bristo!"

"Dick Edmonstone! – is it really Dick?" a well-remembered voice repeated a dozen times. "We knew you were on your way home, but – bless my soul! bless my soul!"

The old soldier could think of nothing else to say; nor did it matter, for Dick's salute was over and his back turned; he was already clasping the hand of the fair young girl, who had risen, flushed and breathless, to greet him.

He was speechless. He tried to say "Alice," but the sound was inarticulate. Their eyes met.

A clatter in the fender. The tall man's heel had come down heavily among the fire-irons.

"Let me introduce you," said Colonel Bristo to this man and Dick. "You will like to know each other, since you both come from the same country: Mr. Edmonstone, from Australia; Mr. Miles, from Australia! Mr. Miles was born and bred there, Dick, and has never been in England before. So you will be able to compare notes."

The two men stared at each other and shook hands.

V
THE FIRST EVENING AT GRAYSBROOKE

"Sit down, boy, sit down," said Colonel Bristo, "and let us have a look at you. Mind, we don't know yet that you're not an impostor. You should have brought proofs."

"Here are five-foot-ten of them," said Dick, laughing.

"To believe that, we must put you through examination – and cross-examination," the Colonel added with a glance at his daughter; "although I half believe you really are the man you profess to be. What do you say, Alice?"

"I have a strong case – " Dick was beginning, but he was cut short.

"It is Dick," said the oracle sweetly.

"You take his word for it?" asked her father.

"No, I identify him," Alice answered with a quiet smile; "and he hasn't altered so very much, when one looks at him."

Dick turned his head and met her eyes; they were serene and friendly. "Thank you," he said to her, with gratitude in his voice. And, indeed, he felt grateful to them all; to the Colonel for his ponderous pleasantry, to Alice for her unembarrassed manner, to Mr. Miles for the good taste he showed in minding his own business. (He had strolled over to the window.)

"And when did you land?" inquired the Colonel.

"This morning."

"Only this morning!" exclaimed Alice; "then I think it was too good of you to come and see us so soon; don't you, papa?"

Very kind of him indeed, papa thought. Dick was pleased; but he thought they might have understood his eagerness. Alice, at any rate, should not have been surprised – and probably was not. "I couldn't put it off," he said, frankly.

There was a slight pause; then the Colonel spoke:

"That's kindly said, my boy; and if your mother knew how it does us good to see you here, she would scarcely grudge us an hour or two this evening – though grudge it you may depend she does. As for ourselves, Dick, we can hardly realise that you are back among us."

"I can't realise it at all," murmured Dick, aloud but to himself.

"I won't worry you by asking point-blank how you like Australia," the Colonel went on, "for that's a daily nuisance in store for you for the next six months. But I may tell you we expect some tough yarns of you; our taste has been tickled by Miles, who has some miraculous – why, where is Miles?"

Miles had vanished.

"What made him go, I wonder?" asked Alice, with the slightest perceptible annoyance. Dick did not perceive it, but he thought the question odd. To disappear seemed to him the only thing a stranger, who was also a gentleman, could have done; he was scarcely impartial on the point, however.

Alice took up the theme which her father had dropped.

"Oh, Mr. Miles has some wonderful stories," said she; "he has had some tremendous adventures."

"The deuce he has!" thought Dick, but he only said: "You should take travellers' tales with a grain of salt."

"Thanks," Alice instantly retorted; "I shall remember that when you tell yours."

They laughed over the retort. All three began to feel quite at ease.

"So you kept up your sketching out there, and drew bush scenes for our illustrated papers?" said the Colonel.

"Two or three times; more often for the Colonial papers."

"We saw them all," said Alice, graciously – "I mean the English ones. We cut them out and kept them." (She should have said that she did.)

"Did you, though?" said Dick, delighted.

"Yes," said Alice, "and I have a crow to pick with you about them. That 'Week in the Sandwich Islands' – it was yours, wasn't it?"

Dick admitted that it was.

"Oh, and pray when were you in the Sandwich Islands?"

He confessed that he had never seen them.

"So you not only cheated a popular journal – a nice thing to do! – but deceived the British public, which is a far more serious matter. What explanation have you to offer? What apology to 'One who was Deceived' – as I shall sign my 'Times' letter, when I write it?"

"Alice, you are an inquisitor," said Colonel Bristo. But Alice replied with such a mischievous, interested smile that Dick immediately ceased to feel ashamed of himself.

"The fact is," he owned, "your popular journal doesn't care a fig whether one has been to a place so long as one's sketches of it are attractive. I did them a thing once of a bullock-dray stuck up in the mud; and how did it appear? 'The War at the Cape: Difficulties in Reaching the Front.' And they had altered the horns of my bullocks, if you please, to make 'em into South African cattle! You see, just then Africa was of more interest to your British public than Australia. Surely you won't be so hard on me now? You see you have made me divulge professional secrets by your calumnies."

Alice said she forgave him, if all that was true; but she added, slyly: "One must take travellers' tales with a pinch of salt, you know!"

"Come, Alice," said her father, "if you insist on pitching into our artist, he shall have his fling at our photographer. Dick, she's taken to photography – it's lately become the fashion. Look on that table, under the lamp; you'll find some there that she was trimming, or something, when you dropped in our midst."

"May I look at them?" Dick asked, moving over to Alice.

"Certainly; but they're very bad, I'm afraid; and since you artists scorn photography – as so inartistic, you know – I suppose you will be a severe critic."

"Not when this is the subject," said Dick, in a low voice, picking up a print; "how did you manage to take yourself?"

He was sitting beside her at the little table, with the lamp between them and the Colonel; he instinctively lowered his voice, and a grain of the feeling he had so far successfully repressed escaped into his tone.

"Someone took off the cap for me."

"Oh. Who?"

"Who? Oh, I get anybody to take the cap off when I am so vain as to take myself – anybody who is handy."

"Mr. Miles, for instance?" It was a stray question, suggested by no particular train of thought, and spoken carelessly; there was no trace of jealousy in the tone – it was too early for that; but Alice looked up, quick to suspect, and answered shortly:

"Yes, if you like."

Dick was genuinely interested, and noticed in her tone nothing amiss. Several of the photographs turned out to be of Alice, and they charmed him.

"Did Mr. Miles take all these?" he asked, lightly; he was forced to speak so before her father: the restraint was natural, though he marvelled afterwards that he had been able to maintain it so long.

Alice, however, read him wrong. She was prepared for pique in her old lover, and imagined it before it existed. She answered with marked coldness:

"A good many of them."

This time Dick detected the unpleasant ring in her words – he could not help but detect it. A pang shot to his heart. His first (and only) impression of Miles, which had fled from his mind (with all other impressions) while talking to her, swiftly returned. He had used the man's name, a minute ago, without its conveying anything to his mind; he used it now with a bitterness at heart which crept into his voice.

"And don't you return the compliment? I see no photographs of Mr. Miles here; and he would look so well in one."

"He has never been taken in his life – and never means to be. Now, Dick, you have seen them all," she added quite softly, her heart smiting her; and with that she rolled all the prints into one little cylinder. Dick was in that nervous state in which a kind word wipes out unkindness the moment it is spoken, and the cloud lifted at once from his face. They were silent for more than a minute. Colonel Bristo quietly left the room.

