

A CORNER IN WATER

BERT MUDGE AND ALBERT GOLDIE.

AUSTRALIA:: THE WORKER TRUSTEES, Sydney and Melbourne. 1901

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I bent his head back till his neck broke.

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FIRST IMPRESSION, 1909.

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1.3 CHAPTER I.

1.4 A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

The last boat for Manly, the ferry steamer ' Cowra,' left Circular Quay, at 11.30 last night, and hasn't been heard of

Such was the startling news that paralysed the citizens of Sydney on the morning of the fifteenth of May, 19—.

Up to midday the harbor was covered with a dense fog. All night the sirens, fog horns, and whistles shrieked continuously. The "Cowra" had been reported missing from the Manly wharf about one o'clock in the morning. She was due half an hour before.

Search was made. Slow, cautious search, surrounded with danger, but the hours dragged through— with no sign of the vessel.

The morning papers could tell no more.

During the morning the search was continued, without success. Anxiously the lifting of the fog was awaited.

It was concluded the missing boat had run aground or been wrecked. More optimistic citizens reckoned she had got out of her course, and was perhaps lying up one of the bays or rivers, waiting for daylight.

As the fog slowly lifted about midday, the search was redoubled with feverish activity by police, pilot, tug, and other boats.

Without success!

There was no sign of the boat! No sign and no news!

No wreckage was found. Not one single plank, one spar, or seat, not even a stray lifebuoy; not the smallest, slightest token.

The vessel could not have been wrecked within the harbor.

She had absolutely disappeared.

As this conclusion took hold of the city a feeling of dismay changed to one of bewildered wonder.

That the boat could get off her course; that she might be wrecked, people could understand. But that she should utterly vanish seemed beyond comprehension.

The pilot boat had passed out the Heads in a vain search. South Head reported that there had been no sign of any unknown craft passing either way during the night.

All passages, and they were few on account of the fog, had been signalled.

The closest search of the coast gave no further satisfaction. The "Cowra" had vanished in the night.

Special editions of the evening papers appeared at intervals during the afternoon. They had little to tell of this mystery of the night.

The names of two passengers had been learnt; a further sensation electrifying the excited populace when it became known that the Hon. John Silmore was one of them. Silmore was one of the leading commercial men in the city; a man intimately associated with big enterprises; a member of the Upper House, and a prominent figure in the financial world.

That he was on board there could be little doubt.

He had attended a meeting of coal mine owners the previous evening, and an intimate friend, Mr.

Robert Grabbit, who was also his partner, had strolled down to the boat with him from his office, taking advantage of the opportunity to discuss some important business matters. He had left him a few moments before the boat steamed out.

Mr. Grabbit noticed few passengers on board, but, as he was leaving the wharf, he saw three men rush through the turnstile and scramble on board as the vessel was moving out. They were followed by another man, who seemed very excited, and completely disregarded the warning cries of the officials on the wharf. Had it not been for the friendly assistance of the others, he would have been left behind. Probably, in view of later events, it would have been better for the unfortunate man if he had missed the ill-fated vessel.

Another passenger had been identified as Harry Cable, an electrical engineer.

This was all the press could tell. Meagre particulars as they were, they served to give rise to the wildest conjectures in every quarter of the city.

Little as it was, it was enough. All other news seemed trifling.

In the excitement another city tragedy faded into insignificance. The warehouse of Ring and Purse, the great wholesale jewellers, had been robbed the previous night.

The thieves had got away with a big haul, totaling some thousands of pounds.

The night watchman was missing.

Suspicion pointed to his being implicated in the crime, but the city had only a moment's thought for these happenings.

Robbery they could understand; but this strange disappearance of a boat!—Men whose homes lay over the water shivered at the thought of a night trip.

Even the news coming later in the day that the dead body of the night watchman at the

warehouse had been found floating in the harbor near Pinch—Gut aroused only a passing interest.

The one question on the lips of the Sydney people was—

“Where is the ‘Cowra

A ferry steamer, lying in the harbor of a great city in times of peace, had totally disappeared—had passed out into the silence of the night.

1.5 CHAPTER II.

1.6 THE DREAMS OF AVARICE.

In the offices of the Central No. 1 Extended Coal Mining Company, Limited, Robert Grabbit sat in his room staring moodily at his desk with unseeing eyes.

He had roughly put the pile of papers aside, had curtly dismissed his stenographer before the day’s work was even begun, and given himself up to be—wilder meditation.

Grabbit was a short, clean shaven, thin man with a tense, cunning expression. He had not an attractive face, for cupidity was the great passion stamped in—delibly on his countenance. It was a true record. The pursuit of wealth was the one object of his life. He was one of the smartest and most successful men in the city; it would be safe to add unscrupulous, as far as business was concerned.

A self-made man, the objective of his life was gain and if at the present moment his usually systematic methods were shaken to their base, his mind a vacant, useless thing, his nerves on the verge of hysteria, it was more because his desire for gain was threatened than for any personal regret over his friend’s disappearance.

Friendship, in the usual sense of the word, meant little to Robert Grabbit. His connection with other 11 men was based on what they were worth to him; hypocritical garments of mock good fellowship might be worn for disguise.

In ordinary circumstances the death of an acquaintance, even of a colleague such as Silmore, was only a passing event, measured in its importance as it affected his bank book.

There were other reasons, then, for this bloodless miser to be so upset.

Although nominally secretary of the Central No. 1 Extended, Grabbit was also a partner in the concern, which practically belonged to Silmore and himself.

The other shares held were trifling.

Silmore was termed managing director, and the two men absolutely controlled the business.

Grabbit had come in upon amalgamation with the Deep Bore Colliery, of which he was the owner. The purchase money was represented mostly by shares in the joint concern, which had since absorbed several smaller mines.

The Central No. 1 was one of the biggest mines in the State. The two men were therefore prominent and influential figures in the coal world, apart from the other interest they had gradually obtained.

They were more than ordinary acquaintances, being united by the strongest of interests.

Ordinarily, however, Grabbit would not have worried over the disappearance of his partner, for he was well able to control affairs himself, and probably, like most men, would welcome a freer hand.

But circumstances made the disappearance of John Silmore a matter of great moment, and a cause of keen anxiety to Grabbit and certain business friends. Similarly, it was also a matter of considerable relief to other men in the city.

To all it was an extraordinary mystery.

For some months previously there had been an unusual stir within coal circles in the city. An amalgamation of interests was contemplated, which would have a most momentous effect upon the coal industry of Australia, and be a big landmark in commercial history, having for its end the absolute control of the trade.

The scheme had found birth in the avaricious brain of Robert Grabbit.

After joining forces with Silmore and realising the power they already held in the coal world, the possibility of immeasurably increasing that power to the point of complete monopoly was irresistibly tempting.

His whole nature had surrendered its humanity to the all-absorbing desire for gold; for wealth and the power that wealth can bring. As far as material pleasure was concerned the obsession of his better parts had long since tempered natural enjoyment. The fact that others might suffer, that industries might be extinguished and labor disorganized, did not count. It was no more considered by this keen business man than the consequences of his act to his victim is considered by the garrotter or footpad.

The idea speedily matured, and, being laid before Silmore, found a ready acceptance.

The two men, with their joint interests, were by far the biggest holders in the industry. With the co-operation of three or four other large mine owners, the scheme was speedily on the way to realisation. With the exception of a few small men, whom it was not intended to consider other than perhaps to salve with a contemptuous offer for their property, which would probably have to be accepted in preference to extinction, the project was quietly laid before the various owners in the State.

The amalgamation afforded such opportunities of aggrandisement that its promoters never entertained the prospect of any opposition. Indeed, they expected to be hailed as financial geniuses and secretly relied upon a certain amount of respect—to abuse an honest word—to enable them to secure perhaps slightly better conditions for themselves in the amalgamation than would otherwise be the case.

They were doomed to disappointment, and found that all was not to be plain sailing with their new scheme.

Its reception was not by any means one that could be described as enthusiastic, even by those who immediately recognised the opportunities for enhancing their profits.

The keenest critic, however, was Robert Black.

Black was about the largest owner next to the originators of the scheme. He was a man of strong individuality, of a different type from both Silmore and Grabbit. While his commercial morals were probably much on the same plane, he was not so completely wrapped up in the gathering together of riches as his more elderly opponents.

A younger man, life held for him other attractions, and consequently his sympathies were broader and in general more in touch with humanity. Not that he could be, in any sense of the word, considered a sentimentalist, or, indeed, a man of exceptional good nature or kindness. He was first and foremost a business man, but his success had been largely due to the valuable capacity for recognising the limits of human endurance and perhaps credulity.

Where others, influenced solely by the desire for gain, rode roughshod over human feelings and sensibilities, arousing opposition and obstruction that very often defeated the end they strove for, Black would achieve success by apparently giving away a little and studying others. The consequence was that the big mines operated by him stood high in the estimation of that important factor in the coal-mining industry, the Workers' Federation, while the collieries worked by Silmore and Grabbit were detested.

Times out of number the wisdom of Black's policy had manifested itself, and a steady output would be coming from his properties while the Central Extended and kindred mines were held up.

It was only natural that Black should be shrewd enough to see the dangers as well as the benefits of the proposed amalgamation. The chances would be, in fact it followed from its nature, that the policy of the new organization would be based upon the lines adopted by Silmore and Grabbit rather than upon his own, and he could foresee the possibility in the end of industrial trouble, when his future position would be considerably worse than when left to his own individual effort.

Furthermore, Black was influenced very considerably by a personal dislike he bore to

the pro—ponents of the scheme, and personal likes and dislikes count for considerably more in business enterprises than is generally admitted, and will probably continue to do so while human nature remains as it is.

He did not like the men, he did not like their nature, and had a contempt for their policy, while fully recognising their ability and enterprise.

The idea that he and his friends would probably, nay, would for a certainty be in a minority in the direction of the amalgamation, was against his grain.

When the proposition came before him, therefore, it found little favor.

A secret preliminary meeting was held, at which the proposals were brought forward. They embraced an amalgamation of all the main mines in the State, with a contract between the owners to work in thorough co—operation in order to absolutely control the coal output and consequently the selling price. It was apparent that it might be possible at times to shut down certain collieries, and yet by an enhanced price secure larger profits to the individual members, with a saving in expenditure, and possibly a diminu—tion of wages.

The meeting adjourned after hearing the proposals to allow the owners time for consideration. At a later gathering, Black declared himself wholly in op—position to the proposal. It was evident that a minority of those present were inclined to support him.

The meeting was again adjourned, for it did not suit the Grabbit and Silmore clique to bring about an absolute rupture.

Black was far too strong a man to openly antagonise. They preferred to leave matters in abeyance to secure the opportunity of exercising their influence quietly.

The opposition, to an extent, had taken them un—awares, and they were not prepared to look upon it as likely to last. The proposal offered such tempting prospects that it seemed impossible that any scruples would be speedily overcome.

They felt that it was best to hold matters over a little longer to allow of a quiet confidential talk with the different owners, who were apparently opposed to the scheme.

Black proved an active opponent.

1.7 CHAPTER III.

1.8 PROS AND CONS.

The following week was devoted to active work on both sides. Silmore and his associates brought their whole strength to bear upon the other leading mine—owners, and they appeared to favor the proposal.

Of the seven big colliery men, including the orig—imators, all were fairly united. The exceptions were Black and Peter Morgan, and these two were the strongest in the industry apart from Silmore and Grabbit.

Morgan was a keen man with a natural indepen—dence. He had been badly hit once or twice by Grab—bit, and was sore about it. Furthermore, he and Black had joint interests, and he was inclined to follow the latter.

At the same time, he was an avaricious man, and the prospects of the scheme appealed to him. Had it come from elsewhere it w[^]ould probably have been taken up eagerly. Yet he was far from convinced that it wasn't a wise step, in spite of all Black's arguments and appeals.

Up to the present he was neutral.

Ignoring their past differences, Grabbit had not hesitated to approach him secretly, and in the course of several interviews to appeal to his cupidity.

While unaware of these confabs, Black knew that his colleague was wavering. The former's position was not an enviable one; he thoroughly distrusted the amalgamation, and was confident that while Morgan and he stood out there was little prospect of its ac—complishment. He made no secret of his intentions to form an opposition body should it eventuate, consist—ing of a group of smaller men, who with Morgan and himself would make a combination able to stand against the amalgamation.

On the other hand, there was a chance—that Morgan would leave him to practically fight the combine alone. He knew that meant a merciless battle to the end.

A battle in which he would be defeated.

On the morning of the disappearance of the "Cowra" Black had brought together his party, consisting of the small mine—owners and Morgan.

They had met at his suggestion to go thoroughly into the amalgamation scheme, and Black lost no time in coming to the point. He was naturally direct and blunt.

The fact is, gentlemen, as far as I'm concerned I am not inclined, to go much on any scheme put forward by the Central Extended crowd. We are here to get right down on to a business proposition which it seems to me is just as likely to hit us hard, in the long run, as to put money in our pockets. My experience with Silmore and Grabbit is not calculated to make me feel anxious to welcome them as partners.

I'm a darned sight less anxious to have them as bosses, and that's what it comes down to!"

"Still," interrupted Morgan, "it is not a personal matter, and as far as Silmore and Grabbit are concerned, it is not them we are dealing with, but the question of whether this scheme is going to put money in our pockets. Personally, I don't like the men and never did, but if this is going to guarantee me a bigger profit—well, that is all I want. It's no good. Black, damning the scheme because it is proposed by men you don't like!"

Some of the other men present nodded an assent to the speaker's words, and Black frowned as he replied:

"Of course, I know that. I don't think that I can be considered such a fool as to throw away the chance to make money simply through a personal dislike. But as far as our friends down the road are concerned, there is not a man in this room but knows that they are out for themselves every time, and are not too damn particular how they go about it. Of course, none of us are in business for fun, but still we manage to play the game, and, while looking after ourselves, do it decently!"

"That's right!" interjected one of his hearers.

"While we must look at this thing in a business light," continued Black, "we cannot forget the type of men we are dealing with.

"I candidly admit that this consideration makes me dubious about an amalgamation, for the main reason that there is no getting away from the fact that Silmore and Grabbit will have the biggest pull in the concern.

** They are the biggest owners, and we cannot, if we go into the thing, prevent them from holding the biggest share. Given the help of one or two others, and they will get that, for there are some of their own kidney in it, and they can run the show!

Can we trust them? For my part, I say "No!" all the time!"

"All the same," said Morgan, "the more money they make the better for us. The terms of the contract cover that, and I am hanged if I see where the danger to us comes in. They are not going to crush the trade altogether, for that would hurt them as much as us. The more they make out of coal the bigger our share. You can't dodge that, and, by George, it seems to me a good proposition!"

** "Can't crush us!" retorted Black warmly. "Who's to say? There was never a business scheme of this sort yet that couldn't hit more ways than one."

But how?" expostulated Morgan.

Now look here!" replied Black, rising to his feet as he spoke. His brows came together in a deep frown, for he was desperately in earnest, and his hands were outstretched as in appeal, only there was little of appeal in the nature of the man and more of fight. He spoke quickly, his voice vibrating with a quick, tense note of passion.

"Let us look this thing fairly in the face," he said with brutal directness. "As far as you and I are concerned," and he looked at Morgan, "we are given a chance to come in and share the spoils. But as to the smaller men—and he waved his hand in the direction of the remainder of

the group, who were watching him intently, where do they come in? They were not asked to the meeting. They are not to be in the amalgamation. There would be too many mouths to fill

"But/" interrupted Morgan, with a deprecatory shrug of his shoulders, they will not be affected. They "

"Oh, I know what Grabbit says," continued Black, with increasing vehemence, "They will not be affected. Their trade will not be enough to affect the big concern. But is that what he is telling all hands? The fact is they are to be wiped out! A big slump in the price for a month or so. A passing loss to the amalgamation, and the small men will be glad to sell out at any figure. I don't know whether you have had a hint of this," and the speaker looked keenly at Morgan, who flushed a little and looked disconcerted for the moment, but others have, and I can see it is the game!"

"It's the first I've heard of it," replied Morgan. But some of them reckoned he lied.

"Well, even if true, it might be a matter of business," said Black, "but it doesn't seem to me to be a fair thing. We are friends to an extent, and at least have got on all right. Why introduce this dog eat dog business? But putting them aside—let them sink if need be, and where do we come in?"

To control the output, Grabbit tells us, some of the mines on occasion will be closed down. But which mines? His or ours? And when they have been closed down, and the men get growling and striking, and the whole thing disorganized, whose mine will be affected? And what is to prevent us being left in the end with a disorganized mine and the business in the hands of the Silmore and Grabbit crowd?

"But the contract?" remonstrated Morgan.

"Contract be damned!" replied Black, hotly. "You know as well as I do that this contract won't stand. Why it is an illegal combination probably, and bonds might be evaded as far as that goes. Say what you like, it simply comes down to a proposition to go into partnership with men you don't trust, and that strikes me as the biggest fool proposition I've ever struck.

"There was a silence as Black resumed his seat, and the small men looked at one another and nodded significantly.

Morgan, who had been biting nervously at his cigar, was just about to speak, when there was a knock at the door.

Black sprang to his feet.

"Who's there?" he cried angrily.

The door opened, and his confidential secretary looked into the room.

"Excuse me, Mr. Black," he said diffidently, "but I have a memo, here which I think will interest you."

Black, who had given strict orders that he was under no circumstances to be interrupted, strode impatiently to the door, and took a slip of paper from the other's outstretched hand.

He opened and scanned it quickly.

A look of bewilderment passed over his face.

Good God," he exclaimed, "Silmore has disappeared!"

There was an astonished chorus:

Disappeared?"

What the blazes do you mean?" shouted Morgan.

Black looked at the note. "Mr. Silmore was a passenger on the ferry steamer 'Cowra,' which disappeared last night," he read aloud.

"The missing steamer," echoed Morgan; there has been no word of her this afternoon?"

Black looked enquiringly at his secretary.

The latter shook his head.

"No sign of any sort. The harbor has been thoroughly searched without any success," he replied.

Who told you about Silmore?" asked Black.

It is in the early issue of the * Echo,' sir! I thought you would be interested to know."

Interested—I should think so!" muttered Black. "All right, thanks; you can go, Mr. Norton," he said aloud, and the secretary discreetly withdrew.

As the door closed, the group of men looked at each other in astounded silence. For the moment they were to an extent overawed by the sudden news.

Disappeared! "Terrible" There seems no hope of the boat being found safely/' were the exclamations that passed after a few moments' silence.

Black, who had resumed his seat, sat looking at the table in silence for a time, then, lifting his head and looking at his companions steadily, he said in a quiet voice:

"I think we can safely postpone our discussion for a time, gentlemen."

The others nodded silently, and, with the exception of one or two of Black's more intimate friends, shortly afterwards left the office.

The others remained to discuss this new and sensational development in the history of the great coal amalgamation.

1.9 CHAPTER IV

1.10 ANXIOUS INQUIRIES.

It was no wonder that Grabbit, for the first time in a long business career, was unable to concentrate his attention upon the numerous details intricately associated with the management of the important concerns with which he was connected. Instead, he gave himself up to a series of futile conjectures as to the disappearance of the ferry boat and, what was of infinitely greater moment to him, his friend the director of the Central Extended.

On the eventful morning of the 15th of May he had come down to the office as usual about nine, and, his mind being full of the amalgamation scheme, he had glanced into Silmore's room as he passed, having some fresh details about which he wished to consult him.

Not surprised at finding the chief absent, for Silmore did not generally come down till between ten and eleven, he passed into his own office and devoted himself to the morning's paper.

He remembered that it had been a late and irksome evening the previous night, and that elderly gentlemen of sedate habits were apt to find the last boat rather an unpalatable experience.

Afterwards he remembered with a grim smile, in the light of future events, that these thoughts had passed through his mind.

Grabbit, although nearly of the same age as Silmore, was the type of man who never recognised that he was old.

While fully conscious of the idiosyncrasies of others, he was too wrapped up in a strenuous business life to recognise or at least to care about his own.

After glancing lightly at the paper for a few moments, he suddenly sat bolt upright in his chair, his eyes staring at the open sheet before him, glued to the following headlines:—

LOST !

Ferry Boat Missing.

Extraordinary Disappearance of Manly Steamer.

He scanned the page rapidly, not fully comprehending the import of what was written.

As he collected his wits, and remembered that he had left Silmore on the very boat that was missing, he dropped the paper and gazed dully before him.

Gathering himself together, he picked up the table telephone lying on his desk, with the intention of calling up Silmore's private house.

As he did so a voice came through the telephone.

Is that Mr. Grabbit?" It was a woman's voice.

"Yes," he replied. "Who's speaking?"

Miss Silmore "was the answer, and he felt his worst fears confirmed.

Can you tell me if father is at the office?"

Grabbit hesitated a moment before replying.

"No, he has not been here yet. Has he left the house?"

Oh, dear me, no! He did not come home last night! We thought he had probably stopped at the club and had perhaps telephoned us to say so after we had gone to bed. He said he would be very late. But no word having come this morning we are awfully upset, especially after reading the terrible news in the paper. ... I do hope nothing has happened to him! . . . Mother is in a frightful state! . .