Then a strange change came over Dick. While others had been in the room, composure had sat naturally upon him; but now that they were alone together, and the dream of his exile so far realised, that armour fell from him, and left his heart bare. He gazed at his darling with unutterable emotion; he yearned to clasp her in his arms, yet dared not to profane her with his touch. There had been vows between them when they parted – vows out of number, and kisses and tears; but no betrothal, and never a letter. He could but gaze at her now – his soul in that gaze – and tremble; his lips moved, but until he had conquered his weakness no words came. As for Alice, her eyes were downcast, and neither did she speak. At length, and timidly, he took her hand. She suffered this, but drew ever so slightly away from him.

"Alice," he faltered, "this is the sweetest moment of my life. It is what I have dreamt of, Alice, but feared it might never come. I cannot speak; forgive me, dear."

She answered him cunningly:

"It is very nice to have you back again, Dick."

He continued without seeming to hear her, and his voice shook with tenderness: "Here – this moment – I can't believe these years have been; I think we have never been separated – "

"It certainly doesn't seem four years," said Alice sympathetically, but coolly.

Dick said nothing for a minute; his eyes hung on her downcast lids, waiting for an answering beam of love, but one never came.

"You remember," he said at last, in a calmer voice, "you remember the old days? and our promises? and how we parted?" He was going on, but Alice interrupted him by withdrawing her hand from his and rising from her chair.

"Dick," said she, kindly enough, "don't speak of them, especially not now – but don't speak of them at all. We can't have childhood over again; and I was a child then – of seventeen. I am grown up now, and altered; and you – of course you have altered too."

"Oh Alice!" – the turning of the door handle made him break off short, and add in a quick whisper, "I may speak to you to-morrow?"

"Very well," she answered indifferently, as there entered upon them a little old lady in rustling silk and jingling beads – an old lady with a sallow face and a piercing black eye, who welcomed Dick with a degree of fussy effusiveness, combined with a look and tone which discounted her words.

"Delighted to see you back, Mr. Richard – a pleasure I have often looked forward to. We don't welcome conquering heroes every day," were in themselves sufficiently kindly words, but they were accompanied by a flash of the beady eyes from Dick to Alice, and a scrutiny of the young fellow's appearance as searching as it was unsympathetic; and when a smile followed, overspreading her loose, leathery, wrinkled skin, the effect was full of uncanny suggestion.

"Yes, it is jolly to be back, and thanks very much," said Dick civilly; "and it is charming to find you still here, Mrs. Parish."

"Of course I am still here," said the leathery little lady brusquely: as if Colonel Bristo could live without his faithful domestic despot, as if Graysbrooke could stand without its immemorial housekeeper! This Mrs. Parish was ugly, vain, and old, and had appeared as old and as vain and as ugly when, more than twenty years ago, she first entered the Colonel's service. She had her good points, however, and a sense of duty according to her lights. Though it be no extravagant praise, she was a better person at heart than on the surface.

She now inquired with some condescension about Dick's Australian life, and how he liked it, and where he had been, and how he should like living altogether out there. She congratulated him on his success (she called it "luck"), which she declared was in the mouths of everybody. On that he felt annoyed, and wondered if she knew any details, and what figure she would bid for some – of, say, his first year – in the local gossip market.

"Of course you will go back," said the old woman with conviction; "all lucky Colonists do. You will find England far too dull and slow for you." At this point Colonel Bristo and Mr. Miles came back, chatting. "I was saying," Mrs. Parish repeated for their benefit, "that of course Mr. Richard will soon return to Australia; he will tire of England in six weeks; it is always the way. Mr. Miles is the happy exception!" with a smile upon that gentleman which strove to be arch – with doubtful success.

"I never said I meant to make 'Home' my home," said the Australian, with the drawl of his race, but in tones mellow and musical. His long frame sank with graceful freedom into a chair beside Mrs. Parish, and his clear blue eyes beamed upon them all – all except Dick, whom he forgot to notice just then.

"I don't think Dick means to go back," said the Colonel cheerily. "That would be treating us all abominably; in fact, we could never allow it – eh, Dick?"

Dick looked gravely at the carpet.

"I mean to settle down in England now," said he; and he could not refrain from a sly glance at Alice. Her eyes, bent thoughtfully upon him, instantly filled with mischief.

"You mean to stay at home, yet sketch the ends of the earth; is that it?" Her tone changed swiftly to one of extreme kindness. "Well, it would be dreadful if you didn't stop at home now. Whatever you do" (he changed colour; she added calmly), "think of Mrs. Edmonstone and Fanny!"

A little later, Alice and her father told Dick all the news of themselves that they could think of – how they had been in Italy last year, and in Scotland the year before, and how they had taken a shooting-box in Yorkshire for this year. And Alice's manner was very courteous and kindly, for she was beginning to reproach herself for having been cruel to him on this his first evening, and to wonder how she could have had the heart. She asked him if he had forgotten how to dance, and said he must begin learning over again at once, in order to dance at her ball – her very own party – on the second of July.

Poor Dick's spirits once more rose high, though this time an uneasy sediment remained deep in his heart. Without the least intention in the world, Alice was beginning a very pretty game of coquetry with her sweetheart – alas! her quondam sweetheart. While they talked, Mr. Miles, at the other side of the room, kept up an entertaining conversation with Mrs. Parish. At the same time he observed Dick Edmonstone very narrowly – perhaps more anxiously than he need have regarded an old friend of his friends'; though perhaps with no more than a social lion's innate suspicion of his kind. At last Dick rose to go.

Colonel Bristo went out with him, and thrust his arm affectionately through the young man's as they crossed the lawn.

"Dick," said he, very kindly, "I thought I would wait till I saw you alone to congratulate you most heartily on having made your way so splendidly. Nay, don't interrupt me; your way in the world is already made, and nobly made. I think you showed your sense – and more – in stopping short, and coming home to follow up the career you love. That was the intention expressed in your letter, I think?"

"Yes, sir. And that letter?" said Dick anxiously. He had felt misgivings about it ever since the heat of triumph in which it was written and posted in Melbourne.

"I liked it," said the Colonel simply; "it was manly and frank, and to the point. You shall have my answer now; and I, too, will be frank. Four years ago, more or less, I was forced to answer in a certain way a certain question – there was no alternative. Dick, think seriously – you are both four years older; are you, for one, still of the same mind?"

"I am; indeed I am," said Dick, earnestly.

"Then take your chance!" said Colonel Bristo. "I cannot say more; I don't understand women; I find it bitter to say this much, I that am to lose her. But you deserve her; come here as often as you will; you will be very welcome. And if you both wish now – both, mind! – what you both wished then, when for obvious reasons I could not hear of it – "

"You were right enough, sir," Dick murmured sadly.

"Then," continued the Colonel, "I frankly tell you, I shall like it. That's all; good-night!"

Dick looked up from the dewy grass, and his lips formed a grateful sentence, though no words could express his feeling just then. He looked up, but the honest, simple-hearted soldier was gone. He who had faced the Russian shot and shell had retreated cowardly before honest English thanks!

The young man stepped into his boat, undid the painter, and floated out upon the broad moonlit river. Ah, how kind of Colonel Bristo! But only to think what those words would have been to them four years ago! Yes, to them; for then Alice besought the consent that had just been given; besought it as wildly as himself. And now did she even desire it? He had found her so passionless, so different from all he had fancied, or hoped, or feared. Once she had been cruel, but anon so kind; and then she had ridiculed him in pure friendliness. Alas, fatal friendliness! Had she but been awkward or shown him downright coldness – anything but that. As to this Miles, no need to think about him yet. The question was whether Alice Bristo still loved Dick Edmonstone, not whether there was another man in the case; time enough for that afterwards. Yet a few short hours ago the question – faced so calmly now – would have stunned or maddened this ardent lover.

Down with the stream came peace and hope, with the soft, soothing touch of the moonbeams; they stole into the heart of Dick Edmonstone; they held it for one brief moment. For a sound broke on his ears which made him stare and tremble, and drove out the sweet influences almost before their presence was felt. Yet the sound of itself was sweet; the very same sound had thrilled poor Dick as he leapt ashore; it was the voice of Alice – singing to Mr. Miles!

VI
SISYPHUS

Dick Edmonstone slept badly, his first night in England; and no wonder, since already a sense of grievous disappointment weighed him down. When he reached home and his own room, this feeling grew upon him; it distracted him, it denied him rest. Where his faith had been surest, disillusion came slowly home to him; in the purest spot of the vision the reality was dim and blurred. What a fool he had been to make sure of anything! Above all, to build his peace of mind on the shifting sand of a woman's love; to imagine – simply because his love for Alice had never wavered – that Alice's love for him must perforce remain equally unchanged. And all that night her voice, as he had last heard it, rang cruelly in his ear, and a light remark, about what she had called her "childhood," lay like lead at his heart.

At breakfast he could not quite conceal his trouble; he looked somewhat haggard. He knew that he was expected to be in high spirits, and did his best to feign them, but his mirth was perfunctory. This was obvious to his sister, and not unnoticed by Mrs. Edmonstone. They spoke about it afterwards, for they knew something of the circumstances at Graysbrooke, and had their own opinion of the guest there.

Dick fidgeted all the morning, and passed some of the time in unpacking his belongings. In the afternoon he left the house full of conflicting emotions. As he walked up the drive, Dick could not tell how he had waited until the afternoon, such a wild elation took possession of him at the thought of again seeing his beloved. Miss Bristo was in the garden, the butler told him – yes, alone; and Dick walked through the house and on to the top of the shaven lawn that sloped to the river.

He found her deep in a magazine and in the stern sheets of the boat, which was moored in the inlet. She was all in white, for the day was sunny; and she smiled sweetly from under the broad brim of her straw hat as Dick stepped gravely into the boat, and sat down on the thwart facing her.

She looked so careless and so bright that he could not find it in his heart to vex her straight away; so they talked lightly of this and that for a full quarter of an hour, while Dick basked recklessly in her smiles, and almost persuaded himself that this was happiness. But at last came a pause; and then he nerved himself to speak.

"Alice," he began gravely, "you know our few words last night? You said I might speak to you today."

"Well," said Alice, carelessly.

"You know very well what I want to speak about," rather warmly.

Alice turned down her leaf, shut up her magazine, leant back, and surveyed him calmly.

"I wish I didn't, Dick," she answered, half in annoyance, half in pity. But her look added: "Say on; let us have it out – and over."

"Last night," said Dick smoothly, "I asked you if you remembered old days, and what there was between us, and so on. You said you didn't want to remember them, and talked about your 'childhood.' You said you were altered, and that, of course, I must be altered." He paused.

So far he had been cool and fluent; but he had rehearsed all this. His next words came hot from the heart, and fell unsteadily from the lips.

"Oh, Alice," cried he, "did you mean that? Say that you didn't! I have never changed, never can. Oh, say that you are the same. Say that you only meant to tease me, or try me, or anything you like – anything but that you meant all that about our being altered, and forgetting the past – " his voice was piteous in its appeal; "say that you didn't mean it!" he repeated in a whisper.

"I did mean it," Alice replied; not harshly or coldly, but with due deliberation.

Dick turned pale. He grasped the gunwale nervously with each hand, and leaned forward.

"Then I – no longer – have your love?" he asked in a hollow voice.

Alice looked at him reproachfully; there was even indignation in her glance.

"How can you force such things from me? Have you no pride?" He winced. "But, since you press for an explanation, you shall have one. Before you went away I knew no one. I was a child; I had always been fond of you; my head was full of nonsense; and, when you asked me, I said I loved you. It was true, too, in a childish way."

"Go on," said Dick, in a low voice.

Alice was flushed, and her eyes sparkled, but her self-possession was complete.

"Well, you come back after four years, and, it seems, expect to find me still a child. Instead of that, I am a woman – a sensible woman," with a good humoured twinkle of the eyes, "disinclined to go on with the old nonsense just where it left off – you must admit that that would be absurd? But for the rest, I am as fond of you, Dick, as I was then – only without the childish nonsense. No one is more delighted to see you back, and welcome you, than I am; no one is more your friend. Dear Dick," she added in a tone of earnest entreaty, "cannot we be friends still?"

"No!" exclaimed Dick, hoarsely.

The flush died away from the girl's face, to return two-fold.

"No!" he repeated. "You give me your love, and then, after years of separation, you offer me your friendship instead. What is that to me? How can I make that do – a lamp instead of the sun? It is too much to ask of any man: you know it. Who has taught you to play with men's hearts like this?"

"I have been too kind," said Alice, coldly. She had stifled her humiliation, and was preparing to leave the boat.

"Say rather too cruel!" returned Dick very bitterly. "Nay, not on my account. I will save you the trouble of going."

He sprang from the boat as he spoke. One moment he stood on the bank with a blight on his brave eyes; the next, he raised his hat proudly, turned on his heel and was gone.

No sooner had he disappeared than the young lady produced a little lace handkerchief, and rained her tears upon its wholly inadequate area. She sobbed for nearly five minutes; and, after that, dipped her pink fingers in the water, and made assiduous efforts to expunge the most tell-tale symptoms. Then she took up the magazine and tried to revive her interest in the story she had been reading, but she could remember nothing about it. Finally she was about to quit the boat in despair, when, looking up, whom should she see but Dick Edmonstone towering above her on the bank, hat in hand.

"I want you to forgive me," he said very humbly. She affected not to understand him, and intimated as much by raising her eyebrows.

"For what I said just now" (rapidly) – "for everything I have said since I saw you first, last night. And I want to say – if you will still have it – let us be – friends."

Her face instantly brightened; every trace of affectation vanished; she smiled gratefully upon him.

"Ah, that is sense!" said she.

"But," said Dick, still more earnestly, "there are two questions I do think I may ask, though whether you will answer them – "

"I will," the girl exclaimed rashly.

"Well, then, the first is, have you taken a dislike to me – a new one? Don't laugh," he said, colouring; "I mean it. It is so possible, you know. I have led a rough life; you might easily be ashamed of the things I had to do, to make my way at first; you might easily think me less polished, less gentlemanly: if it is that, I implore you to say so."