The listener at the other end knew that the speaker was deliberately buoying herself up with false hopes, but he could not crush her with the truth. To tell such news through a lifeless machine was too brutal and cold—blooded, and Grabbit, after all, was human. Striving, therefore, to make his voice composed and calm, he told the girl not to be unnecessarily alarmed; that he would immediately make full inquiries and let her know the result.

He hung the receiver up with a sigh of despair, and sat for a few minutes collecting his thoughts.

Recognising that it was impossible to postpone the sad intelligence much longer, he picked up the tele—phone again and, being put on to his own house, asked his wife to come into town and meet him at once, tell—ing the reason amid her exclamations of surprised dismay.

Manlike, he intended putting an unpleasant duty on so—called weaker shoulders.

1.11 CHAPTER V

THE JOHN BROWN'S FIND.

As the days passed and the disappearance of the Cowra " still remained an unexplained mystery, a feeling of stunned amazement took possession of the people of Sydney.

Speculation was rife, and the wildest and most extraordinary solutions were put forward as a theory in explanation, only to be promptly scouted.

Astounded bewilderment gave place to fevered excitement when it became known that the missing ferry steamer was being towed through the Heads by a tramp sailing vessel.

The evening papers told this news in their first editions, and they did not waste time in making the most of a golden opportunity.

The "Cowra " had been found tossing on the ocean about three days after its disappearance, with— out a soul on board.

There was no sign of any sort to explain w^hat had happened to the passengers and crew.

The boat was unharmed j was floating helplessly miles out at sea.

So far from the recovery of the " Cowra having solved the mystery, it had intensified it! There was something almost ridiculous in the sight of the ferry—boat as she rode through the Heads in the wake of her rescuers.

A mob of reporters was on board the police boat when it went down the harbor to meet the incoming craft, and the captain, a wizened little Yankee, greeted them with an affable smile as they scrambled up the side of the dirty old timber—boat.

She was the "John Brown," working across from Buenos Ayres; captain, Ephraim Davis. Willing to talk, but nothing to tell. Picked the Cowra " up about a hundred miles out to sea.

These sentences were jerked out between de— liberate spits in answer to eager questions.

And there was no sign of anyone on board

Nary a soul, son! She just lay there risin' and fallin' like an old dead whale. We did not know what to make of her at all, for you don't see many of them sort at sea," he added with a grin, for the captain was in a cheerful mood in view of prospective salvage. ** Ferry boats don't come padding across our track much. To tell the truth we were a bit scared of her at fust, thinkin' there might be sumthin' wrong aboard of her. But, Lord, there weren't a sign of even a rat!"

The little group of journalists and others exchanged glances in astonishment, then looked in wonder at the ferry boat as she came gliding behind them.

She did not look any the worse for her escapade.

As the " John Brown " dropped her anchor there was a scramble to get on board the ferry boat.

As the skipper had said, she was absolutely deserts.

In vain did the energetic newspaper men, burning for fresh copy to dish up to their hungry audience, roam over her, hunting into every nook for some sign of the missing men . . . something to tell them the story of this ocean mystery.

A few stumps of cigars were about all they got in return for their efforts.

The boat was in good order. There was no sign of any violent struggle, or even of bad weather.

Excepting that she had not the same spick—and—span appearance, the "Cowra " might have been just returning from her usual trip to Manly.

The disappointed journalists gathered together on the deck, while the company's engineers were examining the vessel to see if all was in order below.

By this time quite a fleet of all sorts of craft had gathered round the returned wanderer, filled with interested observers.

The pier was also lined with onlookers, but the police kept them all from boarding the boat. But they missed nothing from that, except the satisfaction of idle curiosity.

Suddenly Morton, of the " Echo," whose inquisitive eye had been wandering round while his companions yarned over the strange mystery, gave a startled exclamation.

" Hello," he cried, " where's the piano?"

Simultaneously all eyes were turned to the spot where the piano is always found on the harbor ferry boats.

It was gone!

As one man they rushed to the other end of the boat to see if the other piano was missing.

It was in its usual place.

" Perhaps it was taken off for some reason before she went away," said one of the group.

" No fear," said one of the company's officers. " It was on board when she left Sydney all right."

Well I'm damned!" said Morton. "What the devil would people want with a piano?"

Especially a Manly boat piano," remarked one of the morning daily paper men, with a grin, which brought forth corresponding smiles from the others.

Pooh!" snapped one of his seniors. It's been washed overboard, I suppose."

"Not a bit of it," replied the ferry officer, who had meanwhile been examining the sides of the vessel; " there would be signs of breakage if that were the case. That piano has been taken off this boat without doing any damage!"

The others stared in speechless astonishment.

At last Morton, jamming his copy—paper into his pocket, gave a disgusted curse as he snapped out: "

Come on, boys. There's no good stopping here. This business is getting on my nerves!"

Next day the " Cowra " resumed her running to Manly, none the worse for her misadventure, and the company did a royal business carrying the inquisitive thousands who were anxious to be able to say they had had a trip in her.

As to where John Silmore and the others who had been on board had gone, that was still a mystery, and as the passengers sat and listened to the weird music from the instrument that had taken the place of the missing piano, many were the wondering speculations as to the secret of their disappearance.

Had the public known the effect that the passing strange disappearance of Silmore had upon its own pockets in protecting it from the merciless onslaught of a powerful commercial combination, interest would have been keener still.

Perhaps, for human nature is selfish, many might have harbored the silent hope that his absence would be a long, long one.

1.12 CHAPTER VI

1.13 THE WAITING SPIDER.

In Silmore's own business circle his disappearance spelt confusion.

There could not have been a worse time for him to have been absent. The amalgamation was practically at a standstill.

The balance of power having been in his hands, it was impossible to go further.

Black and his associates knew this, and looked upon the proposal as defunct for a time at least. If their satisfaction was tempered by the tragic nature of the circumstances—for Silmore was looked upon by city acquaintances as one dead—yet it provoked many a sigh of relief.

After all, there is not a great deal to choose in the commercial world between death and ruin. Perhaps, of the two, ruin might be the harder to face, for there is nothing more tragic than to see the semblance of power relentlessly torn away, leaving a man exposed to adversity in helpless nakedness. Silmore's scheme, while it made for his enrichment, carried with it the ruin of others, and they, remembering this, were but human in feeling gratitude for the strange intervention that had been their salvation. If that salvation meant that the storm—tossed body of John Silmore lay at the bottom of the deep sea, food for the fishes, they were not to 34 blame. The pious, indeed, might look upon it as the justice of the Almighty.

While the opposition could view the circumstances with complacent sympathy, in the offices of the Central Extended, noted for regularity and order, there was a state almost of chaos. The staff, always influenced by the humor of the heads, was torn between wonder and worry.

Grabbit had never before encountered such a blow to his ambitions, and, in addition to his official annoy—ance, had the care of two frantic women on his hands, a charge he was ill adapted for.

Silmore's wife and daughter could not believe that he was really dead, and they continually beseeched Grabbit to take some fresh steps to solve the mystery. The fact that police and harbor authorities found them—selves facing an impenetrable wall of mystery was thrust aside with futile suggestions, to which, however, Grabbit listened with courteous but heedless ears. Their importunity, under ordinary conditions, would have met with short shrift, as far as he was concerned, for Grabbit cared little for the feelings of others.

But he was already looking into the future, and, inwardly satisfied that Silmore was dead, did not forget that these two hysterical women would inherit his in—terests. They unknowingly—and he would see that it continued unknowingly—would hold the balance of power in the coal world, and they must be as wax in his clever fingers. But if that consummation was to be reached, he must establish himself firmly as their friend in their hour of distress. So he listened to their wildest ideas with apparent sympathy.

There was no evil intention in his mind, and the interest of the widow and child of his partner would be looked after as carefully as his own, and most ably. However, for the ultimate success of his scheme, it would be necessary that they should give him full power over their affairs, therefore he was patient beyond his usual wont. For the time being he saw that the amalgamation was at a standstill, and fretted in—tv^ardly. There was a whisper of English capital com—ing in on a large scale to reconstruct some other fields, and that was dangerous to the future from his point of view. But any immediate action was impossible.

Not only had Silmore to be proved to be dead, but any suggestion as to steps in that direction at this early stage would have caused an outburst fatal to his aspira—tions and ill—suited to the role of the sympathising counsellor and intimate friend.

He had, therefore, to wait patiently—inwardly raging at the thought that the opposition was probably strengthening its position every day, for he had speedily noted a keener competition operating than hitherto.

Little wonder, then, that the office was disturbed, and an unusual fluster manifest. Grabbit was irritable and short—tempered, and his feelings communi— cated themselves down through the staff from secretary to office—boy and messenger.

In one quarter at least John Silmore's disappear— ance was far from forgotten!

1.14 CHAPTER VII

1.15 A MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE.

Some weeks had passed since the ^Cowra had been reported missing.

The excitement caused by the disappearance had passed, and affairs were working slowly into a new groove.

The greatest places in the world can never remain long unfilled, and thus a new order of things was as—serting itself at the offices of the Central Extended.

John Silmore was slowly being given up for lost, and even in his own family a subdued grief was taking the place of the confidence in recovery of the first hours.

Grabbit came down a little earlier to his office one Monday morning. He sat down at his table and rang for his stenographer, then proceeded to open some private letters that were lying in front of him.

He opened them leisurely, noting their contents with the quick despatch of a smart business man.

Suddenly he started, and, jerking forward, stared at the letter in his hand like a man in a dream.

The stenographer who had just come into the room looked at him in astonishment as he brought his fist down on the table with a resounding crash.

^Good God!** he exclaimed.

The suave Mr. Grabbit!

He looked at the letter again for a moment. Then he sprang from his seat and commenced walking up and down the room with nervous steps, heedless of another ^s presence.

The girl, who had attended at his bidding, stared at him open—mouthed, note—book and pencil in hand.

As he passed the second time he saw her.

^Get out of this ... !" he ejaculated brusquely.

^111 call you when I want you!" There was a flash of white lace and flowing skirt as the girl, with indignant face, literally jumped out of the room at the sound of such unexpected and unusual tones from the formal, polite Mr. Grabbit.

In a few moments the news had spread through the office, by medium of that subtle but ever present under— current in all big concerns, that something was " up again.

Clerks whispered eagerly to one another as they leant over their ledgers, while the click of the busy typewriters slackened just a shade as their haughty manipulators^uplifted eyebrows met other similarly interrogatory signs over the machines, and they gently shook their curls in burning curiosity as to what it was all about.

A ruffle of feminine indignation had travelled through their ranks as it became known how one of their number had been treated, for the office was op— pressively conservative and dignified, particularly in its treatment of the lady employees, who thought no little of themselves.

Curiosity was intensified later when a tall man in uniform walked through the main chamber, making straight to Mr. Grabbit's room.

The visitor, the office boy familiarly informed the dignified bevy (for, like the rest of his tribe, he was utterly disdainful of anyone's dignity), was Old Dyer, the police inspector." This information con— siderably heightened the interest.

Even the staid accountant glanced eagerly at the closed door of the chief's room, as if he would read what was going on inside.

Ever since the disappearance of Silmore there had been a nervy feeling among the senior men in the office.

Meanwhile Inspector Dyer had been shown into Grabbit's room, where he found the latter waiting for him eagerly with signs of nervous excitement on his face, which the keen eye of his visitor did not fail to notice.

The newcomer walked straight up with out— stretched hand (for the two had come in close contact in connection with Silmore's disappearance), ex— claiming :

“You have heard something, Mr. Grabbit?”

“Read that . . . !”

The officer took the letter which Grabbit had impetuously held out across the table, while the latter watched him eagerly.

The missive was written on ordinary writing—paper in a bold neat hand, while the signature was in smaller characters, a little shaky but plain. It read:—

Dear Grabbit,

This is to inform you that I am alive and well, but I am a prisoner, and before I can return home £20,000 is demanded and it is useless to pro— test. This amount must be taken in Diamonds (nothing else will do) by a messenger who will go to Cooma and drive from there along the road to Nimitybelle, stopping at the fifteen—mile peg. He must arrive four days from the date of this letter, and at seven o'clock in the evening I will be brought there and an exchange made. These are the conditions on which I can get release, and I am powerless.

“JOHN SILMORE.”

“By George exclaimed the inspector, a clue at last!”

Grabbit nodded, and the two men, now visibly excited, sat looking at one another in silence.

A silence so intense that the atmosphere seemed to vibrate with the vitality of the momentous.

The tick of the large marble clock over the massive mantelpiece sounded to them like blows on a smithy's anvil.

Through the high windows the hum of the outside traffic came as something from another world. The rattle of the cable car, the shrill cries of the newsboy, fell on the brain of the two men with meaningless sound. Both were alert and laboring under the stress of a keen mental strain.

The police inspector scented the solution of the most sensational mystery recorded in the annals of his calling. Already his thoughts were reaching out in half—formed plans, his wits working rapidly, for by a stroke of luck Grabbit had happened upon one of the few officers at their best in the presence of an un— foreseen emergency.

Grabbit for his part was equally busy. Grasping in a moment what Silmore's unexpected return meant, he had rapidly passed from a feeling of happy relief at the knowledge that his friend was still alive, and his indefatigable brain was already weaving ambitious schemes for the future.

Once again the great coal combine, the dream of his latter years, sprang into reality! The lost hopes of the last few weeks were swept away, and the scent of battle intoxicated his brain for the moment as it in— cited the one tangible joy of his life, that of amassing wealth.

Thus in a way the thoughts of both men, in an atmosphere of sudden excitement, were soaring in the realms of success, although in widely different direc— tions.

A light puff of wind came through the window, and the momentous letter, which was lying on the table, went fluttering on the floor. This trivial circumstance D brought the two men down to common earth again, and although only a few moments had passed since he had read it, the inspector, with a half—ashamed laugh at his want of control, asked as he bent down to pick it up:

I suppose there is no doubt about the signa— tured'

Grabbit in answer touched the bell at his side, and told the clerk who appeared to ask Mr. Thompson to come in.

In a couple of minutes a white-headed old man, with a shrewd face and the confirmed stoop of the life-long city clerk, came quietly into the room. With a friendly nod Grabbit handed him the letter, so folded that only the signature was visible.

"I suppose there is no doubt of that being Mr. Silmore's signature?" he asked.

Thompson took the letter, held it to the light, then returned it quietly but decisively:

"Not the slightest!"

"Thanks," replied Grabbit. "That is all, Mr. Thompson."

As he left the room Grabbit turned to the inspector and said: "That gentleman is our cashier. He has been with Mr. Silmore some thirty-odd years."

Dyer nodded as he replied: "That is satisfactory enough. What do you intend doing? I see they don't intend to be blocked getting their money's worth. They ask for diamonds. About the only thing we could not trace. Do you intend to send them?"

Grabbit sprang to his feet and thumped the table in his excitement. His face was white with astounded rage at the suggestion.

"What!" he cried. "Submit to such daylight robbery? I will see them damned first! ... Do you think twenty thousand pounds are to be picked up in the street? . . . Whoever heard of such a thing? . . . Why, man, we are living in a civilised country, and such a thing is not to be tolerated. Twenty thousand pounds! . . . God bless my soul! . . . Twenty " And he began pacing up and down the room again.

The inspector eyed him with a slight curl of the lip. Secretly delighted at this decision, as it gave the police a chance, he understood that it was only through meanness. Most men he knew in similar circumstances would have paid the money over quietly without the authorities being any the wiser. Now they had a chance to solve the tantalising mystery. Yet he could not help feeling some contempt for Grabbit's miserliness, nor could he quite repress a vague smile as he reflected that it was Silmore's money that would be paid, and Silmore that would have to take the risk if it was not paid. As far as Grabbit was concerned, it meant no direct loss to him. But to surrender such a sum of money was a sheer impossibility to one of his avaricious nature. All the same, the inspector mused as he watched the other stride angrily to and fro, there might be another story when Silmore's wife and daughter heard about it.

However, he only said: "Of course, Mr. Grabbit, it is certainly a large sum of money, but I thought perhaps you might think it was worth that to have Mr. Silmore back safe and sound

Back safe and sound!" interjected Grabbit hotly. "Of course we'll have him back safe and sound. What are the police for? Damme, are we keeping up an expensive force for nothing, if leading citizens can be taken away and robbed like this? I tell you, sir, it is intolerable!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Grabbit," interrupted the inspector in cold tones, as an angry flush crept over his face, "there is no question of the police not doing their duty. I mentioned the point because if that letter is genuine Mr. Silmore is in the hands probably of dangerous men, and we must remember he is consequently incurring a personal risk. Of course, you take that responsibility, Mr. Grabbit?" he added curtly, glancing keenly at the other.

Grabbit fidgeted uneasily as he replied hastily:

"Of course, of course! . . . But really, Inspector, I don't think there will be any risk if the matter is treated carefully. For one thing, there must be absolute secrecy about this letter. I know I can rely on you to help me. Really you must excuse my hasty words. The truth is, you can understand, this has all upset me terribly. ... It is like a voice from the grave ..." And Grabbit wiped his face nervously as he spoke.

"Oh, that's all right," said Dyer. "I can understand your feelings. The question is what steps are we going to take? As you do not intend to send the diamonds, we must endeavor to catch this gang and at the same time save Mr. Silmore. By the way, have you got the envelope that letter came in?"

"Yes," replied Grabbit, here it is. I thought of that when I read the letter, and kept it."

"Good," commented Dyer, as he examined the envelope handed to him. "I see it is marked

Lithgow. It might be as well for us to keep a look—out there, or anyhow make some inquiries. Still, that is a pretty hopeless task."

What plan do you suggest?" asked Grabbit.

Umph! That will take a bit of thinking out. It's a wild, cold, sort of place they have fixed for the meeting. I was stationed on the Monaro years ago, and know what it is. I will think the matter over and see you later in the day. We have got three clear days, and the main thing is to keep the matter thor— oughly quiet."

Grabbit assented willingly, with an inward smile, for that exactly suited his desire. The two men then separated, and, summoning his stenographer, Grabbit endeavored to devote his attention to his business affairs.

1.16 CHAPTER VIII

1.17 THE INSPECTOR'S PLANS.

When he first read Silmore's letter Grabbit was simply astounded.

In his excitement he quite lost control of himself, but after having abruptly dismissed his stenographer he calmed down after a while and carefully reviewed the position.

He was convinced that the note was genuine. The signature was Silmore's. There was no doubt about that. When he realised that his friend was alive he centred his thoughts on the proposition in the letter. It was not a palatable one!

Although twenty thousand pounds was not a sum of very great magnitude either to him or to Silmore, the prospect of having to give it away was appalling. It was monstrous. Surely there must be some other way out of the difficulty. Silmore was alive, and ap— parently well. There must be some means of rescuing him. This was the trend of Grabbit's thoughts as he strode up and down the room.

As Dyer had said, most men would have made the best of such a bad bargain, and decided to carry out the expensive proposition that seemed, as it were, to come from another world.

But few men had the inordinate love of money that characterised Grabbit.

The more he contemplated parting with such a sum—although it would really cost him nothing personally, for Silmore would have to bear the loss—the more he revolted against it.

Thus it was that he had sent for Dyer and the above interview had taken place.

As the day passed he waited anxiously for his further appointment with the inspector.

That individual came punctually to time.

"Ah!" said Grabbit, as he entered the room, "you are punctual. Have you decided on a plan

Dyer gave a quick glance round to see that they were alone before replying :

" Yes, I think I have worked things out, for, after all, the matter is comparatively simple. It is obvious that, whoever the men are who have got hold of Mr. Silmore, they must accompany him to the meeting place to get the diamonds, and we should be able to arrest them.

" No doubt they have figured out that Mr. Silmore's friends will be too anxious to get him out to bother communicating with the police. I cannot yet understand why they have fixed upon such an out—of— the—way place to meet your messenger, unless it is that they want to evade pursuit. While reckoning that there is not much danger of anyone accompanying the messenger, they have probably figured it out that the moment that Mr. Silmore is out of their hands the alarm will be raised, and an attempt made to catch them. Fixing the spot at the fifteen—mile peg gives them a chance to get away before Silmore is back in Gooma. Their intention, probably, as far as I can figure it out, is to cross the mountains, working down to Gippsland in Victoria. If so, it looks as if there are some smart bushmen having a hand in the game, for it is no child's play to work over the range. Of course, on the other hand, their intention might be to race away over Big Jack or Brown Mountain, and get down to the coast about Bega or Eden. The roads are good, and with a fast motor—car they could get down there, taking a little risk that night. Again, if they are bushmen they might double back and

work round by Kiandra and Tumut down on to the Murray. It does not look as if they meant to catch the train, judging by the hour they have fixed."

"It seems to me," interrupted Grabbit, "that it is going to be a big job."

"There is no doubt about that," replied Dyer; "but the fact remains that the gang, whoever they are, will have to accompany Mr. Silmore to the fifteen-mile peg, and that is where we come in. Our men will be put out to circle that spot to prevent them getting away. As they are probably watching, or will be watching, it will not do to send up too large a body of men, and I have decided that half-a-dozen should be enough."

"But," said Grabbit, "they will be bound to be watchiDg about the town for the arrival of any strange police, which would, of course, frighten them off."

"Very likely; but there won't be any policemen arrive at the town."

You will have them disguised?"

Exactly. As a matter of fact, a couple of smart troopers are leaving to-night for Cooma effectually disguised. They have their instructions, and will be followed within the next couple of days by their com—panions, two of whom are going round by Bega. They will meet, under cover if possible, in such manner as to be able to close in quickly on the arrival of the messenger."