She could scarcely keep grave; even he might have smiled, but for the question he had still to ask.

"No, it is not that; to my mind you are just the same."

Dick drew a deep breath of relief.

"The second question may offend you; if it does – well, it can't be helped. I think my old footing – even though you were a child then – is sufficient excuse for it. It is, then – and, indeed, you must grant me an honest answer – do you love another man?"

"And it is not that," said Alice shortly, nevertheless looking him full in the face.

A great load was removed from his heart.

"Then it is only," he said eagerly – "only that you wish to cancel the past? really only that?"

"Really only that," she repeated with a smile.

"Then," added Dick, hope rekindling in his heart, "may I never – that is, won't you hold out to me the least faint spark?"

"I think you had better leave well alone," said Alice; and she stepped lightly from the boat as she spoke. "Now I must go in. Will you come, too?"

"No; I must say good-bye."

"Really? Then good-bye, Dick." Another sweet smile as she stretched out her hand. "And come as often as ever you can; you will always be welcome."

He watched her slim form tripping daintily across the grass.

"Ay, I will come!" he muttered between his teeth; "and I shall win you yet, Miss Caprice, though I have to begin all over again. To start afresh! How could I have borne the thought yesterday? Yet to-day it must be faced. This minute I give up looking back, and begin to look forward. And it may be better so; for when I win you, as win you I shall, you will be all the dearer to me. I might not have valued you as I ought – who knows? You do not deny me hope; I shan't deny it to myself. You shall be mine, never fear. For the present, have your wish – we are only friends."

His resolution taken, Dick Edmonstone threw up vain regrets; "friendly relations" with Alice were duly established, and at first the plan worked tolerably well. They had one or two common interests, fortunately. Alice dabbled in water-colours; in which Dick could help her, and did. In return, Alice took a lively interest in his sketches; and they would sometimes talk of the career to which he was to devote himself. Then there was the river; they were both good oars, and, with Alice, rowing was a passion.

Beyond these things there was little enough to bring them together. In everything else Mr. Miles either stepped in or enjoyed a previous pre-eminence. At first Dick tried hard to hate this man for his own sake, without being jealous of him; but under the circumstances it was impossible for jealousy not to creep in. He certainly distrusted Miles; the man struck him from the first as an adventurer, who had wormed himself by mysterious means into the friendship of the guileless, single-hearted Colonel Bristo; and observation deepened this impression. On the other hand, the pair saw very little of each other. Dick naturally avoided Miles, and Miles – for some good reason of his own – shunned Dick. In fact, the jealous feeling did not arise from anything he saw or heard: the flame was promoted and fed, as it were, at second-hand.

Deep in his heart, poor Dick had counted on being something of a lion (it was only human) on his return from Australia, at least on one hearth besides his own; and lo! a lion occupied that hearth before him – a lion, moreover, of the very same type. The Bristos didn't want to hear Australian experiences, because they had already heard such as could never be surpassed, from the lips of Miles; their palate for bush yarns was destroyed. Dick found himself cut out, in his own line, by Miles. His friends were very hospitable and very kind, but they had no wish to learn his adventures. And those adventures! How he had hoarded them in his mind! how he had dreamed in his vanity of enthralling the Colonel and thrilling Alice! He had hoped at least to interest them; and even in that he failed. Each little reminiscence yawned over, each comparison or allusion ignored – these were slight things with sharp edges. With Alice, it more than once happened that when he touched on his strange experiences she forgot to listen, which wounded him; or if she made him repeat it, it was to cite some far more wonderful story of Mr. Miles – which sowed salt in the wound. Of course vanity was its own cure,

and he dropped the subject of Australia altogether; but he was very full of his romantic life, and this took him a day or two, and cost him some moments of bitterness.

So Dick's first fortnight in England passed, and on the whole he believed he had made some sort of progress with Alice. Moreover, he began rather to like wooing her on his merits. On consideration, it was more satisfactory, perhaps, than reviving the old boy-and-girl sentiment as if there had been no four years' hiatus; more satisfactory, because he never doubted that he would win her in the end. It is to be noted that his ideas about one or two things changed in a remarkable degree during those first days.

One morning, when they chanced to be particularly confidential together, Dick said suddenly:

"By the bye, how did you come to know this – Mr. Miles?" He had almost said "this fellow Miles."

"Has papa never told you?" Alice asked in surprise.

"No, never."

"Nor Mr. Miles himself? Ah, no: he would be the last person to speak of it. But I will tell you. Well, then, it was when we were down in Sussex. Papa was bathing (though I had forbidden it), when he was seized with cramp, out of his depth. He must certainly have been drowned; but a great handsome fellow, dressed like a fisherman, saw his distress, rushed into the sea, swam out, and rescued him with the help of a boat. Poor papa, when he came to himself, at once offered the man money; and here came the surprise. The man laughed, refused the money, dived his hand into his own pocket, and threw a sovereign to the boatman who had helped!"

Dick's interest was thoroughly aroused, and he showed it; but he thought to himself: "That was unnecessary. Why couldn't the fellow keep to the part he was playing?"

And Alice continued: "Then papa found out that he was a gentleman in disguise – a Mr. Miles, from Sydney! He had been over some months, and was seeing England in thorough fashion. Indeed, he seemed a regular boatman, with his hands all hard and seamed with tar."

"And your father made friends with him?"

"Naturally; he brought him up to the hotel, where I heard all about the affair. You may imagine the state I was in! After that we saw a good deal of him down there, and papa got to like him very much, and asked him to come and stay with us when he grew tired of that kind of life and returned to London. And that's all."

"How long did you say it is since he saved your father's life?" Dick asked, after a short pause.

"Let me see, it's – yes, not quite a month ago."

Dick gave vent to a scarcely audible whistle.

"And he has no other friends in England?"

"Not that I know of."

"And writes no letters nor receives any?" (He was speaking from his own observation.)

"Not that I know of. But how should I know? or what does it matter?"

"In fact, he is a friendless adventurer, whom you don't know a thing about beyond what you have told me?"

Alice suddenly recoiled, and a dangerous light gleamed in her eyes.

"What do you mean? I don't understand you. Why all these questions?"

Dick regarded her unflinchingly. He knew what an honest answer would cost him, yet he was resolved to speak out.

"Because," said he, impressively and slowly, "because I don't believe Mr. Miles is what he makes himself out to be."

He knew that he had made some advance in her esteem, he knew that these words would lose him all that he had gained, and he was right. A flash of contempt lit up the girl's eyes and pierced to his soul. "Noble rival!" said she; and without another word swept haughtily past him – from the garden where they had been walking – into the house.

VII
SOUTH KENSINGTON

The first act of every Australian who landed in England that summer was, very naturally, to visit the Exhibition – their Exhibition – at South Kensington.

Dick was not an Australian, and it therefore did not consume him to put off South Kensington until he had been a week or so quietly at home. Nevertheless he was sufficiently eager to inspect the choice products of a land that he regarded with gratitude as indeed his alma mater; and still more eager to expatiate on all that was to be seen to insular friends, who believed that New Zealand was an inland colony, and who asked if Victoria was not the capital of Sydney. On that very first evening he had made a sort of offer to escort Colonel Bristo and Alice; but there he was too late; and he experienced the first of a series of petty mortifications – already mentioned – which originated from a common cause. Mr. Miles had already been with the Bristos to the Exhibition, and had proved a most entertaining showman. He had promised to accompany them again in a week or two; would not Dick join the party? For three visits would be more than impartial persons, such as the Colonel and his daughter, were likely to care about – even with so splendid a cicerone as Mr. Miles.

Of course, Dick was not going to play second fiddle to the Australian deliberately and with his eyes open. He made his excuses, and never alluded to the matter again. But one day, after a morning's business in the City, he went alone.

When he was once in the vast place, and had found his way to the Australian section, his interest speedily rose to a high pitch. It is one thing to go to an exhibition to be instructed, or to wonder what on earth half the things are; it is something quite different to find yourself among familiar objects and signs which are not Greek to you, to thread corridors lined with curios which you hail as the household gods of your exile. Instead of the bored outsider, with his shallow appreciation of everything, you become at once a discriminate observer and intelligent critic, and sightseeing for once loses its tedium. Dick wandered from aisle to aisle, from stand to stand, in rapt attention. At every turn he found something of peculiar interest to him: here it was a view of some township whose every stick he knew by heart; there a sample of wood bearing on the printed label under the glass the name of a sheep station where he had stayed time out of number.

The golden arch at the entrance to the Victorian Court arrested him, as it arrested all the world; but even more fascinating in his eyes was the case of model nuggets close at hand. He heard a small boy asking his mamma if they were all real, and he heard mamma reply with bated breath that she supposed so; then the small boy smacked his lips, and uttered awed (though slangy) ejaculations, and the enlightened parent led him on to wonders new. But Dick still gazed at the nuggets; he was wondering – if he could have it all over again – whether he would rather pick up one of these fellows than win again their equivalent through toil and enterprise, step by step, when a smart slap on the back caused him to turn sharp round with an exclamation.

A short, stout, red-faced man stood at his elbow with arms akimbo, and grinned familiarly in his face. Dick looked him up and down with a stare of indignation; he could not for the life of him recognise the fellow; yet there he stood, his red-stubbled chin thrust forward, and a broad, good-humoured grin on his apish face, and dressed gorgeously. He wore a high white hat tilted backward, a snowy waistcoat, a dazzling tie, and a black frock-coat, with an enormous red rose in the button hole. His legs, which now formed two sides of an equilateral triangle with the floor for its base, were encased in startling checks, and his feet, which were small, in the glossiest patent leather. His left hand rested gloved upon his hip, and four fingers of his ungloved right hand were thrust into his waistcoat pocket, leaving the little one in the cold with a diamond of magnitude flashing from its lowest joint.

"Euchred?" this gentleman simply asked, in a nasal tone of immense mirth.

"If you mean do I know you, I don't," said Dick, only a degree less haughtily than if he had come straight from Oxford instead of from the bush.

"What! you don't remember me?" exclaimed the man more explicitly, his fingers itching to leap from the waistcoat-pocket.

Dick stared an uncompromising denial.

The diamond flashed in his eyes, and a small piece of pasteboard was held in front of him, on which were engraved these words:

"The Hon. Stephen Biggs."

Dick repressed an insane impulse to explode with laughter.

"What! of Marshall's Creek?"

"The same."

Dick stretched out his hand.

"A thousand pardons, my dear fellow; but how could I expect to see you here? And – the Honourable?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Biggs, with legitimate pride, "that knocks you, old man! It was only the Legislative Assembly when you and me was mates; it's the Legislative Council now. I'm in the Upper 'Ouse, my son!"

"I'm sure I congratulate you," said Dick.

"But 'ang the 'andle," continued the senator magnanimously; "call me Steve just the same."

"Well, it's like the whiff of the gum leaves to see you again, Steve. When did you arrive?"

"Last week. You see," confidentially, "I'm in my noo rig out – the best your London can do; though, after all, this Colony'll do as good any day in the week. I can't see where it is you do things better than we do. However, come and have a drink, old man."

In vain Dick protested that he was not thirsty; Mr. Biggs was. Besides, bushmen are not to be denied or trifled with on such points. The little man seized Dick's arm, marched him to the nearest bar, and called for beer.

"Ah!" sighed Mr. Biggs, setting down his tankard, "this is the one point where the Old Country licks us. This Colony can't come within a cooee of you with the beer, and I'm the first to own it! We kep' nothing like this at my place on the Murray, now did we?"

Dick was forced to shake his head, for, in fact, the Honourable Stephen had formerly kept a flourishing "hotel" on the Murray, where the Colonial beer had been no better than – other Colonial beer – a brew with a bad name. Dick observed an odd habit Mr. Biggs had of referring to his native heath as though he were still on it, speaking of his country as he would have spoken of it out there – as "this Colony."

The Honourable Steve now insisted on tacking himself on to Dick, and they roamed the Exhibition together. Biggs talked volubly of his impressions of England and the English (he had crowded a great deal into his first few days, and had already "done" half London), of the Exhibition, of being fêted by the flower of Britain and fed on the fat of the land; and though his English was scarcely impeccable a vein of shrewd common sense ran through his observations which was as admirable in the man (he had risen very rapidly even for Australia) as it was characteristic of his class.

"By-the-bye," said Mr. Biggs, after they had freely criticised the romantic group of blacks and fauna in the South Australian Court, "have you seen the Hut?"

"No," said Dick.

"Then come on; it's the best thing in the whole show; and," dropping his voice mysteriously, "there's the rummest go there you ever saw in your life."

Everybody remembers the Settler's Hut. It was a most realistic property, with its strips of bark and its bench and wash-basin, though some bushmen were heard to deny below their breath the existence of any hut so spick and span "where they come from."

"Good!" said Dick, as soon as he saw the Hut. "That's the real thing, if you like."

"Half a shake," said Mr. Biggs, "and I'll show you something realler." He drew Dick to the window of the hut. "Look there!" he whispered, pointing within.

Three or four persons were inspecting the interior, and debating aloud as to how they personally should care to live in such a place; and each, as he surveyed the rude walls, the huge fireplace, the primitive cooking utensils, reserved his most inquisitive scrutiny for an oddly-dressed man who sat motionless and silent on the low bank, as though the Hut belonged to him. A more colourable inference would have been that the man belonged to the Hut; and in that case he must have been admitted the most picturesque exhibit in the Colonial Courts, as he looked the most genuine; for the man was dressed in the simple mode of an Australian stockman, and looked the part from the thin soles of his plain side-spring boots to the crown of his cabbage-tree hat. From under the broad brim of the latter a pair of quick, dark eyes played restlessly among the people who passed in and out, or thronged the door of the hut. His shoulders were bent, and his head habitually thrust forward, so that it was impossible, in the half-light, to clearly make out the features; but long, iron-gray locks fell over the collar of his coarse tweed coat, and a bushy, pepper-and-salt beard hid the throat and the upper portion of the chest. Old though the man undoubtedly was, his massive frame suggested muscularity that must once have been enormous, and must still be considerable.