"Do you think you will be able to get the troopers near the spot without their being seen?"

"That is the danger, of course," replied Dyer, "but it cuts both ways. You see, the country round there is open bare hills, and it will really amount to who are the smartest bushmen. I have picked men with long country experience, and a couple of them are familiar with the locality. They will go on foot, and in that way should have an advantage in keeping out of sight by getting out in the vicinity the previous night, and camping among the rocks during daylight."

Well," commented Grabbit, "you certainly seem to have laid your plans well, and it is to be hoped we will catch the infamous rascals, whoever they are. Who will act as the messenger

I will/" replied Dyer, quietly; "I have arranged that with my men."

"That is excellent. Then you will not want me with you at all," said Grabbit, who was much relieved in his mind.

No, we will not want you with us; but you had better go to Cooma in case you are being watched, and so give them the idea that the bargain is being accepted."

Very well. I suppose there is nothing more to be done now?"

"Nothing more," said the inspector, "except to keep this matter perfectly secret."

"You can depend upon that," replied Grabbit, as the two men shook hands; and the inspector was about to leave the office when a clerk entered the room and handed Grabbit a telegram. Instinctively he stopped and waited till the other opened it.

Grabbit gave a startled cry, looked at the telegram again, then handed it to his companion, exclaiming, "

What the devil do you think of that?"

Dyer took the piece of paper, and, having read what was on it, gave a low whistle as he ejaculated,

Well, I'm damned I"

The telegram read as follows:—

Charters Towers.

Grabbit, Sydney.

Remember only three more days.

SILMORE."

"Charters Towers exclaimed Dyer. "They must have confederates all over the place. I don't like the look of this."

It certainly seems an extraordinary business," said Grabbit. Will it make any difference in your plans?"

Not as far as I can see," was the answer. Anyhow, keep the whole thing quiet."

" Very good," replied Grabbit, and the other then left the room.

1.18 CHAPTER IX

1.19 A NIGHT OUT.

It was a cold night on the Monaro plain when Dyer drove up to the fifteen—mile peg with two stout horses. Although it was close upon the hour fixed, there was no sign of anyone to meet him, and already he had a foreboding as to the likely success of his mission. The previous day another telegram had come to Grabbit from Cobar, which, coming after the other messages, made it look as if they were dealing with some powerful gang of criminals, not only daring and resourceful, but with confederates all over the continent. If so, he was afraid that he had underestimated its strength. Added to all this was the sensational disappearance of the ferry boat at the start, which had completely baffled his colleagues and himself.

He pulled the horses up in the middle of the road, half turning them so that the light would be on the face of anyone approaching him, and waited.

He knew that half—a—dozen good men were lying only a few yards away, rifles in hand, ready to cover anyone who should appear. Except for the jingle of a bit or the shuffle of harness, as the horses moved restlessly in the cold, there was not a sound breaking the night silence. Away on one of the slopes the light of a homestead shone steadily; otherwise there was 52 no sign of life, excepting the buggy with its silent occupant.

It was a dreary experience.

Dyer had arranged that when the gang came and accosted him he would pretend to be a genuine messenger, and bend down in the buggy for the apparent purpose of getting the bag containing the ransom. This would afford him a certain amount of cover, and on that instant the troopers were to appear and hold the others up. While there was a certain amount of risk, the scheme promised well, and Dyer had looked forward jubilantly to its accomplishment, readily taking the risk in view of the credit that would be his in the event of successful consummation. Now he felt that any risk would be preferable to sitting wearily on a cold night on the Monaro plains.

Slowly an hour passed, and there was no sign of any strangers. By this time he had alighted from the vehicle, and was leading the horses up and down the road some thirty yards to keep them and himself from being frozen. He thought bitterly of his men, and reckoned their experience of a policeman's life was certainly not being a happy one that night.

After another half—hour he had had enough of it, and, clambering into the trap, gave an impatient whistle.

Half—a—dozen figures half—staggered out from the shadows of the rocks, and began stamping their feet wildly on the roadway. For a few moments nothing was said, all of them being too disgusted to care to risk giving vent to their feelings in front of their superior officer.

When the blood had started to run in their veins a little, Dyer said :

" You may as well climb in here somewhere, and we'll start for home. One thing, the more crowded the warmer it will be. Damn such country, and Silmore, too," he added savagely. " Come on, we'll talk as we go along. These fellows must have seen your men," he continued to the sergeant in charge of the party. " Did you follow out instructions

The sergeant flushed angrily as he replied in the affirmative. It was bad enough being half—frozen on the plains without being censured by imputation.

" We got out there last night after dark, arriving in couples, and camped under cover—at least as much cover as we could find during the day," he said. " There was no sign of anybody following us, and as we kept a sharp look out we must have seen them in the open country."

" Did you notice anybody passing at all during the afternoon," asked the inspector—" anybody likely to be our men."

" There were only four or five traps went past the whole day, and there was nothing suspicious about any of them."

" Well," replied Dyer, " they must have got wind of it somehow, and kept out of the road."

The party drove in silence most of the way. Dyer was chagrined at the failure of his plans, over which he had been building high hopes, and his subordinates were too thoroughly sick of the whole thing to feel inclined to talk much. It was bitterly cold driving along the wind—swept roads, and altogether the whole affair had been an exceedingly unpleasant experience.

It was close on midnight when they got back to Cooma, and the men lost no time in seeking warm nourishment.

At the hotel, Dyer found Grabbit waiting for him with visible excitement. It had been a monotonous and trying ordeal waiting alone during the slow hours for the inspector's return. He started eagerly to his feet when he heard the inspector coming, and a look of disappointment came over his face when he saw that Dyer was alone.

" Where is Mr. Silmore he asked.

That's just what I don't know," replied Dyer in a surly tone, as he walked over to the fire, and in a few words he told Grabbit of their failure.

While the inspector was making a late meal, the disappointed men talked the matter over; but were unable to arrive at any decision as to their future movements. Ignorant as to whom their opponents were, or where they were, they could do nothing. Dyer made inquiries of the local police, who had been warned to keep a careful look out; but no strangers had been noticed about the township.

Shortly afterwards the two men retired for the night, both feeling disappointed and angry, and Grabbit also filled with some foreboding. Now that failure had attended their plans, the thought of John Silmore in the hands of some unknown and probably unscrupulous and angry men made him regret his decision to obtain the assistance of the police. He had taken the responsibility of refusing to send the money to effect Silmore's release, and now that responsibility was becoming greater than he had anticipated. His was an uneasy sleep that night, for, despite the serenity of the cool mountain air, his anxious thoughts kept him awake most of the time, and caused him to toss restlessly on an uneasy couch.

Neither of the men came down to breakfast very early, but when Grabbit entered the room Dyer was already waiting for him, and handed him a telegram which had arrived that morning.

Grabbit opened it eagerly, and gave a groan as he read it, and afterwards threw it over to the inspector. The latter saw that it was sent from Yass, and read:—

Hope your friends quite well after trying exposure last night recommend mustard bath and warm drinks would deeply regret to learn of any ill effects terms raised letter following immediate attention necessary in interest of our mutual friend dangerous for you to try further experiments you are too young avoid cough cures better see doctor

SMITH.

The damned scoundrels!" exclaimed Dyer, but in spite of his chagrin he could not help smiling. " It looks as if we were up against a pretty hot gang," he continued, " and I'm afraid they've about got us beat. Why, there must be an army of them, with a perfect system of communication, the way we are getting telegrams from all over the place. What do you make of it all," he added, as he viciously threw the telegram down on the table.

But Grabbit only groaned in answer, as he leant forward and stared moodily into the glowing embers, for the whole thing to him was a mad baffling mystery, in which at times he could hardly realise that he, Robert Grabbit, staid, cold man of business, was playing an active part.

That night the party returned to Sydney.

1.20 CHAPTER X

1.21 WHAT TO DO ?

The next morning Grabbit sat in his office alone. As he had expected, a letter was waiting for him. It was from Silmore, and the look of worry deepened as he read. It started abruptly,

without prefix or courtesy, and, although signed by his partner, was written by someone else with a strong, clerkly hand.

Your attempt at capture was simply waste of time. There is no possibility of success in such a direction; but any future effort will probably be dangerous—might, indeed, be fatal to me. You are dealing with determined men, and it would have been far better in the first instance if you had met their request. Their terms are now altered. A ransom of £25,000 must now be paid within three days' time and you must bring the money yourself and come alone. You must take the train to Ger—manton and drive along the road leading to Tumha—rumba. We will meet you at the six—mile peg at 7 o'clock at night, on the road leading to Tooma. You must come alone, and bring the money with you, otherwise you will never see me again."

An hour must have passed slowly by unheeded since Grabbit read this letter. He had given instructions that he was not to be interrupted on any account, and these had been obeyed, for he was not the type of man to have his orders overlooked. As he sat deep in meditation, half crouched down on his office chair, his head bent forward on his chest, his brow wrinkled with furrows, and his thin nervous hands aimlessly twisting a piece of paper, his mind was a chaos of activity, for bewildering thoughts rushed one upon the other in topsy—turvy procession, without logical sequence or value.

The one certain knowledge that now loomed big and strong before him, beyond all hope of contradiction, was the recognition that on his shoulders alone hung the fate of John Silmore. It was no longer possible to doubt that Silmore was in the hands of men of great resource, against whom it was hopeless to longer combat.

He, and he alone, must go forth with this great sum of money into what was to him a wild and unknown land.

It was an extraordinary situation, and for the first time in his life, solely through force of circumstances, Eobert Grabbit realised that he was a physical craven and a coward.

He was entirely a child of the city, and in a lifetime spent in New South Wales he had had practically no acquaintance with the country. Surrounded from youth upwards by the vital, pulsating energy of a keen commercial life, he had never rubbed shoulders with bodily danger of any kind. Essentially a product of modern civilisation, his nerve and mental forces had been developed to the highest capacity at the expense of the primeval characteristics of man. He who, in the keen distress of commercial warfare, had become famous with his cool calculating brain and indomitable energy, now found himself, in the face of an unaccustomed physical danger, as timid as a nervous child on a dark night.

He dragged through the day with a half-hearted interest in the business matters demanding his attention. Things of greater moment overshadowed his mind, and it was almost with a sigh of relief that he at length found himself, at the close of the day, alone in his private study. He had made cautious inquiries as to the whereabouts of the meeting—place, and the result was not calculated to allay his fears. Tumbar—umba, he learnt, was a little township in an out—of—the—way corner of the southern tableland, and the road to Tooma was a lonely one that led over the mountain down to the Murray River. To his city—enthralled mind it loomed as a wild, savage spot, where any crime might be wrought in the solitude of the night, and he mentally shivered at the ghastly picture he had imagined.

Such were the feelings that Robert Grabbit took with him for company as he locked himself up alone in the quiet study. The coal fire blazed away merrily in the handsome tiled fireplace as he sat in a great easy—chair. A table stood handy at his side, bearing a comfortably laden tray and a box of cigars. The room, lined with massive well—filled bookcases, and hung with rich curtains, spoke of wealth and comfort. His slip—pered feet sank in the thick carpet, and the din of the distant city echoed faintly like a murmur on the wings of a breeze.

It was a room full of happy associations to him. There he had sat, on many a night in a line of successful years, revelling in the memory of past triumphs and dreaming of still more ambitious pictures. But to—night its rich comfort only accentuated his fears. It forced into

contrast visions that made him shudder. Glancing fearfully about him, as if to make sure that he was really in his own home, he could see a lonely mountain road cutting its way in and out along the edges of cold, dangerous hills, whose dark shadows lay across it, wrapping the turns and corners in impenetrable blackness, where lurked hideous danger surrounded by an awful silence. To go into such a place with a fortune in his hands, to meet unknown enemies, was a prospect that might well fill with dismay men of a stouter heart than Grabbit. Who could tell that it was not a trap? Might there not be waiting in the dark shadows an assassin's knife? To some men how little was a human life in comparison with such wealth! Suddenly it came to him with appalling significance that he had reckoned human life or humanity little in the struggle for wealth. As he sat, with unstrung nerves and fearsome heart, in his lonely room, retribution grasped at the opportunity, as it often does in men's lives, and there stretched before him in horrible retrospect a vision of the miseries, the heart-ache, failures, and perhaps ignominious deaths, that had littered the footsteps of his past success, for most great money gain is built on the failure of others.

Unknown to himself, Grabbit was never closer in touch with humanity than at that moment, for indeed "one touch of nature makes the whole world kin." But the frightful possibilities that faced him shut out all other considerations. Ever and again the thought had crept into his mind to desert Silmore and leave him to his fate. At first he thrust it hotly aside as a treacherous and unworthy thing. But as his fears grew his conscience weakened, and as new insidious arguments marshalled themselves, he yielded before them with a spirit of relief. No one knew of the letter. Why not destroy it and keep his own counsel? Suddenly he remembered Dyer, and his hopes fell in headlong confusion.

The police inspector, he well knew, was burning under a sense of defeat, and was not likely to let the matter drop. He knew that a letter was coming to Grabbit, and, unless there was some development, his suspicions would cause him to ask strange questions, and all might unveil itself to a startled world. He saw himself a despised man amongst his fellows, one who had played a craven part—deserted his friend and been false to his friend's wife and child.

There was no escape, and the net closed remorselessly around him. He must go on this fearful trip and take whatever risk lay before him. Enviously he thought of stalwart men to whom such a risk would be the spice of life, mere child's play. Men whom in his blindness he had viewed with a sneer in the past, as some who had grown to be mere big boys. Now he saw that there were other sides of life to strive for. He was learning rapidly that night, and the lessons, scorching with red-hot letters his feverish brain, were not easily forgotten.

It was a bitter night, but at last his worn-out frame and mind asserted their desire, and, still sitting in his chair, he fell into an uneasy slumber, waking at times with a muffled shriek, the sweat showing in beads on his forehead, as he writhed in some horrible dream.

At breakfast the next morning he was handed a telegram:—

Only two days.—SMITH."

The following afternoon he left for Germanton by the Southern Express.

1.22 CHAPTER XI

1.23 A JOURNEY AND ITS RESULTS.

The journey was one that Grabbit was not likely to forget in after years. As the train dashed along to the south he passed the long hours of the night in sleepless misery. In vain he tried to settle himself down to rest in the comfortable sleeper, for his thoughts were fatal to any chance of sleep. He sat for hours, long after the other passengers had gone to their bunks, gazing out of the window into the starlit night. But the trees and hills and fences which seemed to fly past him only left an impression of forbidding shadows which accentuated his fears. At last the cold of the crisp winter's night sent him shivering to his bed, where he lay cowering till the conductor came to tell him it was time to get ready to change trains. Even at this stage his

fears urged him to return to Sydney, but, whenever his thoughts turned in that direction, the grim questioning face of the police inspector, side by side with the entreating countenance of his missing friend, stared at him out of the darkness.

He had to leave the express at Culcairn and take a slow branch line to Germanton. It was a cold raw morning when he changed from the comfortable fast overlander to the slow bone—shaking country train. As they slowly puffed across the open paddocks it was a dreary look—out, for the country was wrapped in a grey fog, through which the rising sun slowly struggled. The dew was heavy on the half—frozen grass, and the dank, dead gum—trees looked desolate and menacing as they broke out from the surrounding fog. Two sleepless nights were already beginning to tell on the traveller; every bone in his body was tired and aching, and his physical discomfort only aggravated his gloomy imagination. Nature at last, however, asserted itself, and he fell into a broken uneasy sleep, from which he was aroused by the arrival of the train at the junction.

The fog had passed away, and the sun wTapped the country—side in the glow of a beautiful mild winter morning. After a good breakfast, for the crisp clear air had given him an appetite, Grabbit was inclined to take a more cheerful view of matters, for as he walked down the quiet street of the little country town, puff— ing at a good cigar, the bright atmosphere had a happy, exhilarating effect. For the time being he almost for— got the nature of his errand, and felt like a schoolboy on a holiday journey as he arranged for a man to drive him across to Tumbarumba right away.

The drive across country gave further life to this feeling. During the greater part of the day all the surroundings were new and strange to the city man. The early autumn rains had clothed the hills and val— leys with a rich coat of green. Mountain streamlets gurgled and rippled over stony courses alongside the road. The pungent aroma of the eucalyptus filled the air, mingled with the odor of the still damp grass drawn out by the morning sun. The whistle of the magpies rang down the valleys as they made their gladsome morning song, the hoarse chatter of the twelve apostles mingled with the screams of the white gold—topped cockatoos, and the sardonic notes of the jackass in the hilltops. In the scrub near the track, blue—eyed wrens twittered and chirped merrily, and hapx)y pairs of rosellas flew from tree to tree in grace— ful curves, their rich plumage flashing in the sparkle of the sun. The whole note of the atmosphere was one full of the supreme joy of living, and it came upon the jaded nerves of the onlooker with the effect of a stimu— lating tonic.

Before the long journey of some sixty miles of overhill country was finished these natural beauties had palled somewhat, for the drive was a weary experi— ence to one unaccustomed to bush travelling. It was with a sigh of relief, therefore, that Grabbit at last looked down upon the little mountain township, wiicli lay in the midst of hills, like a lonely pioneer in the march of civilisation. But the sight at the same time brought back to life again all his fears, and it was with a sinking heart that he made arrangements to go on alone for the rest of his journey.

He made the pretext that he was going to drive over to a neighboring station to meet an old friend, and easily obtained full directions concerning the Tooma road. In the course of the drive from German— ton he had learned from the driver the name of a holding in that direction, near enough to Tumbarumba to prevent his evening drive from causing comment.

About five o'clock, therefore, he drove a quiet old horse slowly up the hill in continuance of his fateful commission. Beneath the seat of the buggy he had his bag, filled with its valuable contents, and, as he noted the curious glances thrown at him by idle loungers in the street, he felt a thrill of apprehension as he re— flected what might be their feelings if they could guess what those contents were.

The evening was closing in as he reached the six— mile peg. He pulled up his horse on one side of the road, and composed himself to wait for the appointed hour to come. He had about half an hour to wait. The sun had long since disappeared, and the lonely hills were wrapped in the gloomy silence of a winter's night. The moon had risen, and in its cold, still light every—

thing seemed magnified. Dark shadows fell across the road. There was no sign of life. The only sound that broke the silence of the night was the occasional snap—ping of some twig in the frosty air. The minutes dragged wearily to the waiting man..

Silent as was the night, to him it seemed full of uncanny sounds. The air was alive with sibilant whis—perings, mysterious forms hovered around him, and he had for company all the torments of a fear—racked mind. He cowered in the seat of the buggy, huddled up in his coat and ru^gs, hardly daring to look round him. The old horse, after a wondering glance or two round at the motionless frame behind him, decided to make the most of his opportunity, and letting his head drop and his legs assume a most unstable attitude, quietly went to sleep.

The time passed slowly on. Suddenly Grabbit heard or fancied he heard the sound of wheels in the distance. He looked up and down the road eagerly, for anything was preferable tp the torture of waiting, but nothing was in sight. Yet he was positive that he had heard the creaking of some vehicle, either motor—car or buggy, but dismissed the idea as another out—come of his imagination.

He looked at his watch in the clear moonlight.

It was seven o'clock.

Since Silmore had disappeared in such an extra—ordinary fashion the projected amalgamation of coal companies had been dropped. As far as Black and Morgan, who were opposed to it, were concerned, it was certainly looked upon as dead. They had not moved any more in the matter since their last event—ful meeting, which had come to an abrupt conclusion owing to the news of Silmore's disappearance. Nothing had yet been heard of the missing magnate, although the considerable excitement caused by the disappear—ance of the ferry boat had been intensified by her dis—covery in mid ocean without a soul on board.

Black was not a little astonished, therefore, to re—ceive one morning a letter from Grabbit informing him that the adjourned meeting of those interested in the coal industry would be held at the offices of the Cen—tral Extended that afternoon. Inquiry from Morgan and others showed they had got similar notices, but were quite unable to account for the reason of it. With Silmore away there was no prospect of anything being f done, but Black and his colleagues decided it might be best to attend so that they would at least know what was projected. Accordingly, about three o'clock, some fifteen men were gathered in the gorgeous directors' room of the Central Extended, looking inquisitively at one another, as they wondered what was in the wind. There was an amused smile on Black's face, which was reflected on the countenances of his companions. They had had an informal meeting at lunch—time, when it had been found that Morgan, in the face of Silmore's ab—sence, was with them. Nothing had yet been done in connection with the latter's estate, so that it was im—possible for a proxy to act for him.

As the hands pointed to the hour. Black, with a slight gesture of impatience, rose to his feet and said : " Well, gentlemen, I suppose there is no use wasting time. I propose that Mr. Grabbit take the chair and that we get to business."

There was a murmur of assent, and the motion was agreed to, although Grabbit remarked in a depre—cating tone that there was surely no hurry for a few minutes.

There was a grim smile on his careworn face as he walked to the end of the table and took his seat.

Hardly had he done so when the door was opened quietly and John Silmore walked slowly into the room.

1.24 CHAPTER XII

1.25 BLACK SHOWS HIS CLAWS.

A silence of profound amazement fell upon the meeting. Every eye was rooted on the figure in the doorway. That the sudden appearance of the Hon. John Silmore came as an apparition is to put it mildly. A ghost could not have created more astonishment, for there is in most minds

a long—stored—up expectancy for the advent of the supernatural. But here was the man in very flesh!