"Now, what do you think of that cove?" inquired the Hon. Stephen Biggs in a stage whisper.

"Why," said Dick, who was frowning in a puzzled manner, "he looks the real thing too. I suppose that's what he's there for. Now, I wonder where – "

"Ah, but it ain't that," broke in Biggs, "I've been here every day, almost, and when I see him here every day, too, I soon found out he don't belong to the place. No; he's an ordinary customer, who pays his bob every morning when the show opens, and stays till closing-time. He's to be seen all over the Exhibition, but generally at the Hut – most always about the Hut."

"Well, if he isn't paid for it, what on earth is his object?" said Dick, as they moved away.

"Ah," said Mr. Biggs darkly, "I have a notion of my own about that, though some of the people that belong to this here place share it with me."

"And?" said Dick.

"And," said Mr. Biggs with emphasis, "in my opinion the fellow's the dead spit of a detective; what's more, you may take your Colonial oath he is one!"

"Well," said Dick coolly, "I've seen him before, though I can't tell where. I remember his bulk and shape better than his face."

"Yes? By Jove, my boy, you may be the very man he's after!"

Mr. Biggs burst into a loud guffaw; then turned grave in a moment, and repeated impressively: "A detective – my oath!"

"But he looks a genuine Australian, if ever I saw one," objected Dick.

"Well, maybe he's what he looks."

"Then do you think he's come over on purpose? It must be a big job."

"I think he has. It must."

"Ah," said Dick, "then I have seen him out there somewhere; probably in Melbourne."

"Quite likely," said Mr. Biggs. "There are plenty of his sort in this Colony, and as sharp as you'll find anywhere else, my word!"

A little later they left the Exhibition, and spent the evening together.

VIII
THE ADMIRABLE MILES

If Mr. Miles was systematically "spoilt" by the Bristos, he was more or less entitled to the treatment, since it is not every guest who has had the privilege of saving his host from drowning. But Mr. Miles was in other ways an exceptional visitor. He contrived to create entertainment instead of requiring it. He was no anxiety to anybody; he upset no household routine; he might have remained for months, and not outstayed his welcome; from the first he made himself at home in the most agreeable fashion. In a word, he was a very charming man.

Moreover, he was unlike other men: he was far more independent, and far less conventional. It was impossible to measure him by a commonplace standard. He had little peculiarities which would not have recommended other men, but which in his case were considered virtues: he was quite artless in matters of etiquette. Indeed, he was a splendid specimen of free, ingenuous manhood – an ideal Australian, according to the notions of the old country.

The least breath against their guest on conventional grounds would have been indignantly resented by the Graysbrooke people. They put upon his peculiarities an interpretation which in Mrs. Parish's case resolved itself into a formula:

"They are so free-and-easy out there; they despise conventionality; they are natural. Oh that we were all Australians!" (Mr. Miles was the one Australian of her acquaintance.)

Thus when he swore unmistakably at a clumsy oarsman while piloting the ladies through a crowded lock, the offence was hushed up with a formula; and so were other offences, since formulas will cover anything.

One day Mrs. Parish, going into the drawing-room, paused on the threshold with an angry sniff.

"Smoke – in here! It is the very first time in all these years," severely to Alice, "that I have ever known your papa – "

"It was not papa, it was Mr. Miles," said Alice quietly. "He walked in with his pipe, and I really did not like to tell him. I believe he has gone for more tobacco."

"Why, how stupid of me! Of course, with Mr. Miles it is quite different." (Mrs. Parish assumed an indulgent tone.) "He is not used to such restraints. You were quite right to say nothing about it. He shall smoke where he likes."

Again the little old lady came to Alice, and said very gravely:

"My dear, did you notice the way our visitor refused the hock this evening? Of course they do not drink such stuff in the bush, and he must have what he is accustomed to. I will arrange with Tomlin to have the whisky decanter placed quietly in front of him for the future."

Alice, for her part, not only permitted but abetted this system of indulgence; for she agreed with Mrs. Parish that the guest was a noble creature, for whose personal comfort it was impossible to show too much solicitude – which, indeed, was the least they could do. He had saved her father's life.

That incident – which she had related to Dick with a wonderful absence of feminine exaggeration – had been in itself enough to plant in her heart a very real regard for Mr. Miles. That was but natural; but one or two other things which came to her knowledge furthered this regard.

One Saturday morning in Kingston market-place Alice met a bosom friend, who informed her that she had seen the Graysbrooke pleasure-boat being towed up-stream by a tall gentleman – ("So handsome, my dear; who is he?") – while a miserable, half-starved wretch sat luxuriously in the stern-sheets. Rallied with this, the Australian's brick-dust complexion became a shade deeper. Then he made a clean breast of the affair, in his usual quiet tone, but with a nearer approach to diffidence than he had yet shown them. He had gone out for a solitary pull, and had no sooner started than a cadaverous creature with a tow-rope pestered him for a job. Miles had refused the man; doubted his

strength to tow a flea with a silk thread; and observed that he, Miles, was more fit to tow the other, if it came to that. At this, Miles, being sworn at for making game of a starving man, had promptly landed, forced the man, speechless with amazement, into the boat, towed him to Kingston, and left him to a good dinner, with some wholesome advice touching immediate emigration.

A few days later, at dusk on a wet afternoon, Mrs. Parish, from her bedroom window, saw Mr. Miles walk quickly up the drive in his shirt-sleeves. It transpired that he had given his coat to a ragged, shivering tramp on the London road – plus the address of the Emigration Office.

"You see," he said, on both these occasions, "I never saw anything half so bad in my own country. If you aren't used to it, it knocks a man's heart to see a poor devil so far gone as all that."

In short, Mr. Miles exhibited to the Bristos, on several occasions, a propensity to odd and impulsive generosity; and the point told considerably in their general regard for the man, which day by day grew more profound.

Among other peculiarities, so excellently appreciated, Mr. Miles had a singular manner of speaking. It was an eminently calm manner; but for the ring of quiet audacity in every tone, it might have been called a subdued manner. He never raised his voice; he never spoke with heat. When he said to Colonel Bristo, clinging to him in the sea, "If you hang on like that I must fell you," his tone was as smooth as when he afterwards apologised for the threat. When he paid Alice his first compliment he did so without the smallest hesitation, and in his ordinary tone; and his compliments were of the most direct order. They once heard him threaten to thrash a bargee for ill-treating a horse, and they were amazed when the man sulkily desisted; the threat was so gently and dispassionately uttered. As for his adventures, they were told with so much of detail and gravity that the manner carried conviction where the matter was most fantastic. Miles was the best of "good company." Apart from the supreme service rendered to him, Colonel Bristo was fully persuaded that he was entertaining the best fellow in the world. Add to this that Mrs. Parish adored the handsome Australian, while Alice meekly revered him, and it will be easily seen that a hostile opinion of their hero was well calculated to recoil on its advocate.

During the short period in which the hero was also the stranger, he spent all his time in the Colonel's society. Apparently the two men found many subjects of mutual interest. Once, when Alice interrupted them in the study, Mr. Miles seemed to be eloquently enumerating the resources and capabilities of some remote district of the Antipodes; for though she spent some minutes getting a book, he took no notice of her presence in the room. On another occasion Alice saw her father examining a kind of map or plan, while Mr. Miles bent over him in explanation. She afterwards learnt that this was a plan of the Queensland station of which Mr. Miles was part owner.