Even if he had been expected that evening there was in his appearance sufficient to have startled the meeting. His iron—grey hair had turned to complete white, and his face looked haggard and careworn. There was even a subtle difference in his hitherto im— maculate grooming; a suggestion that the matter was of a lesser importance.

So dramatically unexpected was his appearance that for a time there was scarcely a stir in the room.

The silence was suddenly and rudely disturbed by Black, whose fist came down upon the table with such a bang as to bring nearly every man present out of his seat.

" I see it all!" he cried. " A trick! A trick!" The pathetic appearance of the figure in the door— way so belied this statement that the speaker was generally eyed with indignation.

The chairman, with a quiet smile, rose and left his seat. Without uttering a word, he motioned to Silmore to take his place. Slowly, and with less dig— nity than of old, that gentleman took the proffered chair.

" On behalf of all present," said Grabbit with de— cision, "I welcome Mr. Silmore back to our midst."

The remark was received in silent astonishment.

" I—I thank you, gentlemen," responded Silmore in a broken voice.

A constrained silence followed.

" I presume," broke in Black, in harsh, sneering tones, that Mr. Silmore will explain his remarkable disappearance?"

A murmur of assent rose from the others. There was a shuffling of feet as every man leant forward, his eyes fixed expectantly on the newcomer.

Silmore rose slowly to his feet. He looked steadily at Black, and then in solemn and clear tones said:

"You ask me to explain, .to explain. I who had seemed to have passed out of the world—who cannot yet realise that I am back in it."

Where have you been, anyhow?" interjected Black.

"That's exactly what I don't know," replied Sil— more, and a murmur of astonishment ran through the room as those present gazed at each other in in— credulous wonder.

A likely story!" laughed Black.

Silmore frowned feebly.

I know, gentlemen, you will think I am trifling with your credulity," he ventured.

" It wouldn't be the first time," muttered Black.

Silmore affected not to hear.

I think you had better hear my story through," he continued. "You can then judge for yourselves whether I am speaking the truth."

"That's right! Let us hear it," was the general response.

"Then, gentlemen, you are about to hear the most surprising story you have ever heard in your life. And if I were one of you I would be as loth to believe it as you will be."

1.26 CHAPTER XIII

1.27 SILMORE BEGINS HIS STORY

Every man settled back in his chair. Silmore, his elbows on the table, leaned forward and began his story, speaking in a quiet but constrained voice,;

On the night of the 15th of May I left this city by the last boat for Manly, as Mr. Grabbit has probably told you, for we walked down to the Quay together. You may remember that on that night there was a heavy fog. I took my seat on the stern of the boat on the lower deck. I must have chosen a dark corner, as you will discover.

At the precise moment when the gangway was about to be withdrawn I saw three men come running along the wharf just in time to board the boat. This seemed nothing more than the ordinary incident of a few belated passengers, and I would have thought no more of it had not a man, highly excited, rushed to the edge of the wharf an instant afterwards, and, heedless of the danger and the shouts of the officials, jumped the five feet separating him from the moving boat.

He fell right into the arms of the three men who had preceded him, but instead of expressing his thanks, as I had expected, he cried: " Ah, I've got you! I know you, and I'll know you again! Scoundrels! Vil— lains!"

They were the last words he uttered!

I saw something white, like a handkerchief, pressed over his mouth, and he fell back on the seat. The three men bent over him. "That will keep him from talking," said one. Now what are we going to do with him ?"

"No, no! It's too damn cold—blooded," interjected a third voice hastily.

Then you will wait till we get to Manly, and let him split? A nice prospect."

The speaker glanced cautiously round, and the voices fell, so that for a time I could hear no more. By this the boat had rounded the Quay and was passing Farm Cove. "There's nothing else for it," was the next I heard. "Over with him!" and before I could interfere there was a short, sharp struggle, and the unfortunate man was lifted over the side and dropped so carefully into the water that the splash was scarcely heard above the wind.

Silmore stopped speaking for a moment, and his face turned greyer at the memory. After a moment he resumed:

In the awful silence that followed, for a moment I sat petrified. You can hardly imagine my feelings at these remarkable proceedings. For the time it was more astonishment than horror. The whole thing was so sudden and so unexpected. Then my natural impulse was to call for help for the man who had been so summarily dealt with—for what reason I could not imagine—and I had partly risen from my seat with this intention when one of the men who had been leaning over the side of the boat exclaimed: " Fools, fools that we are! He is a strong swimmer. Look!"*

"They were the last words he uttered ... He fell back on the seat."

As the three men gazed in the direction indicated, I, also, saw that the man in the water was making a brave struggle to reach the shore, which at that point would have been somewhere near Lady Macquarie's Chair. "That's your damn fault, Sandy!" said the man who had suggested harsher measures. You're a softy. I've always said you were. If I hadn't given in to you he'd have been at the bottom of the sea by now."

" Instead of being near land, where he has only got to telephone to Manly that the Purse and Ring jewellery robbers are on board the "

"Shut up!" snapped the other, as he looked cautiously round. " These boats carry ears, you damn fool!"

Fortunately I was not observed. Instead, I had an opportunity of inspecting the speaker, whom I had instinctively singled out as the leader of what I was now assured were a dangerous gang of criminals. He was a short, spare man, with sandy hair and a moustache of the same description. His face was entirely furrowed; every line seemed to be clearly defined. Yet there was the buoyancy of youth in his air, a certain jaunty characterised his deportment, and his eyes, though remarkably small, were keen and bright. He might have been thirty; he might have been over fifty. I confess I have never seen such a curious man in all my life. Although much smaller than his companions, his appearance was far more dominating. He spoke or swore with insinuating ease. His manner was entirely confident; in fact, his whole demeanour was magnetic.

The other men looked nervous and shifty, and though both well built, like men who had once thrived upon physical labor, it was apparent that they were weak of knee and deficient in

backbone. The case was clear. The first man was a ruthless scoundrel, and the others simply clay in his clever hands. Still, it seemed in this instance that he was more merciful than his companions.

Now he coolly took a cigarette from his pocket, and, as he lit it, the match flared up in his face, and I could see from his concentrated look that his mind was working out some escape from their awkward position.

After a few moments, during which he puffed silently at his cigarette, he turned to his companions, who were watching him intently.

“This blooming schooner must never reach Manly,” he said as quietly as though such a thing were a mere matter of detail.

The other men looked at each other, shuffled their feet, and waited.

There's a big chance of that fellow reaching land,” he continued. If he does he'll be there in a few minutes more. That means he will have twenty— five minutes' time to give the alarm. Just long enough to settle our hash. Now, boys, I Ve got no quarrel with the Manly police, but I don't feel any wild yearning to meet them to—night. Robbery with violence, proved to the satisfaction of a dozen of our prejudiced fellow citizens, is about the best antidote I know of to a desire to travel. And, as you know, I'm a devil of a globe— trotter.

“In a few minutes we'll be passing a neat little brig, well provisioned and all ready for a pleasant sea—trip. I said we'll be passing it. I meant to say we mustn't pass it. No, boys; we've got to prove that Colt's mixture is the best cure for refractory passen— gers and a steamer's crew full of silly notions about adhering to the regulation time—table.”

The three men put their heads close together for a few minutes, and, while I could hear them whisper— ing, I could not distinguish what they were saying. Evidently they were making their plans. “ Come along,” I heard the leader say.

He took a few steps forward, and to my intense dismay stood right in front of me.

“ Good evening, sir,” he said politely, apparently not at all disconcerted. Nice little shady corner you've got here. Eavesdropping, eh?”

Yes, you rascals,” I cried. “I've heard all, and I'll ”

You'll keep perfectly still, old man,” he answered, producing a revolver and balancing it in his hand. Fix him up, Joe!”

Immediately one of the men tied a handkerchief over my mouth, and between them they bound my legs and arms to the seat.

“ He'll be all right/” the leader said. “Leave him there till we investigate a bit.*” And so I was left alone in the most humiliating and unpleasant condition I have ever experienced.

1.28 CHAPTER XIV

1.29 SILMORE AT SEA.

My life, gentlemen, as you can imagine, has been one of almost perpetual routine. No seriously unto— ward incident had ever previously disturbed the even tenor of my existence. You can imagine my feelings, therefore, as I found myself compelled to sit perfectly still, for what seemed like hours, in what was both an uncomfortable and an undignified position.

Suddenly the lights of the steamer went out, and the fog seemed to have become unusually dense.

I don't know how long I remained in that position, and my thoughts were too confused to try and release myself.

At length the man with the sandy hair returned.

Sorry to have kept you waiting, sir,” he said, removing his hat with ironic politeness.

I glared at him in silence as he proceeded to untie me. When that was done he said, Now, sir, will you kindly step this way ?”

I stood up, and almost sang out with the pain of cramp, for both my arms and my legs were stiff and sore. I thought to myself that I must lose no time in seeing my medical adviser.

As the man had a revolver in his hand, I followed him without any remonstrance, although unwillingly so enough. As it was, my manner did not seem to please him, for I was urged on by an extremely nasty prod in the middle of my back with the revolver.

He guided me down to the engine-room, where in the dim light from the fire I could see the man he called Joe standing with a revolver in each hand, guarding a person who, from his appearance, was evidently the engineer, and two other men, one of whom was an employee on the steamer and the other a passenger. The three were huddled in a corner, and bore a look of most intense astonishment. I saw a half smile pass over their faces when they saw me being unceremoniously driven into the room.

"Hands up!" cried my captor, as he directed me to take my place alongside the others, and I was compelled to hold my arms up in the ridiculous manner of men we have read of in the bushranging days.

Hitherto I had always felt that I lived apart from the world of sensation. Hold-ups and things of that kind had always formed good reading, but that I should ever become involved in such happenings seemed too absurd to contemplate.

Ruefully it dawned on me that nothing is impossible. My speculations as to the intentions of these scoundrels who had so villainously outraged the first principles of law and order were soon ended by the leader of the gang, who stroked his tiny moustache, and, with a smile, which would have been positively pleasing had it appeared on the face of a gentleman, said:—

"Permit me, gentlemen, the pleasure of introducing my little entertainment. On the right we have the champion fire-stoker of all Australasia, the gold medalist of the Union. He will give us an exhibition of lightning steaming such as has never been equalled in Sydney Harbor. On the left we have the greatest living gangway manipulator, who will kindly step alongside his brother artist so as to come directly under the friendly guidance of my esteemed colleague, Mr. Joe Mullins. These two gentlemen are the crew of this ocean-going monster, and up above is the skipper, who is giving a startling exhibition of steering in a fog, assisted by my friend Bill Smithers, who is steadying the nerves of his companion with the muzzle of a revolver. The two gentlemen in the corner will, I hope, be silent spectators of the show now about to commence. Lest there be any doubt on that score, I might remark that I, William J. Dorkins, commonly known as Sandy Dorkins, am simply aching to add an exhibition of sharp-shooting to the excellent programme before us. That, no doubt, will help to keep them silent. As to being interested, the fact that there is a good sporting chance of going to the bottom of the deep sea during the next few hours will, no doubt, keep them wildly interested."

This remarkable speech was delivered not merely with ordinary coolness, but with an insinuating manner which did nothing to ease the fear which I must confess was beginning to possess me.

A brief and whispered conference followed between the two desperadoes, after which Dorkins advanced towards the spot where I stood in the company of the other passenger.

Gentlemen," he said, "let there be a perfect understanding between us. There is no desire on my part to do you any injury. In these matters there is, I believe, such a thing as a parole of honor. Give me your word that you will in no way interfere in our plans, and I will give you mine that you will be treated with as much consideration as is possible under the circumstances."

I turned to my companion in misfortune. He was well dressed, and evidently a gentleman. A man something over thirty years of age, and apparently a man of position. He returned my glance, and for the first time I realised that we were to be companions in distress.

"I should like to consult my fellow passenger," I said.

"Certainly," replied Dorkins, "though the conference must be brief and he retired a few paces, though still toying ominously with the weapon in his hand.

"A nice position for you to be in, Mr. Silmore," were the first words my companion uttered, and Tom acknowledged the compliment of being known with a bow.

"A dreadful position, sir. Dreadful!" I answered.

“Since I have the advantage over you, I should inform you that my name is Henry Cable, and that I am an electrical engineer in the city.

I have heard of you, sir,” I replied, and we instinctively shook hands.

What is to be done?” I asked.

Nothing, I fear, but submit,” he answered. These men are not to be lightly treated. I would advise giving our word and awaiting developments.”

So we passed our word of honor to Mr. Dorkins, who then led us into the saloon, where we were advised to remain for the present.

Dorkins left us alone, and for a few minutes we exchanged our views concerning our extraordinary situation.

We were suddenly interrupted by a bump of the steamer, as of a slight collision. We could hear voices above on the deck, but could see nothing in the darkness. Shortly after the steamer moved again, but not with the easy gliding sensation as when leaving the jetty. She seemed to be heavily burdened, and where we sat we could hear the hard panting of her engines.

“What do you make of it?” I asked my friend.

He did not reply for a minute or two, as he stood at one of the windows of the room.

She's got something in tow,” he answered at last, and it's no light craft, either.”

And then we fell to surmising upon the intentions of these desperadoes. That they were escaping from justice we were quite certain. But what were their plans?

“I expect they will land the boat somewhere about Middle Harbor, and escape that way,” I suggested.

Mr. Cable sat thinking. “They will have had a good start by morning,” he said, but if they're not careful they'll wreck her in this fog before they find a landing-place.”

Then he suddenly jumped to his feet.

“But if they are landing inside the harbor, what are we doing with another boat in tow?”

“What do you mean?” I cried.

Mean!” he exclaimed. I mean that these are no ordinary criminals! They are taking no risk of capture on the land. They have prepared for—”

A sudden swinging of the boat threw him half way across the room, while I felt myself nearly jerked on to the floor.

Don't you understand?” he cried excitedly. We are going through the Heads! We have started on a sea voyage!”

1.30 CHAPTER XV

1.31 THE DORKINS POINT OF VIEW.

A sea voyage!

Whatever my sensations might have been as the result of this pronouncement (continued Silmore) they were soon to be superseded by a feeling of nausea such as I had never before experienced. Having never been on a sea voyage—for Sydney was always good enough for me—I could only conjecture that I was suffering from mal de mer. It was not long before I had ample evidence that this was indeed the case, and considering the trying circumstances under which I had embarked upon this voyage, I think I may be excused for supposing that my sufferings were unusually acute.

At length, from sheer exhaustion, I fell asleep to dream of brigands and pirates, and yet to be lulled into the belief that such things were but a dream, and that I was in my cosy bedroom in my Manly home.

Many times in my life have I experienced the delightful relief of awakening from a dream full of horrors, and when, therefore, someone touched me on the arm, I fully expected to see my good wife standing before me with a cup of tea and a piece of toast in her outstretched hands. But, alas! on this occasion I awoke with a thorough realisation of my dream.

Standing over me was Dorkins, whose appearance brought back with disagreeable force the events of the 86 night before. He motioned me to follow him, and, rubbing my eyes, with still some slight hope left that I had been dreaming, I did so.

The morning must have been well advanced, for the sun was high in the heavens, and had evidently long since dispelled the fog of the previous night. I had not gone more than a few steps when I came upon Cable standing against the railing. After a sympathetic greeting, he pointed to the stern of the steamer, and there I beheld the boat which had been taken in tow the night before. It was a sailing—vessel, of a class we often see anchored in Sydney Harbor.

Cable, who was evidently better informed upon nautical matters than I was, said: That's the craft we're doomed to sail in, and I must say we could do worse. She's a neat little two—mast brig, splendidly rigged, of about three hundred tons. I wonder where they got her?"

As I looked round I found that we were right out at sea. There was no sign of land anywhere. I looked at my watch, but it had stopped. I appealed to my companion.

It's about ten o'clock," he informed me, "so we must have been steaming about ten hours. I should judge that we were about 80 miles from land. The coal supply has, no doubt, given out, and we are about to be transhipped to the—what's her name?" He stood on the seat and fixed his eyes upon the ship now drawing alongside of us. "The Queen of Virtue," by all that's ironical!" he cried.

The three desperadoes and the crew of the "ra" were already on the sailing—vessel as we stepped on board, assisted by Sandy Dorkins.

"Let her go!" sang out Dorkins, when we were safely on board, and the men unloosed the cables which held her to the "Cowra."*

Make sail," he again ordered, and as the other men obeyed he took the wheel. As the great canvas sails were hauled up and filled slowly in the gentle wind, the brig gave a slight dip on one side. Dorkins swung her nose round, and as the canvas also swung into position, the boat righted itself again and slowly glided away on her voyage.

We leant over the stern and gazed at the ferry boat we had left behind. It made a pathetic, helpless picture as it rolled lightly out on the ocean. Cable echoed my thoughts when he said: "Doesn't she seem out of place? It is in a way humorous, but yet pathetic. I wonder if she will ever carry a happy crowd of excursionists again. Deserted in mid ocean! Not even the musicians left to cheer her up! Well, upon my soul!" he exclaimed, jumping up and looking down on the deck of the brig.

What is it?" I cried.

"Well, I'm dashed! If they haven't made off with the piano!" And he laughed in a heartier manner than I could respond to. "So we shall have musical evenings on board. I wonder if there is anything else they found to carry away? And yet, by Jove," he added reflectively, "it's strange they didn't scuttle the boat instead of leaving her to be picked up by any—passing steamer!"

"The Queen of Virtue" was riding over the calmest sea imaginable. An hour later the Cowra was only a mere speck on the water, and somehow the sight gave me a wrench at the heart, for she seemed to be the last link with dear old Sydney.

The motion of the vessel was very easy, and the experience would, under happier circumstances, have been most enjoyable. A rather agreeable odor reminded me that I was extremely hungry, and I must say I felt pleased when Dorkins came up and asked us to join him at breakfast.

We followed him below into a cosy cabin, where a surprise awaited me. Not being used to sea craft, I was amazed to find that so small a vessel could be so comfortably equipped.

In the neat cabin a table was laid with the nicest of linen and cleanest of cutlery. I have read of many adventures by sea in which the travellers seem to have existed most of the time upon salt meat. Imagine my surprise when a man whom I recognised as one of the crew of the

“Cowra” entered with a dish containing ham and eggs, another of steak, and later a third of the fruits of the season.

Dorkins motioned us to be seated. He took the head of the table, and silently we ate our meal. The fresh sea air and a long fast had given me an unusual appetite, and I never remember enjoying a meal more. The fear which had possessed me on the previous night was slowly vanishing under the masterful confidence of our strange host. Cable must have felt as I did, for at the close of the meal he remarked:

A very nice meal, Mr. Dorkins. You have evidently come well prepared.”

“I am a little fastidious, sir,” was the reply, “and I like everything of the best.”

Still, you could never have reckoned on this occasion to be supplied with the requirements of your taste?”

Which is another way of asking how all this happened. You are wondering, gentlemen, how it came to pass that so neat a little vessel as this happened to get switched on to a Manly boat, in a fog in Sydney harbor, and afterwards to set out to sea so well provisioned. Is that not so?”

We both nodded, for I must say personally I felt very curious.

Well, I am nothing if not candid,” said Dorkins with a quizzical smile, but before I explain, perhaps you would like a cigar?” He went to a cupboard and produced a box of cigars; the brand I recognised as being one of the best. We helped ourselves, and Dorkins, also having lit one, continued:

“You see, gentlemen, I would not have had the pleasure of your company if my colleagues and myself had not been in such a hurry last night. We were on our way to the Watson's Bay ferry, when we found that we were followed by a man whose intentions were not likely to conduce to our future comfort. The Cowra” happened to be getting ready to move away at the time, and as that was the easiest way of ridding ourselves of the pursuer, we came on board of her/” The speaker paused and flicked the ash from his cigar.

“Ten thousand pounds worth,” said Dorkins, carefully laying them out on the table.

“I see,” said Cable. “You had this vessel already awaiting you, so that as soon as you should finish your—your

“Business.”

Business in the city. Might I inquire whether your mission was successful?”

Dorkins arose from his seat quietly, and went into a small cabin which opened out of the room we were in. He returned with several small boxes, which he proceeded to open on the table.

They contained some of the finest jewels I have ever set eyes on.

“Ten thousand pounds' worth,” said Dorkins, carefully laying them out on the table.

Cable and I looked at each other in sheer amazement, while Dorkins gathered them up again and, replacing the jewels in the boxes, put them back into the other cabin. As he sat down again, Cable exclaimed: Well, if you're not the coolest” And then he hesitated, as a peculiar smile flitted over the other's face.

“You wonder that I should show you these things?” said Dorkins. Gentlemen, I have studied human nature, and have found that candor is often a better weapon than deceit. In this instance you knew already the nature of my undertaking. I had therefore nothing to conceal. You have been in my power with this dangerous knowledge. I could easily have silenced you. That would have been a crime, and above all, gentlemen, I pride myself upon being no criminal!”

This was indeed an astonishing claim, and Cable and I exchanged glances.

You disagree with me; it is merely a point of view,” Dorkins went on. “I happened to know something of the business methods of the firm from whom I gained these jewels. Our methods differ only in that mine are somewhat more sudden. You have admired this vessel. It belongs to a company which not only steals, but murders the men in its employ. I assure you it is sailing under far less piratical colors at this moment. And now, gentlemen,” he concluded, rising, if you will follow me I will see what can be done for your comfort.”

1.32 CHAPTER XVI.

1.33 LIFE ON THE BRIG.

All told there were nine of us on board the *Queen of Virtue*." Dorkins and his confederates, Mullins and Smithers, I have already told you of. A fourth member of the gang, who had been referred to as " Buckets," had been left in charge of the boat while she was lying in Watson's Bay. He seemed to be a general rouseabout, and was a quiet, slovenly fellow. Then from the " Cowra " there were James Ilichardson, the skipper, Robert Macintosh, the engineer, and Thomas Nolan, deck hand. Cable and myself completed the number.

I was greatly surprised to find that the finest discipline prevailed among the men, the two crews having blended as harmoniously as though this extraordinary cruise had been premeditated by all. Eventually I discovered that Sandy Dorkins had speedily managed the antagonism which must have been aroused among the three men of the " Cowra." Whether it was by promise of reward, or whether the men in question recognized that opposition was useless and acquiescence the best policy, I have never learnt to this day. When I tell you that it was not long before Cable and myself realised that to submit to Dorkins's leadership in all matters was by far the most agreeable course, you will readily understand that men of coarser grain could be easily influenced.

There was, indeed, little to complain about. The brig allowed plenty of accommodation, and Dorkins had provided us with the best cabin on board. The boat having nothing else to carry but provisions, and being particularly well laden with them, there was nothing to complain about on the score of food. What struck me particularly was that every man on board was treated the same. There was no harsh domination on the part of Dorkins. He joined Cable and myself at meak, after which the table was cleared by Nolan. He relaid it for three of the men, who were in turn replaced by the remaining three. " Buckets," Mullins, and Smithers divided the cooking, and we all attended to our bunks. The only indignity offered Cable and myself was when on the second morning we were handed scrubbing brushes and dusters by Dorkins, who, with his former politeness, said, You might kindly clean out the saloon, gentlemen, and sweep out the fore-castle."

I should have felt very horrified at this request had not Cable acquiesced so readily that I allowed him to take most of the work off my hands. Besides, the manner in which Dorkins made the request, as though it were quite a matter of course, caused it to be less embarrassing than if he had intended it as a deliberate attempt to lower my status. It was most fortunate that I should be known to Cable, otherwise I might have been forced to the menial labor of scrubbing floors. And it was also fortunate that Cable, though no doubt a gentleman himself, knew what was due to my political and social position.

Naturally, we sought every opportunity to draw Mr. Dorkins out as to his plans. He proved, however, to have a remarkable way of seeming to be giving us the information we wanted without definitely telling us anything. In that respect he would have made a distinct success as a Cabinet Minister. All we learnt from him was that we were going in a northerly direction, and once, after consulting a map, he informed us that if the weather held as fine as it had been keeping, he hoped to be able to land us at a point in the North of Queensland within a few days.

" Then, gentlemen, you will have to take your own chances. You will be about two hundred miles from the nearest township, but I will leave you plenty of provisions, and no doubt you will soon pick up with someone who will escort you back to civilisation.

" But I will only do all this upon you giving your word of honor not to inform upon us. You will be provided with a satisfactory explanation of your absence, which will suffice for your friends for at least three months; after which you can please yourselves whether you care to tell the whole story. I think, gentlemen, that is a fair bargain

We both nodded, and as I did so I could not help feeling some misgivings concerning his implicit faith in my honor.

On the second evening out, the piano was fitted up in the fore-castle, where there was most room, and we had some music. Dorkins played well. He had the lightness of touch of a young girl, and his selection of airs was large and varied. I always thought pirates sang only sea chanties, but Dorkins went in for opera, both serious and comic. He also had a fund of music—hair songs, in which the other members of the crew joined heartily as they came off duty. They were, indeed, a merry lot of rogues, and certainly didn't seem troubled by any conscience. Joe Mullins proved quite a character in his way, and in addition to several comic songs did what I believe is known as a clog dance. Cable sang some selections from the latest pantomime, with an air of frivolity which surprised me in a man of a serious profession. I was asked to contribute a song, but, although I was capable of rendering "The Holy City" and *Ora Pro Nobis*! I naturally refrained from doing so in such company. Still, I must confess that these doings certainly helped to pass the hours away quickly, and I must even plead guilty to enjoying them.

1.34 CHAPTER XVII

1.35 A STORMY TIME.

Indeed, life was almost pleasant. But for the horrible uncertainty of it all, I could have enjoyed those days on the "Queen of Virtue," as she glided before favoring winds over a brilliant blue sea. The weather was warm and pleasant, and it was evident we were in a more tropical climate. Lounging on the deck in the midday sun after lunch, smoking a good cigar (for Sandy Dorkins had a plentiful supply on hand), one felt a pleasant languor and peace which almost brought oblivion of our extraordinary predicament. Cable I found to be a well-read and clever man of engaging character, while Dorkins was simply a source of endless interest, and the hours passed quickly and easily enough, with much entertainment.

We had been several days out—for I might say in the confusion of much thrilling incident I lost all count of time—when the weather changed. The bright sun—light that had kissed the waves of purest turquoise, as we rippled on our course, became darkened with passing clouds. The sea turned a dull ugly grey, while the surface was flicked with racing white horses that marked the crest of the waves.

The boat, which had hitherto ridden so easily, now became rough as she dipped and swung in the water, and I again felt the horrible sensation of sea-sickness.

As I scrambled down with uneasy steps to my bunk below, I noticed Dorkins and Richardson, the late skipper of the "Cowra," standing near the wheel, anxiously looking towards the north, the direction in which we were heading. It struck me that there was an air of alarm about their demeanor; but I really felt too ill to reflect on that. I saw that the distant horizon was marked with dense black clouds, which seemed to be driving before a great gale. A low moaning sound came creeping over the angry sea, and I was glad to seek shelter down below.

I must confess, gentlemen, that I had never undergone such intense fear in the whole course of my life as on this occasion. I was horribly sick and weak. The boat tossed and rolled until it seemed every moment that she must completely turn over. I could see the foam-lashed waves sweeping past the porthole against my head as the boat dipped in the heavy seas. The wind seemed to become stronger, and the sky darkened ominously. I could hear startled cries and sharp orders mingled with the sound of running feet on the deck above, then I fell for a time into a broken slumber.

I was awakened by that curious feeling that seems to instinctively warn us that someone is present.

Looking up, I saw Sandy Dorkins standing along—side my bunk, and at the moment I thought I noticed in his eyes a pitying, sympathising look as he watched me.

The moment he saw I was awake, however, an almost imperceptible change took place, and his face wore his usual half-quizzical, half-sardonic expression as he said: "Hullo! Been feeling pretty sick?"

I groaned in reply, for my body seemed to be aching all over.

" Well," he continued, " you'd better come up and get some fresh air. It will do you more good than sticking in this stuffy hole. Anyhow, it's worth while, for you will see a sight that does not come often in a man's life, and as there is a good chance of us going to Davy Jones's locker, you had better see it while you can," and a grim, cynical smile passed over his face.

" Good heavens, Dorkins," I cried, as I sat up in my bunk, " you don't mean that we are in danger, do you?"

He gave a quiet laugh as he answered:

" Mr. Silmore, matters have been taken in hand up above by a Higher Power than either yours or mine, and when He sweeps the seas in anger those who go down to the deep in ships learn how little and paltry human plans and efforts are."

There was something almost reverent in his tone, and I could not help glancing curiously at him. Dorkins was certainly a strange compound of rogue, philosopher, and merry wit.

After I had pulled my boots on, he handed me an oilskin cap and coat that were hanging behind the door.

" Keep a tight hold when we get up above," he sang out, and as Ave emerged from the hatchway I realised the value of his warning, for I was almost thrown off my feet by the force of the gale.

I hung on to the rigging, with Dorkins standing beside me, and gazed at the terrific scene with helpless eyes.

Then I could understand Dorkins's reverent tone, for at such a time it came home to one with appalling force how small and futile were man's efforts, how puny a thing man was himself, when nature unleashed herself in ferocious mood.

The boat was racing through the sea at an enormous pace. As you know, I have been on the harbor in a crack motor launch, and have raced over country roads in the best of motor cars, when the rapid pace almost brought a chill to the heart; but in the face of that hurricane—a, gentlemen, the pace of the Queen of Virtue in comparison was as the flight of the soaring eagle to the languid step of the lazy schoolboy.

I saw that all the sails had been hauled down and tied up securely. The masts stood up on the deck like two sticks. The decks were swept clean, and were barren excepting for the two men who hung desperately to the wheel and Dorkins and myself.

The nose of the boat dipped and cut through the waves like a great plough—knife, and the water was thrown up on either side until it seemed that at every moment it must crash down upon us, sweeping the boat to oblivion. She groaned and trembled beneath our feet as the gale struck her.

The sun had completely disappeared, the sky being a mass of dark scudding clouds. The grey of the distant sea merged into the dark banked clouds on the horizon until the whole looked like one grey mass, cold and merciless, yet full of the virility of the unleashed storm forces. The great white strips of foam that were hurled across at a racing speed were the only break in the awful grey—black scene.

As we clung to the rigging great masses of spray showered over us, and my heart sickened at the terrible prospect.

I glanced round at Dorkins, but he was standing with his feet planted squarely on the deck, with one arm hooked in the rigging, and the other arm shoved into the vest of his oil—coat. He was staring straight ahead, and his whole face was lit up with nervous, tense energy. There was not the slightest appearance of dismay. His small, keen eyes sparkled with fire, and his nostrils dilated and quivered like those of a restless racehorse. His mouth was compressed, but in that dreadful moment I felt a thrill of admiration for this man, for, strange as it may seem, there was no doubt that in the midst of that great danger he was actually experiencing pleasure. I realised that as far as physical danger at least was concerned, Sandy Dorkins was certainly a better man than myself, for my whole desire was to get down below, or anywhere away from that horrible scene.

He seemed to read my thoughts, for at that moment he turned round, and, leaning over, shouted in my ear:

Would you like to go down below

I nodded assent, and we managed to clamber down into the main cabin, where the others were sitting gloomily smoking.

It was evident from their appearance that they considered we were in great danger, and, sick and weary at heart, I crept away without a word to my bunk, and, cowering down in the blankets, tried to shut out the sound of the howling storm.

Fortunately for poor humanity, sleep comes to us even at times like these, and some time after, having refused Cable's invitation to join them at tea, I fell off to sleep. I remember even now the compassionate look that Cable, for he was a fine fellow, gave me as he left the cabin.

1.36 CHAPTER XVIII

1.37 THE WRECK.

I was awakened by the sound of a frightful crash!

At the same moment I was thrown violently out of my bunk on to the floor. I lay half stunned for a few moments, then, staggering to my feet, I found the utmost difficulty in keeping upright, for the vessel seemed to have turned almost over on one side. She was rocking and rolling violently. Overhead I could hear shrill screams and the sound of crashing timbers, and it came upon me that this was the end.

Silmore's voice faltered, and for the moment he stopped, with his head bent forward and unseeing eyes staring straight before him.

There was a tense, awed silence throughout the room.

The prospect of death, he continued, is at all times an awesome thing. But in those surroundings it came with an intensely greater terror. In those few seconds my thoughts rushed over the intervening miles of merciless sea to the dear ones at home, and it was awful to feel that I was to be swallowed up in those raging waters without one word of farewell or one kindly pressure of a loving hand. I am not ashamed to confess, gentlemen, that I fell on my knees beside my bunk, buried my face in my arms, and prayed God that the end would come quickly.

At that moment I heard a shout close to me, and the dull light of an oil lantern lit up the darkness of the cabin. I scrambled to my feet, and saw my friend Cable in the doorway. His clothes were wet through, at least such clothes as he had on, for he wore only his shirt and trousers. In one hand he held the lantern, and in the other a circular object, which I afterwards found was a life—buoy.

"Come, quickly," he shouted; "there is no time to be lost!"

I clambered across the cabin towards him, and, placing the lantern in my helpless hand, he rapidly put the buoy round my body, lashing it securely to my shoulders and waist. Then, catching hold of me by the hand, he half pulled me through the cabin and up on to the deck.

Here was a scene of the wildest confusion.

The ill-fated Queen of Virtue "had evidently been driven on to some rocks, and was being rapidly smashed to pieces.

As we clambered on to the deck great waves were breaking right across her as she lay on one side on the rocks, her nose right out of the water.

It was evidently just before the breaking of dawn, for there was a dull, greyish light in which we could get a glimpse of our surroundings. In the distance there were black masses standing out against the sky—line, which were evidently cliffs.

But between them and the ship was a white swirling mass of breakers, some quarter of a mile wide, which seemed to be sweeping and dashing over the rocky reef upon which the vessel had struck.

We were hanging desperately on to the uppermost side of the vessel; there was no sign of anyone else that I could see.

Where are the others?" I cried to Cable during a slight lull in the storm.

"God knows!" he answered. Then, dragging himself closer to me, he leant over and shouted in my ear :

We must make a jump for it from this side. It's certain death if we get on to those rocks. Wait until there is another lull and the water is calmer, then jump !"

He turned his face towards me with a rare, soft smile, and held out one hand: "Good—bye," he said.

I took the proffered hand half mechanically, and he gave it a hearty clasp.

I glanced down over the side of the ship with a strange sort of fascination. The waves came rushing, spitting, and leaping at the helpless vessel, like dogs at the throat of their prey, to retreat in a whirl of white foam as if baffled, only in a moment to make another vigorous onslaught. The vessel swayed and trembled beneath the ceaseless blows of the mighty ocean. Now and again came the roar of smashing timber as part of the vessel was ground and splintered on the rocks.

Suddenly there was a marked lull. The fierce waves stopped for a moment, as if called off by some unseen general. The water, now strangely calm, sucked and eddied beneath the boat, its surface covered with ever—changing circles of white and yellow foam. There was a strange ominous silence in the air, and one could instinctively feel that the storm elements were gathering themselves together for the one great last attack.

Cable sprang on to the top of the bulwark, holding on to the rigging. He pulled vigorously at my arm, and I managed to scramble up beside him.

Jump!" he screamed. Jump, it is our only chance

I hesitated for a moment, then felt him give me a vigorous shove, and, with a muttered prayer, I closed my eyes and made a wild despairing leap into the sea.

I felt myself sinking and sinking, while a black dense wall closed around me. I could feel the blood rushing to my head, and blindly, madly, I struck out for life. Then I seemed to be thrown as if by some unseen force out of the water, and then again the cold arms of the ocean clutched me. But the life—buoy stood me in good stead, and although I found myself being tossed and whirled in the water, I did not sink again. What followed is but a fearful vague memory. I felt myself being thrown roughly against some solid object, dragged and battered for a few moments, and then all was darkness.

I must have lain unconscious for some hours. When I came to, the sun was shining brightly, and there was no sign of the fearful storm that had raged a few hours before.

I found myself lying on a bed of sand, half sheltered by an overhanging rock. I was frightfully weak, and every bone seemed broken. My body was covered with the bruises of the waves. I struggled into a half—sitting attitude, and gazed ruefully around me.

On the one side was the rock against which I had been thrown. In front of me a slight beach of dazzling white sand stretched down to the sea, where it was gently lapped by the water in what appeared to be a small harbor. Tall rough cliffs towered up behind me from the sandy beach, and circled round to the sea—line, where a reef ran out into the ocean. This was evidently the reef that had been so fatal, although now it appeared harmless enough as the water washed idly over it.

Apparently all that remained of the "Queen of Virtue " was some wreckage scattered on the sand.

Slowly and painfully I got upon my feet. I must have looked a pitiful object. The life—buoy still hung around me, for Cable had done his work faithfully. The only other covering I had on was my shirt and trousers, and they were now torn and draggled.

As I undid the ropes of the life—buoy I thought of Cable, and the memory of this brave fellow filled me with the saddest emotions.

As the buoy slipped down to the sand, and my terribly helpless position dawned upon me, I leant against the rock and gave way to hopeless despair.

In all my life I have never yearned for the company of a human being as I did that desolate morning.

Somehow I was convinced that my companions had been drowned, and it was simply to escape from my miserable thoughts that I slowly proceeded to walk along the beach.

As I came round the rock I saw that the strip of sand ran round for about a quarter of a mile, circled by the high cliffs I had already noticed.

I stumbled slowly along for a few yards with my head bent down, and stood still and had another look at my surroundings.

My eyes fell idly over the landscape, and then I gave a sudden start. Sitting on the ledge of a rock near the cliffs were two men. They were only a few hundred yards away, and I recognized that they were my late companions. A great gush of thankfulness went through me when I realised that I was not alone.

I tried to shout, but the result was only a faint whisper, so with hobbling, tottering feet I started towards them.

They must have seen me about the same moment, for I heard a shout, and they got up and came half—running and half—staggering to meet me.

As they drew near me I saw it was Dorkins and Cable.

We met with outstretched hands, like old friends who had been long separated.

"By hell!" ejaculated Dorkins, and there was a really kindly smile on his face, "I never expected to see you again, Silmore. Although they say the devil looks after his own," he added, with a touch of his old cynicism.

"I thought it was your last jump all right," said Cable, but there was no doubt we were lucky, Mr. Silmore, to have struck that bit of calm. Still, when I did not see you on the beach I thought you had become food for the fishes."

"And I would have been, my brave fellow, had it not been for you," I answered, as I grasped his hand and put my other hand upon his shoulder. You were indeed a true friend, and what you have done I shall never forget." I could feel my voice tremble as I spoke.

"Oh, that 's all right," he answered, almost roughly, but at the same time giving my hand an honest, manly squeeze.

Dorkins, who had been looking on with a quiet smile, said; "Well, as that touching little tableau is over, we may as well go and have a rest and talk over what we are going to do, for it seems to me we may as well have been drowned as be tossed up here like rubbish on a scrap—heap. Anyhow, let us sit down to it, for I'm that knocked about I feel that I could sit or lie down for the rest of my life, and I suppose you feel much the same."

"That's right," answered Cable.

We turned and walked slowly towards the spot where they had been. I felt that I could indeed do with a long, long rest; but Dorkins's words as to our future prospects had sent an awful chill to my heart.

1.38 CHAPTER XIX

1.39 THE ISLAND CAVE.

When we reached the rock where Dorkins and Cable had been sitting (continued Silmore), I saw to my great satisfaction a small box with some food in it.

It contained some biscuits, and standing alongside was a small stone gin—jar, and the sight of these reminded me that I was intensely thirsty and hungry.

Naturally, without waiting to be asked, I took hold of the jar and put it to my mouth, and I've never tasted anything so delicious as that water trickling down my throat. But I had barely commenced to drink when I felt the jar pulled away somewhat roughly, and heard Dorkins say: "Here, go steady on that, Silmore; there is not much there to keep three men going long."

I glared at him indignantly, resenting his tone as much as his action, but he had turned his back and was carefully putting the jar back in the box after corking it up, and I said no more,

but, sitting down on the rocks, munched away at one of the biscuits, which I found rather hard and unpalatable.

For a time the three of us sat there in moody silence, each man seemingly occupied with his own thoughts.

Dorkins, who was lying in the sand gazing stead—fastly out to sea, wore a troubled expression, as did Cable, and, no doubt, I also.

We were, indeed, in a pitiful condition, and our prospects were sufficient to daunt the most hardened.

Like myself, the other men were clothed in only their shirts and trousers, and they had also suffered severely in their battle for life against the sea.

The coast on which we had landed looked desolate and uninviting. We were practically surrounded, as I have already said, by a half—circle of formidable rocky cliffs, and I for one wondered how we could possibly exist there.

After a time Dorkins roused himself.

" Well, it's no good sitting here all day," he said. " We had better get a move on, and see what's the state of things."

He stood up and looked at the face of the cliffs, and added:

" By the look of those rocks we ought to find some sort of camping—place there. Anyhow, I'll go and have a look, and in the meantime you fellows had better go along the shore and pull out any wreckage you can. find. Keep a sharp look—out for provisions, and es— pecially any casks of water, although I'm afraid there will be little chance of that. There were a couple of casks on board besides the big tank, but it's a hundred to one that the tank has sunk and the casks been smashed on the rocks. Still, we want to look."

" That's right," said Cable cheerfully, as he jumped to his feet. " There's certainly no good sitting here, and we must fix ourselves up the best we can before night."

I also dragged myself wearily to a standing posi— tion, although I felt little inclined for anything but rest. But I could see that the others expected me to help, so without a word I ploughed my way through the sand in the wake of Cable, while Dorkins went off in the direction of the cliffs.

As we went along the beach we found plenty of wreckage, but most of it consisted of planks and spars, and part of the rigging of the vessel. Cable insisted on dragging it all up out of reach of the tide, explaining that we would want the timber for firewood if for nothing else, and he appeared positively delighted when he saw a spar on which a canvas sail was wrapped floating on the water some fifteen yards from the beach.

" Come on," he cried. " We must get this out. It'll come in jolly handy."

Forthwith he pulled off his clothing and waded out into the water. My sense of dignity forbade me following his example, so I contented myself with tucking up my trousers above my knees, and then followed him. By the time we had landed the spar my trousers were wet through, and I felt decidedly un— comfortable.