After the first day or two it seemed evident that Mr. Miles disliked the society of ladies.

On the third evening, however, the men patronised the drawing-room for half-an-hour, and the Colonel asked Alice to sing something. She sang, and Mr. Miles listened. When she had finished, Mr. Miles coolly asked her to sing again. The following night he extracted three songs from her. Then Mr. Miles began to spend less time in his host's sanctum. He cultivated Alice; he interested himself in her amusements – photography for one; he got her to sing to him in the daytime. He was civil to Mrs. Parish.

When the young lady sat down to the piano, this sun-burned Apollo did not hang over her, as other men did (when they got the chance); nor did he turn over a bar too soon or too late – like the others. He made no pretence of polite assistance, not he. But he flung himself in a chair, threw back his head, and drank in every note. At first it was generally with his back to the piano, and always with closed eyes. Then he found another chair – one a little further away, but so placed that the girl's profile was stamped like a silhouette on the sunlit window, directly in his line of vision. And he no longer listened with closed eyelids.

Mrs. Parish, a keen observer, hovered about during these performances, and noted these things. She had perceived at the time the impression Alice's first song made upon Mr. Miles: she saw that he

had regarded the girl from that moment with a newly awakened interest. Thenceforth he had made himself agreeable to both ladies, whereas before he had ignored them both. Now, although she knew well enough that Miles's attentions, so far as she was concerned, could be but politic, yet such was the inveterate vanity of this elderly duenna that she derived therefrom no small personal gratification. An impudent compliment thrilled her as it might have thrilled a schoolgirl. But this did not prevent her seeing what was really going on, nor secretly rejoicing at what she saw.

She watched the pair together from the first. She watched the girl innocently betray her veneration for the man who had saved her father's life. She knew that it is perilous for a man to see that a girl thinks him a hero, and she awaited results. She soon fancied that she saw some. She thought that Miles's habitual insouciance was a trifle less apparent when he conversed with Alice; certainly his eyes began to follow her and rest upon her; for Mr. Miles did such things openly. But she detected no corresponding symptoms in Alice; so one day she told her bluntly: "Mr. Miles is falling in love with you, child."

Alice was startled, and coloured with simple annoyance.

"What nonsense!" she said indignantly.

Immediately she thought of the absent Dick, and her blush deepened – because she thought of him so seldom. Mrs. Parish replied that it was not nonsense, but, instead of urging proofs in support of her statement, contented herself with cataloguing Mr. Miles's kingly attributes. Here Alice could not contradict her. The old lady even spoke of the station in Queensland and the house at Sydney. Encouraged by the girl's silence, however, she overshot the mark with a parallel reference – and not a kind one – to Dick Edmonstone. She saw her mistake at once, but too late; without a word Alice turned coldly from her, and they barely exchanged civilities during the rest of that day.

From that moment Miss Bristo's manner towards Mr. Miles was changed. Mrs. Parish had put into her head a thought that had never once occurred to her. An innocent pleasure was poisoned for her. She did not quite give up the songs, and the rest, but she became self-conscious, and developed a sudden preference for that society which is said to be no company at all.

At this juncture the ship *Hesper* entered the Channel, and was duly reported in the newspapers. Alice saw the announcement, and knew that in two or three days she should see her lover. These days she spent in thought.

At seventeen she had been madly in love with young Edmonstone – what is called a "romantic" or "school-girl" affair – chiefly sentimental on her side, terribly earnest on his. At eighteen – parted many months from a sweetheart from whom she never heard, and beginning to think of him daily instead of hourly – she asked herself whether this was really love. At nineteen, it was possible to get through a day – days, even – without devoting sentimental minutes to the absent one. Alice was at least madly in love no longer. There remained a very real regard for Dick, a constant prayer for his welfare, a doubt as to whether he would ever come home again, a wondering (if he did) whether she could ever be the same to him again, or he to her; nothing more.

Mrs. Parish was in a great measure responsible for all this. That excellent woman had predicted from the first that Dick would never make his fortune (it was not done nowadays), and that he would never come back. Another factor was the ripening of her understanding, aided by a modicum of worldly experience which came to her at first-hand. Alice was honoured with two proposals of marriage, and in each case the rejected (both were wife-hunting) consoled himself elsewhere within three months. To this groundwork Mrs. Parish added some judicious facts from her own experience; and this old lady happened to be the girl's only confidante and adviser. Alice gathered that, though man's honour might be a steadfast rock, his love was but a shifting sand. Thus there were such things as men marrying where they had ceased to love; thus Dick might return and profess love for her which was no longer sincere.

In the end Miss Bristo was left, like many other young ladies, with an imperfect knowledge of her own mind, and attempted, unlike most young ladies, to mould her doubts into a definite and

logical form. She did arrive at a conclusion – when she learned that Dick was nearly home. This conclusion was, that, whatever happened, there must be no immediate engagement: she did not know whether Dick loved her still – she was not absolutely sure that she still loved him.

We have seen how she communicated her decision to Dick. His manifest agony when he heard it sent a thrill through her heart – a thrill that recalled the old romance. The manly way in which he afterwards accepted his fate touched her still more. She began to think that she might after all have mistaken herself of late; and this notion would probably have become a conviction but for one circumstance – the presence of Mr. Miles.

Dick was jealous: she saw it, or thought she saw it, from the first. This vexed her, and she had not bargained to be vexed by Dick. It made her more than half-inclined to give him something to be jealous of. Accordingly she was once or twice so malicious as to throw Mr. Miles in his teeth in their conversations, and watch the effect. And the effect did not please her.

On the other hand, about Mr. Miles there was no particle of jealousy (one thing more to his credit). Why, he had asked with the greatest interest all about Dick, after he had gone that first evening; and her answers had been most circumspect: she had let him suppose that Dick was a squatter during his whole term in Australia. After that Mr. Miles had asked no more. But Dick had never asked one word about Mr. Miles until he had been in England a fortnight, and then he offended her deeply. Up to that point her interest in Dick had been gradually growing more tender; she felt him to be true and brave, and honoured him; and contrasted her own fickleness with his honest worth. Once or twice she felt a longing to make him happy. Even as she felt herself irresistibly bowed down before him her idol fell. From this man, whom she was learning to truly love, came a mean, unmanly suggestion. To further his progress with her he stooped to slander the man whom he was pleased to consider his rival, and that rival the noblest, the most generous of men.

She could not easily forgive this; she could never forget it, and never think quite the same of Dick afterwards. And then the conduct of the other one was so different! Her manner instinctively warmed towards Mr. Miles: she should be his champion through thick and thin. As for Dick, after that little scene, he did not come near Graysbrooke for a week.

Now, during that week, the words that had offended her recurred many times to Alice. The pale, earnest, honest face with which Dick had uttered them also rose in her mind. Was it possible that his suspicion could be absolutely groundless? Was it not credible that he might have reasons for speaking – mistaken ones, of course – which he could not reveal to her? In any case, his words rankled; and so much sting is seldom left by words which we have already dismissed, once and for all, as utterly and entirely false.