Cable laughed when he noticed this, remarking: ** It's rather a waste of time standing on ceremony now. If I was you I'd take off those clothes and let them get dry. There's certainly nobody about to see you, worse luck," he added bitterly. I only wish to goodness there was, and that we were on Manly or Bondi beach."

I followed his advice, and as I spread my clothes out on the rocks I asked him did he think our position was very serious.

" It's serious all right," he answered ruefully, and God knows what will become of us, cast away here on what appears an out—of—the—way desert island. For all we know yet we might be altogether without food or water, and if that's the case there can be only one end."

" But there's some biscuits and water in that box," I replied.

" Yes," he said, ^enough to last about a day, and we have to thank Dorkins for having them. Indeed, if he was not with us I would hold out very little hope, but there is no doubt he is a

wonderful beggar. When the ship was racing before that hurricane he went down and packed that little tin—lined box with some biscuits and a little water, and when he jumped from the ship he threw it overboard tied up to a lifebuoy, and that's what brought him ashore."

"He's clever enough," I answered, but after all he's only a common criminal, and it is a terrible thing for a man like myself to have to be associated with him."

"Criminal or not," said my companion rather sourly, "he is our hope, anyhow, and I'll advise you not to cros him. After all, whatever he is, it's probably the outcome of circumstances, as is the case with most of us."

I made no reply, as I felt rather annoyed at his remark. I was becoming disappointed in Cable.

We continued our search along the beach, and soon had quite a pile of timber and other wreckage stacked up. At first I felt most uncomfortable prancing about the beach without any clothes on, tugging and slipping in the sand as I struggled with heavy planks and all sorts of rope and timber. I certainly could not have appeared very dignified, and I know I found myself very awkward, and suffered many bumps and scratches in the course of the work.

So far we had not discovered anything in the way of food or water, and we were both becoming rather despondent, when suddenly Cable gave a yell, and pointed to a cask which was bobbing up and down in the water some distance from the beach.

By Jove," he said, we must get that."

He waded into the water, and, with graceful, regular strokes, swam out to where the cask was floating. He seemed to have some difficulty in handling it, but after what seemed a long wait he got it into shallow water, and we soon rolled it up on to the beach, where we upended and examined it.

As we did so Cable said in a tone of regret, as he pointed to where part of the top was broken in: "It's not water, worse luck." Looking closer, he informed me that it was full of salt junk.

"However," he added, "this will come in mighty useful."

Just then Dorkins rejoined us, and we told him what we had found.

"Well," he said, "anyhow I have found a splendid camping place up on the cliff, and we must shift our things up before dark."

It would be tedious to go into further detail, but I might say that the greater part of the day we searched amongst the rocks and along the shore for wreckage, and by nightfall we had gathered all our possessions together in the cave.

They were little enough, although they seemed very valuable then. Besides the cask of meat, we had found a couple of cases of ship's biscuits, a case of tinned meat, and a bag of flour, and another of rice, which, although damaged by the water, Dorkins reckoned would be usable. There was also a fairly large box with tea, sugar, baking—powder, and some other groceries in it, so we were in no danger of starving.

But we had found no water!

Another discovery which we relished was a big tin—lined box of cigars, and Dorkins had also found washed up on a rock my overcoat, which he had spread out in the sun to dry for me.

We had also, of course, the biscuits and the precious jar of water that Dorkins had brought ashore. In the box he had also put a couple of strong jack—knives, and, with what seemed to me to be wonderful forethought, a securely—closed tin containing matches, so after a little trouble we had been able to start a fire going near the mouth of the cave.

The cave itself was some thirty or forty feet above the beach, and a fairly easy track led up to it. In front of the cave a big broad ledge jutted out from the face of the cliff, and on this natural platform we had stacked a pile of firewood and lit a fire.

The cave itself, at the entrance, was about six feet high and four or five feet broad, but it opened out into a fine roomy space. It was clean, the floor covered with sand, and the cave was perfectly dry, although there was an outlet somewhere up above in the face of the cliff, as the daylight came in sufficiently to light up the farthest corners, and the air was fresh and sweet.

At Dorkins's suggestion we had gathered up a large quantity of dry sea—weed, and, spreading over this the canvas sails, dried during the day, we each had a fairly comfortable bunk.

But, though there was plenty of food, we had found no water!

It was nearly dark when we made our evening meal, but Dorkins would only allow us about a table—spoonful of water, which he carefully poured out into some big shells we had gathered on the beach.

The meal finished, I went into the cave and lay down in my bunk, leaving my two companions sitting before the fire puffing gratefully at cigars.

1.40 CHAPTER XX

1.41 THE TEACHINGS OF THE PAMPHLET.

After these terrible adventures I need hardly say that I was on the verge of prostration. Apart from nervous breakdown, I was suffering intensely from rheumatism, and so could do nothing but lie helplessly on my bunk. Even this was agony, as, getting about on the beach during the day, with little and sometimes no clothing on, I had got frightfully sunburnt, and was enduring torment from this cause alone.

Indeed, the mental and physical agony I suffered makes me shudder even now. Cable, being a much younger and stronger man, was naturally not so much affected. As for Dorkins, he seemed so much part of the elements himself that I doubt whether anything could have had any serious effect upon him.

My companions sat outside conversing quietly. For my part, I was too weary to even listen, but puffed mechanically at a cigar, which seemed the only enjoy—able thing I possessed.

After an hour or so the others came into the cave, and sat down on their bunks, and Dorkins said, address—ing me:

"I don't think I'll be able to keep that promise to land you on the north coast, somehow: at least, not just yet. You'll have to make the best of it, like Cable 119 here, and remember that each man has to do his share—and he looked at me with a hardening expression.

Although I resented his tones, I simply asked him what he wished me to do.

"Well, to—morrow at daybreak we'll have to start to explore this island, for it seems to me to be an island. So far I have seen nothing but rocks, but there must be something beyond. If not"—he paused and looked at me for a moment—then we cannot live here more than a few days.

"What do you mean?" I cried with dull fore—boding.

"Water!" replied Dorkins. "We have not more than a pint in this place, although we have enough food to last us for three months. In the morning Cable will set out in the direction of the right, you will make your way to the left, and I will go straight across the centre. If you discover water you will return at once. If not you must keep on till nightfall. You can take a few biscuits with you. There is no time to be lost. It is a matter of life and death. Do you understand?"

I nodded, although with the racking pains I was suffering it was fearful to think of toiling over a rocky island under the hot sun.

There was little more said, and, exhausted by what we had gone through, it was not long before the three of us were sound asleep.

It seemed only a few minutes after that I was awakened by some one shaking my shoulder roughly and calling loudly for me to get up. It was Dorkins.

I staggered as I attempted to rise, and would have fallen had he not caught me.

"Buck up, man! No weakening now," he said in a harsh voice. "Pull yourself together, and remember what important work we have before us. Sit down and eat something, you'll be all right then."

At that moment Cable entered the cave. He had been down for a dip in the surf, and looked quite fresh and fit.

"Good morning, Silmore," he sang out quite cheerily, and I envied him his fine spirits. The day is breaking gloriously fine, which should be a happy omen," he continued. I've brought up a couple of planks from the beach, which will serve for a table. We may as well make ourselves as comfortable as we can, eh?" And, dragging the timber in, he soon made a rough table by propping it up on some stones, while Dorkins brought in some of the salt meat and biscuits.

We had our morning meal in silence, each man being busy with his own thoughts. Dorkins, when we had finished, said curtly; Come on, we had better make a start."

Together we went out of the cave.

The sun was just rising over the distant sealine, breaking through the low white clouds. A cool, soft breeze fanned our faces.

For a moment we stood on the rocky platform, gazing at the desolate but magnificent prospect.

Cable turned away to the right, and got down on to the beach. We waited for a few moments longer till we saw him struggling over the water-covered rocks round the edge of the cliff. He turned and waved his hand, then disappeared.

I'll meet you again to-night, Silmore. Look out you don't get lost," said Dorkins, as he started to clamber up the face of the rocky cliff. I nodded in reply, and started down the rough path to the left. When I had got to the end of the beach where the cliffs jutted out opposite to the side that Cable had gone, I looked back towards the cave and saw Dorkins clambering far up near the brow of the cliffs, and it made me dizzy to watch him.

I could not help reflecting that he at least had chosen the most arduous path. As the thought went through my mind I saw that he had pulled himself on to a narrow ledge on which he stood for a moment apparently resting. He looked out to sea, and, noticing me watching him, waved his hand in farewell, and continued his toilsome climb.

By this time I had left the soft sand and found that I had to climb over great masses of slippery, jagged rock, most of which was covered with green slime. I had no boots on, and my bare feet were sore and weary with the experience of the previous day. The task before me seemed greater than I could manage.

Urged on by our pressing necessity, however, and stimulated somewhat by the energy of my companions, I stepped cautiously on to a flat rock, and then withdrew my leg as a twinge of rheumatism passed through it. I tried again, and this time succeeded in standing on the rock, after which I took heart and planted my foot on another much less even. I gave a horrid lurch, and would have fallen had I not caught the sharp edge of a neighboring boulder, though in doing so I severely cut my hand.

If I had far to go like this, I contemplated, I would not cover a great distance by nightfall. Though it seems absurd to say it, I was positively anxious to please Dorkins by having some good news to report, to show that I was not as useless and helpless as he seemed to think.

Fortunately I came upon a patch of sand and rock, over which I walked with comparative ease, and though I had one or two nasty tumbles I had ultimate cause to congratulate myself that I was at the end of my passage round the edge of the cliff.

I had come out on another long stretch of beach, terminating some two or three miles away in another rocky peninsula. The country had a desolate aspect, as low-lying, barren, rocky hills stretched inland, where they culminated in what seemed to me a chain of mountains running across the island. The vegetation was scant.

I climbed over, the hill for hours and hours, but could find no trace of any water.

It was only when I found that I was absolutely reaching the limit of my strength that I wearily commenced to make my way back to the cave. I had been the whole day without anything to drink since the morning meal, and had even in desperation tried to chew some of the scanty herbage on the side of the hills, but found that it was rank and bitter, and only served to aggravate my already intolerable thirst.

It was nearly dark when I had finished my painful journey back to the cave, but the others had not returned.

Nearly driven desperate by thirst, I looked for our precious jar with the intention of simply moistening my tongue, but could not find it anywhere. Dorkins had evidently hidden it or taken it with him, and my blood boiled at what seemed horrible selfishness. I had to content myself with munching a biscuit as I lay wearily on my bunk waiting the return of my companions.

Cable came in first, looking disconsolate and cast down, having lost the good spirits he started with in the morning. He glumly told me his experiences of the day, which were much on a par with my own.

He had found no sign of water.

As he was speaking Sandy Dorkins came in, and having learnt from us the result of our investigations, had to admit that his search had also been a failure.

We were a gloomy trio as we sat down to our evening meal. Dorkins produced the jar from some secret hiding place, and doled out even a smaller allowance than hitherto, treating himself, however, as frugally as us.

Why didn't you climb to the top of those hills you saw, Silmore?*' he asked, in a familiar manner he was beginning to adopt, much to my dislike.

It was quite impossible—quite/' I answered hotly. Besides, my rheumatism "

" All right, I shall do it myself to—morrow," he broke in roughly. "I'm sure that we will find water over there."

We finished the meal in silence.

So far nothing had been said between us concerning the fate of the other men. As for the " Queen of Virtue," she might never have existed for all that Dorkins had to say about her, yet there were times when I imagined that I saw a great sadness in his eyes.

With such a dreadful retrospect and uncertain future, it was natural that we found a difficulty to talk. For an hour or two we sat by the fire smoking, mostly in silence.

Suddenly, as though to shake off a disagreeable lethargy, Dorkins jumped up, and, fossicking among a heap of things in a corner, brought out a pamphlet, which I instantly recognised.

" This fell out of your coat when I was drying it," he said, handing it to me. " We are likely to be lacking literature, so if you have no objection I would like to read it."

" No objection whatever," I replied, with some little pride, for it was my printed address delivered before the Chamber of Commerce, entitled " Enter— prise and Capital."

Dorkins sat reading for a while, and I thought I noticed a cynical smile pass over his face now and again. At length I asked if he found it interesting.

Remarkably so/' he replied.

Why not read it aloud?" suggested Cable.

Dorkins therewith commenced with the introduction by the president of the Chamber.

* The Hon, John Silmore/ he read, 'is one of our most esteemed citizens, who stands for the best interests of this Mother State before everything. As you are aware, he represents some of our leading industries, and is a man of considerable substance. As a member of the Upper House, a director of the Central Extended, a prominent shareholder in the Broken Hill Proprietary, Ltd., and a director and shareholder in numerous other concerns, he is naturally a man of mark in the financial world, and we can look forward to a valuable address this evening. We will be listening to a man with practical experience of capital and enterprise, and not a mere theoretical orator. I have much pleasure in calling upon the honorable gentleman.

Well, Silmore, I guess they'll be missing you some," chuckled Dorkins, lapsing into a Yankee twang. It was always difficult to judge of his nationality, for his speech varied a great deal.

I flushed uncomfortably at his remark, for, indeed, under the circumstances, there did seem something ridiculous in the reading.

** 'Enterprise,' continued Dorkins, reading from the pamphlet, 'is related to capital as steam is to the engine'—(a neat comparison, Silmore)—'with the difference that capital has a governing and immovable force—(hum, I don't quite catch that)—for capital represents labor, ingenuity, energy, perseverance, and resourcefulness. Enterprise should be dominated by

capital, not capital by enterprise, for 'to have and to hold' is the sacred dictum of English law. Thus the hands of capital turn on or let off the steam of enterprise as is directed by the heads of capital, and it is one of the greatest mistakes of modern finance that money is but the tool of enterprise, and as such should be utilised without the fullest regard to proprietary rights. The first thing one should be able to say of his capital is, 'I have earned.' Personally I can say this, for my respected father accumulated a handsome fortune, which, of course, belongs by natural law to me.

* The second thing one should be able to say of his capital is, 'I will keep.' This is merely providence and good policy, and in my particular case the words have not gone unheeded. But there comes a third and last thing one should be able to say of his capital, and that is 'I will invest and accumulate.' Again taking myself as an example, I think I may congratulate myself that my interests have not been altogether unsatisfactory. (Loud applause.)

And so, gentlemen, we mustn't confound enterprise with speculation, or, in other words, our capital must govern our enterprise. (Cheers.) Thus enterprise, I claim, is investment safely directed, and there is no better form of investment than that which from time to time arises from the inexorable law of supply and demand. You possess an article; I must have that article. The price of the article depends upon how much I need it and whether I can purchase freely elsewhere. Thus arises competition, except in those cases where the selling party is clever enough to secure a corner in the article in question, in which case he is entitled to make his own price. This is business—pure, simple business. It is one of the greatest incentives to competition, and but follows out the principle of the survival of the fittest.' "

Dorkins stopped reading at this stage, and seemed impressed by what he had read, for he laid aside the pamphlet and sat for a considerable time completely absorbed by his thoughts.

Cable, I observed, had fallen asleep.

1.42 CHAPTER XXI

1.43 TROUBLE BREWING.

Again on the following morning Dorkins aroused us at daybreak.

My first sensation was that of an unquenchable thirst. The pains of my rheumatism had subsided, but I was somewhat feverish with cold, and my throat was parched in the extreme.

Instinctively I called for water.

Just turn on the tap over there/' sang out Dorkins, with a grin, and I realised to the full the fearful danger which threatened us. At breakfast I tried to swallow my food in vain. It was not food I needed. It was water—something to drink—anything—that I felt I must have, for it was now some fifty hours since I had had a decent drink.

The measure Dorkins gave us at breakfast was smaller than ever—only a tiny mouthful—and when we had finished the meal he told us curtly that there was no more left, and turned the bottle end up as silent evidence.

As Dorkins prepared to leave he said to Cable: 'I suppose you will continue your search to-day. I will follow in Silmore's trail, up the hills.'

Then turning to me he said: 'As you seem to be about knocked out, the best thing you can do is to get about the beach and gather up any timber. We will want it all, if only to try and make some sort of raft or something to get out of this God-forsaken hole, if there is no water here. When you have finished you had better clean up this cave, straighten up the bunks, and that sort of thing. We don't want it to get like a pig-stye.'

This was too much. When it had been a pressing necessity I did not mind being told off to duty, but to be ordered about by this man was infamous, and the contemptuous way in which he relegated me to do menial services was simply more than I was prepared to put up with. I waited a moment, fully expecting that Cable would expostulate with the fellow, or at least offer to do the work himself, but as he remained silent, in fact didn't appear to have noticed what was said, I blurted out:

I wish you to understand, Mr. Dorkins, what is due to a man of my position. I will lend such aid as I feel disposed, but I will not tolerate being ordered about in such a manner. I certainly refuse to do such menial work as you suggest."

As I spoke I caught Cable's eye, and saw an expression in it which clearly said that he expected trouble. But it was to our mutual surprise that Dorkins simply replied:

"Very well, Silmore. Don't get angry. You need not do it unless you like. Only remember that these things in this cave are mine, and while I am away kindly respect ' my proprietary rights.' "

Then he walked out of the cave with a grim smile on his face.

I wouldn't cross him if I were you/' said Cable. I would advise you to do what he asks."

But I was extremely angry, and, besides, was suffering frightfully from cold and thirst, and did not feel at all disposed to leave the cave.

Cable left shortly afterwards, and I was alone.

I must admit that I felt very uneasy when I reflected over what had passed. I had quite expected Dorkins to have got in a rage, and there was something menacing about the quiet way in which he had treated the incident. The more I thought over it the more uneasy I felt.

In the afternoon I wandered along the shore despondently, pondering over my unhappy position. Glancing idly ahead I saw some dark object lying at the water edge, and in a spirit of idle curiosity I went to inspect it.

When I got closer it appeared like a bundle of clothing, and when I reached it I found to my horror that it was the body of a man.

It was lying face downwards, half in the water. The rise and fall of the tide lifted the body backwards and forwards in a ghastly lifelike manner.

Overcoming a feeling of repugnance—for I had never come into close contact with the dead—I pulled the body, with some effort, out of the water, and turned it over.

It was the late skipper of the Cowra '

He had evidently been dead for many hours.

As I stood looking down at the dead man my mind rushed back to the night the ferry boat was taken out of the harbor by Dorkins, and the sight of this unfortunate man, whose life had been sacrificed as a consequence, filled me with bitter anger against this callous rogue.

It also came home to me how marvellous my own escape from a similar death had been, although I felt that certainly the skipper could have been better spared from the world than myself, so it was evidently the wise working of a beneficent Providence.

There could be little doubt but that all the crew were drowned. It must have been so, although we never found any other bodies. As Dorkins afterwards explained, the other men were evidently carried out to sea by a swift current that lay just beyond the reef.

Yet, as I pondered over my escape, I felt a terrible fear that I had been snatched from the sea only to perish on land. These thoughts, together with my horrible discovery, completely unmanned me, and I was glad to hasten back to the cave, where I waited for my companions to return.

When they came in, I briefly told Cable what I had found. I ignored Dorkins, although covertly watching the effect of this news upon him.

It was he who spoke first, saying abruptly: "Come and show us where the body is!"

Nothing loth at the opportunity of driving home to him the dreadful consequence of his act, I rose and led them down to the spot.

Dorkins stood looking at the body for a moment, then muttered, " Poor devil

I couldn't restrain myself, but cried angrily and bitterly: "

Poor devil indeed, thanks to you and your villainous scheme! You murderer, this man's blood is on your head!"

Dorkins flushed angrily, and I saw it was hard for him to control himself, but he made no

reply. Casting a contemptuous glance at me, he turned to Cable and said curtly: "Well, we had better bury this!"

Cable nodded silently, and the two of them then carried the body of the dead man up towards the foot of the cliff, where they laid it at rest. It was a wearisome task, for the sand had to be shovelled out with pieces of planking. Out of respect to the dead, I willingly helped to the best of my ability. We worked in silence, and when we had finished stood looking down at the rough grave. Already the wind had swept the sand smooth, and there was little sign that it was the last resting-place of a Sydney sailor. It seemed pitifully lonely to leave him thus, alone in this desolate spot. No doubt the others felt somewhat as I did, that something should be done, something said; but for my part I could only stand there wondering dully if I, perchance, should also lie there in death's last sleep.

At last Dorkins pulled off the rough head covering he wore, and said slowly;
Requiescat in pace."

Then he turned and walked rapidly back in the direction of the cave.

** Amen/' murmured Cable, as he and I turned and slowly followed.

1.44 CHAPTER XXII

1.45 SOME HOME TRUTHS.

When we reached the cave Dorkins's manner had changed. He was again in his aggressive, cynical mood. He looked up as I entered, and after a moment said:

So I'm a murderer now, Silmore, eh?*

My only reply was a silent look of scorn.

"I see," he continued in a bantering tone, "that you understand the responsibility of cause and effect!"

"I understand that you are responsible for that man's death," I retorted angrily. "If it had not been for you he would now be safe and sound in Sydney."

"Perhaps. Or he might be out of a job and starving. You can't tell. He hadn't much of a job, any—how, had he?"

Dorkins looked at me quizzically as he spoke, then puffed leisurely at his cigar, and continued:

He came along of his own free will, like the rest of the crowd. He had the option of going back to long hours and poor pay, or staying with me and getting a good punch. He and his mates could have stopped in the ferry boat. We left it in the route of the ocean boats, you know, but they took their chance, and lost. That was their bad luck."

I looked at Cable, and he nodded. Now we understood what had puzzled us, why these men took their lot so cheerfully. No doubt they had been offered a good round sum by Dorkins to stop. It would certainly have been very awkward for him if they had gone back and told their story to the police.

Dorkins sat silent for a few moments, smoking and frowning. Nettled at his manner, I replied shortly:

A plausible story, but it does not alter the fact of your responsibility."

To my surprise, he jumped up angrily, and, striding over to where I was sitting, stood glaring straight into my eyes.

"You damned hypocritical old hubmug!" he cried, "with your moralising and charges. Your blood on my head 'business! Of course if I hadn't taken him from Sydney he wouldn't have been drowned. But, you brilliant student of cause and effect, has it ever struck you that there may be the blood of many men, aye, and women and children, on your head? You—with your thousands and thousands sweated out of hundreds of helpless workers, victims of a cursed competitive system of freedom! If I had not taken him from Sydney! If! Don't talk to me of ifs! They tell me you are a big shareholder in this ferry company, Silmore—a big shareholder. Perhaps if you had paid this man a little more, worked him a little less, he wouldn't have been so willing to have come with me. And the same with his mates. They might even have put up

a fight. Don't make any mistake. I'm not de—fending myself to you. Why should I? To you, of all men, John Silmore! But let me tell you that these men jumped at the chance of making what was to them a small fortune. They took their chance and drew a blank. They didn't bother asking where I got the money to buy their silence and company. Very wrong of them, wasn't it? But do you always ask how your dividends are made, Silmore? God help you if you do! Perhaps, my fine, honest, upright shareholder, this man's blood is on your head more than on mine."

I inwardly winced, for there had been some comment in the radical papers about the wages and hours of these men, but of course one knows these complaints are always worked up by Labor agitators. In fact, I asked one or two of the men at different times on the boats if they were dissatisfied, and they had assured me that they were not. They were really much better off than many of their class.

But Dorkins went on without waiting for any reply, and he seemed to read my very thoughts.

Of course there are plenty more to get where they come from. Hundreds, thousands, only too anxious to get the job. The law of supply and demand! A grand old law, Silmore, isn't it? So just and humane! Almost as good as *cause and effect,' don't you think, my soft—hearted old moralist? Plenty of men ready for the job at the money, you and your colleagues will say. Eh? But did it never strike you, Silmore, that these men—live, flesh—and—blood men, with their loves and sorrows, their tragedies and romances, have as much right to life and health and plenty as you and yours? Have you the right to wear them down and J out, taking advantage of their necessity and your power? And have you not done so, my friend? , If you cannot say No (and you cannot without a lie) then keep quiet with your charges. Keep quiet, I say, and ask yourself whether you have the right to condemn Sandy Dorkins, rogue and murderer as he is according to you!*

He stopped, and walked abruptly to the mouth of the cave, then stopped again as abruptly, and, turning round, repeated:

' ^Keep quiet, my friend—keep quiet! Get to your bunk, and think it over. Get to your bunk, I say, and sleep and dream! Yes—dream! Not of sailors, who chanced all and lost, lapping gently in the deep sea, but of ghastly haggard—faced women and stunted, sickly children herded in the slums, shivering when so little of your coal would warm them, starving when so little of your scraps would feed them: of cursing, gaunt men toiling to pay your rents; of bow—backed consumptive girls coughing their lives away in pesti—lent factories; of miners crouching a thousand feet out of sight of the sun with the lead fumes eating out their very bones; of weakly, neurotic clerks pinching and scraping to look respectable and keep a family on thirty shillings a week, aye, starving the very children because they must get a new black coat to keep up appearances and not offend your august eye. Dream of them, Silmore—dream of them! The living and the dead that earn your dividends. Dream of them, I say, my virtuous, indignant paragon, or if you can't sleep— and you shouldn't be able to, God knows!—then lie awake and think of them, and of the part you have played, friend Silmore! Think of it and ask yourself whether, after all, when you too have been buried—not on the sandy shore of a desolate isle, but in a beautiful green ground with a wonderful marble tomb and a headpiece setting out your virtues and attributes— whether you will be able to show a clean white sheet, or whether, after all, John Silmore, millionaire and legislator, honest upright citizen, model husband and father, is much better than even me—Sandy Dorkins, rogue and thief, and, according to John Silmore—mur—derer

Hissing the last word out viciously between his set teeth, he strode out of the cave, and I was so astounded at this unexpected outburst that I could do nothing but stare vacantly before me, conscious that Cable was watching me with curious, questioning eyes.

1.46 CHAPTER XXIII

1.47 THE TORTURES OF THIRST.

When I awoke the next morning both Dorkins and Cable had left to continue their urgent search for water. I had seen nothing of the former after his outburst the previous evening, but Cable had curtly told me that their day's labor had been fruitless, and they would go out again at daybreak, as our position was desperate. Indeed, no other word could describe it. Our pittance of water was now finished, and unless relief came, a frightful prospect faced us.

That was a very miserable day to me, for I gave myself up to the gloomiest thought imaginable.

Until now I had supposed that Dorkins, despite his familiarity, respected my position in the world. But after my experience of the previous night my opinion had changed. Although I expected, under such circumstances as ours, to have to give way in some degree in the interest of self preservation, I felt that I would not be true to my traditions if I allowed myself to be domineered by a man who was in every respect my inferior, and, moreover, my natural enemy. Dorkins was a thief; I was a Justice of the Peace. Dorkins in his right place should be breaking stones in jail; I, in mine, was an acknowledged good citizen, a property-owner, and an employer of labor. No conditions of time or place, I argued with myself, could possibly narrow the gap between this man and myself. While he had been tolerably respectful, I was content to cast in my lot with him, to eat, drink, and smoke with him, until we found our way back to civilisation. But he had addressed me as though I was his servant, and that I could never suffer. Privation, starvation, death, but not servitude; every fibre of my system quivered with indignation at the thought. The good British blood in me would cease to flow before its action should be quickened by the indignity which menial labor, not self-imposed, would cause me. Never in all my life had I been ordered to do anything. Even my father—my one and only master—had prefaced his instructions to me through life with kindly words—"I would suggest, John, my boy," I should think, John, it might be a good thing if you would—and so on. From my University career I had been put by my father at the head of one of the departments of his business, where I learned to command, but never to obey. Was I to forsake my life's principles now, even though death was the alternative? No, I could not do it. I might be at the mercy of this man, but I could die before I could serve him. All my instincts of freedom and independence, the glorious heritage of our race, rose in angry revolt at the prospect.

Needless to say, my reflections were not pleasant, and I started with something akin to joy as the thought came to me, "Am I at his mercy?" Cable was on my side, we were two to one. No doubt Dorkins was still armed, for I felt sure that I had seen what appeared to be a revolver bulging out in his hip pocket. (He had probably put the weapon in the box he had brought ashore.) Still, we could overpower him in his sleep, and keep him prisoner. Yes, it should be done. I resolved to speak to Cable the instant he returned. When we had Dorkins in our power we, or rather I, would make him do as I wished. It was a splendid idea.

The more I considered it, the more it seemed to be the only solution of the intolerable problem which confronted me. If I gave in to him now I was faced with the prospect of the tortures of servitude or death. So comforting, indeed, was this decision that I endured the rest of the day's hardships fairly well. Several times I was tempted to inspect the stock of provisions, for I felt hungry and suffered severely from thirst, but Dorkins must have understood me well when he carelessly reminded me that they were his property. Whatever came, I could not steal. Besides, I felt certain that Cable would do his best to alleviate my sufferings.

Water!

That was the worst of my physical sufferings. I was filled with a torturing craving. Every nerve and vein in my body cried out in protest. My throat was parched, my lips cracking, and my skin drawn and tightened. Every breath was agony. I was seized with a burning fever. My head seemed on fire, and my brain bursting. I felt sure that I was losing control of my thoughts. I was half stupified, and then sweet, pleasant dreams came floating into my mind. I could see

running streams, cascades falling over mountain rocks. I could hear the ripple of tiny brooks, and pictured them wandering gently through moss—covered banks of fern. The sea lapping idly before me became a great fresh lake of translucent liquid. It sparkled, bubbled, and effervesced like champagne. It looked cool, deliciously inviting. What a fool I was, I laughed, to be here suffering agony with such sweet relief in front of me. I would kneel down and drink, drink, drink.

I staggered to my feet and stumbled across the beach to the water. A great exhilaration possessed me. I could already feel the beautiful soothing water. How refreshing, how intoxicating it would be. I knelt down in the very surf, and, dipping down, filled my hands in the ocean, then placed them to my mouth. A taste of the bitter salt brought horrible consciousness to me. I realised that I had been delirious, and my re—turn to sanity increased my agony. I fell back on the sand, my head splitting with burning pains and my whole frame racked and quivering.

It was thus that Cable found me when he returned. He, too, looked worn and exhausted. I held out my hand despairingly to him. He shook his head dole—fully.

"Not a sign of it," he said, walking slowly to—wards the cave. I followed him and sat down in my bunk. Cable went and got a couple of biscuits, which he munched slowly as he sat on the other side of the cave. For a while not a word passed between us, for, indeed, there seemed little to say. It took me all my strength to control my thoughts and to keep the avenues of the brain from being permeated again with those torturing visions of rippling streams, shady springs, and trickling waterfalls.

At length I regained sufficient self—possession to remember the position in regard to Dorkins, and I care—fully unfolded my plans to Cable.

Instead of being impressed and assenting to them, he turned, and, to my great surprise, gave me a look of disgust mingled with contempt, such as I don't think I have ever seen on any human face before.

"You don't want to suck the man's blood YET," he said, with awful meaning.

I gasped, and my whole frame shook with horror.

"What—what do you mean by that?" I whispered hoarsely.

"That from now onward every moment becomes an hour—every hour a week—until we find water. That if we don't find it," he whispered half savagely, and his voice sounded horrible in the silent cave, it is only a matter of hours before you and I and he will be no longer sane men, governed by human feelings, but beasts—wild, starving beasts with insatiable passions—ready to do anything to live."

Mercifully he ceased to speak. His voice died away in a dull whisper, and his face wore a ghastly pallor as he buried it in his hands and remained silent.

I sank back on my couch with an awful fear of the hideous prospect he had evoked, and groaned aloud in my misery.

1.48 CHAPTER XXIV

1.49 THE FINDING OF WATER.

From such a condition, a condition of mental and physical collapse, I was aroused by a sudden shouting.

I felt an arm passed round my neck, my head was raised from the ground, and—how shall I describe the ecstasy of that sensation?—I felt the touch of water to my lips—clear, sweet, glorious water. My mouth was filled with it, and I found myself clutching at some—thing and drinking, drinking to my hearths content. The liquid seemed for a moment to race through all my veins like burning lead ; my whole body was vibrating as if pricked with a thousand needles, and every hair in my scalp seemed quivering. But these sensations rapidly passed away, giving place to a beautiful feeling of peaceful languor and content, and I felt that my senses were fully returned. I looked around and found that I was in Dorkins's arms, and he was bidding me to

eat. Having quenched that intolerable thirst, I need not say how readily I obeyed. Life seemed worth living again.

There was an appetising smell in the cave, which, I found, arose from some sort of mixture that Cable was busily cooking at the fire, which he called *^dough*—boys. They were something like scones, and gave off a fresh, appetising smell. Some meat was sizzling in front of the flames, where he had utilised a thin sheet of iron for a frying—pan, and an old bucket that we had found amongst the wreckage was filled with hot, fragrant tea. These were the cheery odors at which I hungrily sniffed. We sat down, and the three of us made the first hearty meal we had had since we had been landed on the island. The surroundings were rough enough indeed, and it was a strange experience to me drinking tea out of sea shells, and eating meat and our equivalent for bread out of my hands; but at the time I hardly thought of this. When we had finished I rose and stretched myself, feeling a very different individual from what I had a couple of hours before.

" Good for you, Silmore," said Dorkins ; " I thought you were done for."*

His words brought me to a rather disagreeable sense of gratitude. In truth, after what had passed during the last few hours, I could not help a slight feeling of shame in connection with Dorkins; and yet it seemed maddening that I should be ever continually placed under obligation to this man. It was most galling to my independence, and the desire I entertained to put him in his place. Yet I realised only too well that he had been the means beyond doubt of saving my life, for I could not have endured the torments of thirst much longer. Perforce I had to thank him, but I fear that I did so with little grace. Cable, whom I instinctively felt did not approve of my attitude, was very much more cordial, and made no secret of his gratitude towards the other man. Dorkins, however, only gave a quiet smile as he puffed contentedly at a cigar.

" Where did you find the waterasked Cable.

Dorkins hesitated.

" Beyond the hills/" he replied vaguely, as he rose and stretched himself, then walked towards the mouth of the cave.

In what direction r* Cable continued question— ingly, but the other had moved away, and affected not to hear.

It was now some time after sundown, and it was a beautiful calm night. A half—subdued light filled the atmosphere, and from the mouth of the cave, where I stood for a little time finishing my smoke, the prospect was most charming. The light from the young moon breaking through lambswool clouds threw a silver glint on the edges of the rippling waves, and even the harsh outlines of the rocks seemed soft and subdued. I could not help feeling what a difference in a man's outlook a well—lined stomach makes. I saw Dorkins sitting smoking on a rocky ledge some little distance away; but as he seemed engrossed with his thoughts, and took no notice of me, I did not disturb him, but went back to my bunk. Our relations were now not very cordial, and in any case I was beginning to feel drowsy and inclined to rest. I found Cable had already turned in (if the simple process of lying down in one's bunk with no other covering but the scanty clothes we were wearing deserved such a term), and was blissfully asleep, snoring as peacefully as if there were no such things as shipwrecks, desert islands, or robbers in the world. I followed his example, and was soon oblivious of my surroundings. It seemed hours afterwards that I was awakened for a moment by Dorkins coming into the cave, but I soon fell asleep again.

It was late in the morning when I awoke, feeling more like my old self than had been the case for some time. I sat up and yawned contentedly, blinking my eyes at the bright sunlight that streamed in at the mouth of the cave, which I found I had to myself. My companions had gone out, but I found some tea and food left for me, which I greedily devoured, as I concluded that Dorkins had not in this instance put it under the ban of being his private property. It was with some scruples, however, that I took a cigar from his box; but I really could not withstand the temptation, for it was one of those bright gay mornings when a good cigar after a meal seems

one of the most desirable—able things in the world. I mentally absolved myself by the knowledge that I would repay him liberally for this and all other benefits at some future time when I had returned to my proper position and possessions. When I walked out on to the platform in front of the cave I saw Dorkins and Cable sitting together on the rocks, with their feet dangling down just above the water, conversing eagerly. When I approached them I saw that they were fishing, and had already secured some nice bream and snapper. They afterwards informed me that they had come across some fishing tackle in one of the boxes.

They stopped talking when I got near, and, except—ing for a brief morning salutation, gave their attention to their lines. I stood watching them for a little while; but as they said nothing, and I was not interested in angling, I walked back to the beach, and sat down in the soft sand in the shade of an overhanging rock. I was still very sore and physically worn, and, after gazing idly for some time at the dancing waves, I fell into a drowsy slumber.

The day was a quiet, idle one. The others fished most of the time, although they were evidently arguing about something, as I could hear the murmur of their voices, and it seemed as if Cable was protesting against some proposition put forth by his companion; but I did not feel very interested, and took little notice.

Needless to say, we had good hearty meals that day, and the fish was a most pleasant change. So pleased was I, indeed, with the change in our condition that I voluntarily offered that evening to assist in clearing away and cleaning the few crude eating materials we had. As they had all to be carried down to the beach to be washed, I felt my action was most commendable. Dorkins, however, accepted it without a remark.

Afterwards we lit our cigars, and I settled down for a quiet pleasant evening.

This was not to be.

1.50 CHAPTER XXV

1.51 BUSINESS PRINCIPLES IN APPLICATION.

It was Dorkins, of course, who was the cause of trouble.

Pulling my pamphlet, which seemed to strangely interest him, out from under his bunk, he began reading out extracts from it. He returned to one which he had read before:

* Thus enterprise, I claim, is investment safely directed, and there is no better form of investment than that which from time to time arises from the inexorable law of supply and demand. You possess an article; I must have that article. The price of the article depends on how much I need it, and whether I can purchase freely elsewhere. Thus arises competition, except in those cases where the selling party is clever enough to secure a corner in the article in question, in which case he is entitled to make his own price. This is business, pure, simple business. It is one of the greatest incentives to competition, and but. follows out the principle of the survival of the fittest.' "

Dorkins stopped reading, and eyed me in the most peculiar manner. While I did not understand the purport of his conduct, I began to feel most uncomfortable. I knew he had something to say, so I waited silently.

What are water stocks quoted at now?" he broke in at last.

I don't quite grasp your meaning," I answered, growing nervous.

The price of the article depends on how much I need it, and whether I can purchase freely elsewhere. Thus arises competition, except in those cases where the selling party is clever enough to secure a corner in the article in question, in which case he is entitled to make his own price," he quoted, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. You see, Silmore, I am always ready to learn something. In this instance, I thank you for a salutary lesson, and one which I trust will prove most profitable."

If you will stop speaking in enigmas," I replied, my temper greatly ruffled, while I began to suspect his meaning, perhaps I will be able to answer you."

When we were deposited by the element of chance upon this island," he answered, "I endeavored to place matters on the basis of equality. You have proved, Silmore, that I was wrong. There can be no equality where things are not equal. You have an undeniable advantage over me. You are a man of wealth and position. I am but a common adventurer. You are a man of social status. I am one who from your point of view should be herded amongst the lowest. You have achieved your place in the world by certain doctrines set forth in this book. I am prepared to be guided by those doctrines. Is there anything I have said that you can take exception to?"

I maintained a discreet silence.

There is not? Well, then, we will refer again to the inexorable law of supply and demand, which is one of the first principles of business. I possess an article which you don't. That which is vital to your existence. You must have it. Perhaps you can find other and cheaper means of procuring it. If you cannot do so you are bound to buy it from me.*

I sat up as though I had been stung by a viper. The whole thing was perfectly plain. This man meant to blackmail me. Before I could say a word, Cable, who had been listening with the deepest interest, intervened:

"** But surely, man," he cried indignantly, "you don't mean to apply the principles which may govern business in a large and civilised community to three men cast upon an island."

"Why not?" replied Dorkins, in the suavest possible manner. "I am only taking my cue from Silmore. This morning I allotted him certain duties, which he declined to undertake. On what grounds? According to what principles did he adopt this attitude, if not those which he had learnt in the community you referred to?"

"Think of the humanity of it! Business is one thing, but to let a man starve!"

£20,000 for a drink of water.

"Men starve in civilised communities," replied Dorkins, "but it does not seem to trouble the business man of trusts and combines much. When you talk of fighting for life on this island, don't forget there are thousands of men at the present time in Sydney fighting bitterly for life under the benign rule of the business principles of the Silmores. In this ease," he added, "have I forgotten the demands of humanity? Did I not give this man drink and food when he was nearly perishing? Yet I warrant there were many men perishing in Sydney while he waxed fat on the dividends of monopoly. Am I trying to take any inhuman advantage of him now? At this moment he is as well nourished as myself. But I have an article which he has not. I shall not interfere in any way with his opportunities for obtaining that article by other means. I doubt if he can say the same of the methods of some of his model business concerns. You, Cable, can do as you please. I have no quarrel with you. You have shared the work with me; you may share the reward. That is the law of equality."

There was silence for a few moments, for I was somewhat staggered at this unforeseen development.

"And what," I said at last, rather sharply, "is your price for this—article?"

"Well, assuming that you purchase at the present moment, let us say twenty thousand pounds."

"Atrocious!" I cried. "Why, I never heard"

"Please yourself," said Dorkins grimly, "but do not forget that the price is governed by the demand, and so long as there is a corner in the supply it will go on increasing."

With that he got up and walked out of the cave.

I stared stupidly after him, while Cable gave a low whistle.

"By thunder," he said, "it looks as if he means business. ** I cannot see any way out of it for you, Mr. Silmore, for he is master of the situation."

I could only groan in reply, for I was truly in a most desperate plight.

1.52 CHAPTER XXVI.

1.53 SILMORE'S SEARCH.

At daybreak next morning I set out, accompanied by Cable, to look for water. We had talked together till late the previous night, and he had pointed out that this was my only hope, and had generously volunteered to go with me.

Somewhat to my surprise, Dorkins had set a place for me at breakfast. There was fish and some salt meat. I chose the former, as being less likely to promote thirst, for I was warned by the fact that only two shells of tea were placed on the table that Dorkins meant to keep his word.

We followed the direction which Dorkins had taken when he had found the precious liquid, traversing the same country for the first part as I had travelled in my previous search. But on this occasion I was better fitted for the work, and we got along famously.

When we came to the foot of the hills. Cable hesitated and walked to and fro, examining the ground carefully.

"I am trying my skill at tracking," he explained, in answer to my questioning gaze. If we can keep on Dorkins's trail we will, of course, come to the spot."

He kept his eyes fixed on the ground as he paced about, and at last stopped before a cleft in the hill.