During that week, moreover, there occurred a frivolous incident, of which Alice would have thought nothing before the expression of Dick's suspicions but which now puzzled her sorely. One brilliant afternoon she found herself completely indolent. She wandered idly into the garden, and presently came upon a rather droll sight: her father and Mr. Miles, sound asleep, side by side, in a couple of basket-chairs under the shade of a weeping willow. The girl conceived a happy roguery: what a subject for a photograph! She stole into the house for her camera. When she returned, her father was gone. She was disappointed, hesitated a few moments, and then coolly photographed the still unconscious Mr. Miles. An hour later she greeted him with the negative – an excellent one.

"You said you had never been taken," said she mischievously. "Well, here is your first portrait. It will be capital."

He asked to look at it, in his quiet way. Alice handed him the dripping glass. He had no sooner held it up to the light than it slipped through his fingers, and broke into a dozen fragments upon the gravel path.

Mr. Miles apologised coldly, and proceeded to pick up the pieces with a provoking smile. Alice was irate, and accused him of breaking her negative purposely. Mr. Miles replied with charming candour that he had never been photographed in his life, and never meant to be. Already blaming

herself for having yielded to a silly impulse, and one which was even open to wrong construction, Alice said no more; and presently, when the Australian gravely begged her forgiveness, it was granted with equal gravity. Nevertheless she was puzzled. Why should Mr. Miles so dread a photograph of himself? What had he to fear? Would Dick add this to his little list of suspicious circumstances? If he did, it would be the first item not utterly absurd. What if she were to tell him, and see!

As it happened, Dick called the very next day, a Wednesday, and the last day in June. Alice received him coldly. There was a natural restraint on both sides, but she thawed before he went. As he was saying good-bye, she asked him (casually) if he would come on Friday afternoon – the day of her dance – and help with the floor and things. She really wished him to come very much, for she foresaw an opportunity for explanation, without which the evening would be a misery to her; besides, they could talk over Mr. Miles fairly and confidentially. Dick jumped at it, poor fellow, brightened up at once, and walked home a happier man.

The following day Alice accompanied her father to town, on pleasure bent. The little jaunt had been long arranged, and Mr. Miles was their efficient escort.

That was on Thursday, July 1st.

Unfortunately for Mr. Biggs, M.L.C., he could not spend all his days at the Exhibition, so that a certain little drama, not widely differing from that astute legislator's preconception, was at last played to an altogether unappreciative house. The facts are these:

About four in the afternoon, an old gentleman, with snowy whiskers and hair, and with a very charming girl upon his arm, looked into the Settler's Hut. They did not remain within above ten seconds; but during those ten seconds the genus loci – who was in his customary place on the bunk – heard a voice without which caused him to start, pull the brim of his cabbage-tree hat further over his eyes, and draw a long breath through his teeth.

"I won't come in," said this voice, which was low and unconcerned; "I've seen it before; besides, I know the kind of thing rather too well."

The shadows of the old gentleman and the girl had hardly disappeared from the threshold when the man in the cabbage-tree hat and side-spring boots rose swiftly, and peered stealthily after them. What he saw caused him to smile with malignant triumph. A tall, well-dressed man walked beside the old gentleman and his daughter.

The watcher allowed them to pass almost out of sight, then followed warily. He followed them all the afternoon, keeping so far behind, and dodging so cleverly, that they never saw him. When the trio at length quitted the building and took a cab, this man followed through the streets at a double. He followed them to Waterloo. He got into the same train with them. They got out at a station on the loop line; he got out also, paid his fare to the ticket collector, and once more dogged his quarry. An hour later the cabbage-tree hat was attracting attention on that same suburban platform; later still the occupants of a third-class smoking carriage in an up train thought that they had never before seen such an evil expression as that which the broad brim of the cabbage-tree hat only partially concealed.

This also was on the 1st of July.

IX
A DANCING LESSON AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

To enter a cricket-field in mid-winter and a ballroom at midday are analogous trials, and serious ones to enthusiasts in either arena; but the former is a less depressing sight in January than in December, while there is something even inspiriting about a ballroom the day before the dance.

When, quite early in the afternoon, Alice slipped unobserved into the cool and empty dining-room, her cheeks glowed, her eyes sparkled, and the hard boards yielded like air beneath her airy feet. She shut the door quietly, though with an elbow; her hands were full. She carried two long wax candles that knew no flame, two gleaming dinner-knives, and a pair of scissors. These were deposited on a chair – provisionally – while the young lady inspected the floor with critical gaze.

She frowned – the floor was far from perfect. She slid out one small foot, as if trying dubious ice – yes, most imperfect. The other foot followed; it would be impossible to dance on a floor like this. Next instant the lie was given to this verdict by the judge herself, for Miss Bristo was skimming like a swallow round the room.

Would you see a graceful maiden at her best? Then watch her dancing. Would you behold her most sweet? Then catch her unawares – if you can. Most graceful and most sweet, then – I admit that the combination is a rare one, but she should be dancing all alone; for, alas! the ballroom has its mask, and the dual dance its trammels.

In this instance it was only that Alice desired to try the floor, and to assure herself that her feet had lost none of their cunning; and only once round. No, twice; for, after all, the floor was not so very bad, while the practice was very good, and – the sensation was delicious. Yet a third round – a last one – with quickened breath and heightened colour, and supple curves and feet more nimble, and a summer gown like a silver cloud, now floating in the wake of the pliant form, now clinging tenderly as she swiftly turned. And none to see her!

What, none?

As Alice came to an abrupt pause in front of her cutlery and candles, a deep soft voice said, "Bravo!"

She looked quickly up, and the base of a narrow open window at the end of the room was filled by a pair of broad shoulders; and well set up on the shoulders was a handsome, leonine face, with a blond beard and a pair of bold, smiling eyes.

"Bravo, Miss Bristo!"

"Well, really, Mr. Miles – "

"Now don't be angry – you can't be so unreasonable. I was out here; I saw something white and dazzling pass the window twice; and the third time I thought I'd see what it was. I came and looked, and thought it was an angel turned deserter, and dancing for joy to be on earth again! There was no harm in that, was there?"

"There is a great deal of harm in compliments," said Alice severely; "especially when they are wicked as well as rude."

Mr. Miles smiled up at her through the window, completely unabashed.

"I forgot. Of course it was rude to liken you to gods I never saw, and never hope to see. Forgive me!"

But Alice was thinking that her freak required a word of explanation.

"I was only just trying the floor," she said. "I never dreamt that anyone would be so mean as to watch me."

"Unfortunately one can't learn from merely watching," Mr. Miles replied, quietly raising himself upon the sill. "You surely haven't forgotten the lesson you promised to give me?" – swinging his legs

into the room – "I claim that lesson now." He towered above her, a column of gray tweed, his arms folded lightly across his massive chest.

The window by which Miles entered was five feet above the river lawn, and one of three at that end of the room – the other walls had none. Standing with one's back to these windows, the door was on the right hand side, and, facing it, a double door communicating with the conservatory. Before this double door, which was ajar, hung a heavy curtain, awaiting adjustment for the evening.

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