"I think this is it," he said. "I am not good on the trail, but I should judge that to be a footstep." So we proceeded to make our way in the direction he had indicated. After we had gone some distance, Cable stopped and turned to me:

"I'm sorry to discourage you," he said, "but personally I think we've got an extremely difficult task; in fact, I greatly doubt if we shall succeed in discovering the source of Dorkins's supply. Our only hope is to discover another."

But why should you have these doubts so soon?" I asked gloomily.

Because I have been studying the working of Dorkins's mind. What gives me the greatest cause to fear that our search will fail is that Dorkins would otherwise have cornered the food supplies. Perhaps that would have proved futile, because there are fish, crabs, and other means of sustenance which he knows that I, if not you, have discovered. Certainly he might have given you a pretty rough time if he had left you to the mercy of these chances. But he is clever, and sees that it would serve no object—unless to satisfy the resentment you seem to have aroused in him. Yet Dorkins is not small enough to be spiteful. Do you not realise what a wonderfully cool and even—tempered man you have to deal with? And so I think he would not be so confident about his 'corner,' as he calls it, if he was not reasonably certain that you will not be able to obtain water from any other source."

"The scoundrel!" I exclaimed.

"There you are wrong," Cable objected quickly.

I looked at him with great surprise.

Wrong! Why, don't we both know that he is "

Yes, yes; we know all about that. We know what has brought us to this awful pass. But try and get away for a moment from the principles and ethics of living which have formerly governed you. Consider yourself just born, and that this is your world, and Dorkins and myself the only human beings you know of. Then do you not think you are just a little—say only a little—to blame yourself "

I really do not understand "

"Well, then, ask yourself the question: Have you in any way considered Dorkins?"

I consider him? Why should I?"

Well, let us say on purely humanitarian principles. Have you regarded him as a living being like yourself, who values life, and who has an equal appetite to your own?"

"But he is "

"A thief. Yes—or, rather, he was in the world we left behind us. But we are not living in

that world now. We are governed by entirely different conditions. When the sea gave up the three of us to live again, gave us another lease of life—leaving our unfortunate companions to drown—we emerged again upon another plane of existence. Life began anew. The old world had vanished. The old life was dead. Dorkins realised this when he tried to place the three of us upon an equal footing. He had been a thief & he became a man.*'

" You actually defend him?"

** Does he want defending? Unless I am mistaken, he is well able to defend himself. I only reason the matter out. If you had had your way in regard to maintaining your former status you could not have blamed Dorkins for wanting to keep his. In that case, you would be the gentleman, Dorkins the thief. Had each pursued his vocation from the first you would now be dead—dead of starvation. Your wealth and position in another world would not have the value of a crust of bread. Dorkins, on the other hand, would be richer by a certain quantity of provisions and several fine Havana cigars."

I was conscious that Cable's eyes were upon me, but mine I kept fixed upon the ground. I did not relish the trend of conversation. Nor could I yield to any such absurd arguments.

Does not Dorkins owe me all these things and more than he can ever repay for the terrible sufferings he has caused me?" I asked triumphantly, feeling certain that the statement was incontrovertible.

I do not think so answered Cable.

I turned upon him with righteous anger.

Then, sir, it is impossible for me to discuss this matter further. You are defending the scoundrel. Perhaps you are acting in collusion with him. Ah! I see! That is why he has not cornered his supplies so far as you are concerned!"

I was angry and bitter, or I would not have dreamt of making such an accusation. To my surprise and relief, Cable took it mildly.

It would be a trifle unfair to knock you down, Silmore," he replied with a smile. " You would fall much too easily."

" Well, why should you assume such a preposterous attitude?" I asked, regaining control of my temper. " Perhaps I should not have spoken as I did, but you will admit that it looks strange for you to take this man's part against me."

" It is not a matter of taking sides, Silmore. I am discussing the whole question impersonally. You consider that Dorkins owes you everything you have received and more for being the cause of bringing you here. I might make the same claim myself. But, on the other hand, it is quite certain that Dorkins did not want us on the trip. Doubtless he would have been more pleased if he could have left us behind."

Yes, but he was the cause "

" Indirectly, yes—he was the cause. Again, the meeting that kept you late that night might also be considered the cause. Dorkins also was engaged upon an undertaking, and in the chain of circumstances which followed you and I became unwilling links. But there was no actual design on Dorkins' part as far as we personally were concerned. If Dorkins had adhered to the character you give him we would have been quietly dropped overboard. We were awkward witnesses, and certainly in the road. Yet he treated us decently, giving us a share of all he had after our voyage of adventure had commenced. Allowing that he is responsible for our well-being, you must at least give him credit for this, that so far as his actual relationship with us is concerned, he acted in a manly way. Even after we had been cast upon the island, when it might have been a case of every man for himself, he was prepared to share all with us on a recognition of equality in misfortune. I admit that this mystifies me. There is something in the man which I cannot understand. And I must say there are times when I cannot help admiring him. Really it seems to me that you can only blame yourself for the way things turned out, owing to the unreasonable position you took up."

Angry and indignant, and seeing that there was no use in continuing the discussion with this stubborn man, I turned and walked away in silence.

Cable also remained silent, and we wandered along somewhat aimlessly in our search for water.

Certainly our explorations had not begun under happy auspices, and for a time silence continued. I would not have been surprised if, after what had passed. Cable had deserted me, but I must admit that in that respect he acted a good part, and after my temper had cooled down a little and I ventured to address him, he replied as if nothing had happened.

Indeed, he naturally took the lead in our search, and through the whole day we wandered over those desolate hills in our anxious search, but, alas, without success.

Cable's prophecy proved only too true.

In that barren range there was no sign of water, no sign of life, only unutterable barrenness..

As the afternoon passed away I felt my heart sink in miserable apprehension. I saw that I was in Dor—kins's power, and the prospect was appalling.

At last, as it was getting dark, Cable suggested that it was time we retraced our steps, and we wearily made our way back to the cave.

When we entered, Dorkins was lying on his bunk reading the pamphlet, which I had, by this time, come to detest the sight of, although I had been very proud of it in the past.

An appetising odor of food spread throughout the cave, for he had prepared the evening meal, which was set out on the rough table.

As in the morning, a portion was there for me, but there were only two shells placed alongside the half—bucket of boiling tea.

Dorkins did not say anything when we entered, although I noticed he looked keenly at me, and no doubt read the result of our search in my woebegone visage. We sat down at the table, but I found that I could eat practically nothing, for I was again consumed with all the horrible pangs of thirst.

I could see that Cable felt his position keenly, and before the meal was over, seeing that I had scarcely touched my food, he at last made an appeal to Dorkins. But the latter was relentless.

He knows my terms," he said coldly.

Then, with an irritating smile, he looked at me and started again to quote from that miserable address, but this was too much for any man to stand, and, losing all control of myself, and half-maddened by my deplorable condition, I sprang up and rushed out of the cave as I cried:

Oh, curse you and the pamphlet both!"

1.54 CHAPTER XXVII

1.55 A WAY OUT.

I had very little sleep that night, and in the morning my sufferings were awful.

At breakfast the same order of things was observed as the previous night, and again I found myself unable to eat. Added to the torments I was enduring was the humiliating knowledge of the absurd position I was in.

Water was within my grasp, but I must pay a monstrous price for it. I must yield a fortune for a commodity I had so frequently and carelessly wasted. It was the height of absurdity, yet nature kept telling me more and more vigorously every moment that it was the most serious piece of business I had ever encountered in my life.

Would Dorkins let me die of thirst?

Wouldn't Cable intervene to save me? But that this would not be too easy was soon made apparent. He did indeed make an attempt to divide his drinking water with me, but was instantly stopped by Dorkins,

Do it," he said, and afterwards your own supply will be cut off!"

Cable thereupon realised the futility of openly helping me. Would he contrive means to do so secretly? I kept asking myself.

I felt that I could never go through what I had previously endured and live.

As hour passed slowly after hour and my *cra^ni* became greater and greater, I began to feel myself yielding.

The price seemed to become smaller and still smaller as my need grew greater.

But I believe I would have held out to the last had not a sudden thought occurred to me which caused me to laugh out aloud in spite of my suffering. No doubt if the others heard me they would be satisfied that I was delirious. I can see myself even now. I was sitting on the side of a ledge near the bottom of the cliff with my head bowed in my hands, gazing moodily at the shore. Suddenly I sat up, and, smacking my hands on my knees, gave a loud laugh. It was the reaction. Like a flash came upon me the absurdity of Dorkins's proposition that he could rob me in this manner, I marvelled that it had not struck me before; that I should ever have taken the matter seriously. How could this man hope to gain possession of my money or interests, by any act or deed committed on this island under such circumstances ? More likely, in— deed, that he would be cooling his heels in a prison cell. .When we returned to civilization—and, strange as it may seem, I had up to this stage been absolutely con— fident that we should do so—I could hand the man over to justice before he would be able to benefit by his extortions, and so I chuckled to myself as I decided to pretend to keep up the farce, and appear to give way only after a struggle. Yet I felt almost angry with myself for having endured all this suffering when such an easy solution was at hand.

Inwardly jubilant, I walked back to the cave, apparently in a state of the deepest dejection. Dorkins was sitting at the mouth, but took no notice when I came up. I stood near him for a few moments before I spoke. Cable was watching the pair of us intently, and the silence seemed fraught with possibilities. At last I spoke:

Will nothing alter your terms?" I asked.

Nothing!" he answered.

I pretended to hesitate, and at last said, in the most melancholy tone, that I would do as he wished.

Dorkins got up, and, walking into the cave, placed a sea—shell on the table. It was filled with a dark— looking mixture, which I found he had manufactured from some ashes, water, and a little fishes' blood.

This will do for ink," he said. He produced a quill made from the feather of an albatross, which he had picked up on the beach. Then he took that miserable pamphlet out of his pocket. The inside of the thick cover was plain, as well as the fly leaf.

On this he wrote a short but well—worded agreement by which I undertook, in consideration of value received, to pay in coin or specie for commodity as he desired the sum of twenty thousand pounds to Dorkins. It also stipulated that no act of mine in the future was to render it null and void. I agreed to sign this as requested, at the same time laughing to myself at its pomposity. I was satisfied that such a document would be quite valueless when the surrounding facts were placed before a law court. In any case, I reasoned, if Dorkins returned to Sydney to claim its fulfilment the police would be ready to claim an acquaintance with him. I had not forgotten the man he threw into the harbor, and I knew some dark tragedy lay behind this.

I reckon this will do/" said Dorkins, and as he spoke I wondered that Cable had ever called this man clever. You'll witness this, Cable," he added.

But before this ridiculous document was signed he poured me out a long draught of water.

1.56 CHAPTER XXVIII

1.57 DORKINS ON CONDUCT.

I signed the paper, Cable acting as witness.

If we should ever return to civilisation/" said Dorkins, folding the document very deliberately

and eyeing me fixedly, you will have quite forgotten the circumstances under which we became acquainted, and will not in any way hinder my enjoyment of this sudden stroke of good fortune?"

He did not remove his gaze an instant as he awaited my reply. The man might have been reading my thoughts.

"It will be difficult to forget," I answered evasively.

"But not to refrain from using your knowledge to my disadvantage?"

"Why do you not put the same question to Cable?" I asked, after a moment's consideration.

"It is not necessary," Dorkins responded quietly.

"So you trust Cable, but do not trust me?"

"Am I not showing a great deal of trust in offer—ing to be satisfied merely with your word?"

"You certainly do place a great deal of reliance on my word of honor."

"Because, Silmore," responded Dorkins with a strange smile, "you are one of those curious products of civilisation who have a cast-iron sense of honor up to a certain point. You live according to a certain code, and you are quite satisfied that it is the right and only one. Where your line of integrity is clearly defined, as in the case of your word of honor, the payment of your debts, and your duty to your wife and children, you are principle personified. But outside your little book of rules you are petty and ignorant—you lie and thief as much as anyone who openly professes to live by those means.*"

Sir! This is too much! Cable, I appeal to you for protection "

Dorkins proceeded, undeterred by my interruption, "The strange part,"* he said, "is that you are so utterly blind and so thoroughly imbued with the idea that you are a privileged mortal, that you become perfectly horrified at the suggestion of criminality. You never for a moment stop to think that there are thousands of other beings who need the earth and the fruits thereof as much as you do. In other words, you never get down to the basic principles of natural law. You preach about the survival of the fittest, and yet, stripped of your artificial power—money—you are as helpless as a child. With money you buy other people's brains to make you richer than you are or ever need to be, and to cripple your fellow-beings in their struggle for existence. A thousand books are in print which could convict you of crime, but you never read them, and if you did, you would never understand them. Hundreds of pens are now busy holding such men as L. you up to ridicule—showing you up as worse than the savage who preys only upon his natural enemies, and struggles gamely with the elements. And I believe that ridicule will do more than anything to bring your kind to its true level. When the advanced thinkers of the world have had their laugh at you, when the anarchist realises that the bombshells which hurt most are those which hold up to ridicule your little vanities, your petty tyrannies, your smug self-satisfaction, your attempts to conciliate conscience, and your weakness in the real vital things of life—then you will cease to value the power, luxury, and empty show which you purchase with the life's blood of thousands of others, and then it is possible that you will be glad to agree to a more humane form of existence and a nobler standard of merit."

Dorkins was quite carried away by his own little outburst, which was accompanied with gesticulations rendered familiar to me by Domain orators.

"If you think so little of the power of wealth you take remarkable means of showing it," I retorted. "** I have not seen your contempt for money take any practical form yet."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me on that point," Dorkins replied. "I am not at all blind to the value of money, and I have furnished sufficient evidence that I take all I can get. But I, too, have my book of rules. Only the scope of mine is infinitely wider than that of yours."

I should like to know something of your rules, Dorkins/' said Cable, who had been sitting idly by. I did not like the friendliness of his tone.

Dorkins sat on a ledge of rock, dangling his legs, and reflected.

After all,*' he said, "I suppose we are all the creatures of environment. I am only an excrescence—a creature of revolution. Owning no particular community, I have been able

to look unbiassed into the ways of all. My first lesson in life I got through my father. He was killed before my eyes, mangled in a machine. The sight has always been before me. When I was old enough to understand the reason of the accident, I found that if it had not been for the greed of his employers, and their callousness for the lives of the men who did their work, it would not have happened. Years afterwards I did a little towards paying them back. I stole a brig belonging to them, and in a cynical mood called her the 'Queen of Virtue.' My second great lesson of life was taught me at the age of twelve, when I saw my mother slowly poisoned to death by the foul air of a factory in which she earned the most miserable pittance. I then concluded that there was something wrong about life. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but a woman who thought she was charitable referred me to a Sunday school for information. Somehow I felt out of place. The teachings were all right for the nice, well-dressed boys, but they didn't seem to meet my case. I was eventually turned out for blasphemy. This caused an argument between myself and the charitable lady who intended to adopt me. Fortunately for her I cleared out, went to sea, and, with the exception of one unavoidable stay at Sing Sing, have been roaming round the world ever since. I have found that it is not such a bad world after all. I have enjoyed life—the life which is called 'devil-may-care,' but is really the simple satisfaction one can find in the gifts of the gods if one takes things as they come and makes the best of them. You smile. You cannot get it out of your little minds that I am a professed thief, and you are wondering how any man can live in contentment who has that on his conscience, as well as the fear of being caught. In the matter of conscience I have never felt uneasy. I have never stolen from the poor, I have never robbed any good man of his earnings, I have never deliberately or knowingly injured a living soul. And, moreover, I have never stolen any but stolen goods. That may not justify stealing, but it is one of the rules from my book, and it may possibly be as good as any of Silmore's. You must remember that I learned when very young that it was impossible for me to exist under the laws which govern modern society. I felt that it would have been cowardly to calmly acquiesce in a system which had brutally robbed me of both father and mother. Rebellion was to me what duty is to you. At the same time, I have no grudge whatever against humanity, for I recognise that all—kings and peasants, despots and demagogues—have a common enemy in the money system. Once, on a goldfield in Colorado, I saw a man, unclean in mind, body, and soul, stumble upon a nugget and become suddenly rich. He was a man that even I would not have associated with. But to-day he is regarded as a desirable member of society. On another occasion I encountered a woman of the worst class, who had to my knowledge sent good men to hell—a woman in whom crime was a disease. Suddenly she won a fortune in a lottery, and is now married to a man who is showing her round the best resorts of Europe. Is the system right by which the merest chance can lift the most degraded to the level of the most worthy—the greatest failures to the same plane as the most successful? The man and woman I have mentioned, Silmore, are to-day your social equals. If you go abroad you may encounter them in the best hotels, in the finest salons, or in the most fashionable homes. The man's arm may some day be around your daughter's waist at a swell dance; the woman may have an opportunity of exchanging confidences with her. And there are many such, Silmore—but, thank heaven, they mix in your circles of society—not mine."

Whether it was the reference to my dear daughter, whether I was maddened by these outrageous remarks, or whether I was suffering from severe nervous tension, I do not know, but with a sudden bound I sprang at the man with more fury than I had ever experienced in my life, and caught him by the throat.

"** You scoundrel—you low wretch—you dare to speak to me like this!" I cried furiously. But before I could utter another word I was lying on the ground in Dorkins's grasp. Cable made a movement as though to protect me, but Dorkins waved him aside.

"I shan't hurt him," he said. "It's always a bit rough on a fellow when these home truths come to him so late in life. It's the truth that's hurting him, but he'll soon get over it."

1.58 CHAPTER XXIX

1.59 SILMORE'S DEJECTION.

It was two or three days before I spoke to Dorkins again. In the meantime he and Cable were busy break— ing up huge boulders of rock into portable stones, which they carried across to a spot in the shelter of the hills. Cable said they intended to build a place to which we could retreat in the event of a hurricane, since the cave was too exposed to the sea. Dorkins had other ideas for ensuring their safety and comfort, and Cable hinted that as there was plenty to do for a long time, I had better join them and give whatever assistance I could. But for various reasons I refused.

Then the days began to drag fearfully. The awful dread that I might have to pass the rest of my days in this place at the mercy of Dorkins became so fixed on my mind that I could think of nothing else. And so my nerves slowly gave way. I became the victim of the greatest despondency. More and more I avoided my companions. At last I even ate my meals alone, for as the others returned from their labors their unwonted cheerfulness irritated me terribly. All day long I dragged myself about listlessly, or lay on the narrow strip of sand gazing across the sea. Would I never see my own again? Was I to die in this awful spot, when my family had the means to send a hundred 175 steamers to bring me home if they only knew? So time dragged on.

Weariness and monotony.

Despair to the verge of delirium. '

Oh God, would it never end?

• • • • •

Cable stood over me. Eat," he said. I obeyed.

You will break down completely if you go on like this," said Cable. So far it is nothing but hys— teria. You need something to occupy your mind."

For some time I did not reply. Then, with all the strength that Avas in me, I roused myself as Dorkins and Cable were setting out for the hills again.

I went up to Dorkins, and, pointing to a rough pick which he held in his hand, I said: If you will make me one of those I would like to lend a hand,"

There was no sign of triumph in his manner as he replied: ** To—morrow."

1.60 CHAPTER XXX

1.61 A HOPE OF ESCAPE.

But when this work was finished, and there was nothing to do, the days passed very slowly and monotonously. I was almost in a state of collapse, taking little interest in what was going on, and spent most of my time on the seashore, filled with melancholy reflections.

My companions, being more active, divided their time between fishing and exploring the island. Some— times, taking a supply of provisions with them, they would disappear for the whole day, returning in the evening weary and despondent. From what they told me I learned that the island on which we had been cast was of greater extent than we had thought. It was very rough, being a volcanic formation, and abso— lutely barren. In Cable's opinion the island was the result of an eruption of comparatively recent years. They had climbed some of the highest peaks, and had found that the other side of the island consisted of a rocky coastal line similar to the one we were on.

What they expected to find I did not exactly understand, and I really think their journeys were made more to pass time than for any other reason. Dorkins made casual references to discovering a goldmine and getting me to float it, but I believe this was a thought— less jest.

One morning Dorkins went off by himself, as Cable was not feeling very well, and had decided to stop in the cave and rest. The day passed very quietly, for we had little to say to one another.

It was late in the evening when Dorkins returned. I noticed a change in his appearance, and he seemed laboring under some sort of repressed excitement. He was generally of such cool demeanor that one naturally noticed this. However, he said nothing except to make an inquiry after Cable's health, and our evening meal passed without any conversation, although I noticed that Cable was also keenly watching Dorkins. Like myself, he had evidently observed something unusual.

When he had finished, Dorkins lit a cigar, and walked out of the cave, and sat down on his favorite seat near the entrance, gazing steadily out to sea.

He was evidently meditating very deeply. Cable and I remained in the cave quietly smoking, but we could not help casting many curious glances at the silent figure of our companion. It must have been about an hour later that Dorkins got up as if he had come to a determination, and walked slowly into the cave. He came over and sat down at the table, with his elbows resting on it and his chin on his folded hands, and looked steadily over at me for a few moments, while I wondered what was going to happen now. At last he said, very quietly, and with a half smile at the corner of his mouth:

"What would you give to get back to Sydney, Silmore?"

I sat up on my bunk in an excited manner, for I felt that something lay behind his quiet manner.

"What do you mean?" I asked in a trembling voice, while Cable also leant forward, eagerly waiting for the reply.

"What I say," was the answer. "What would you give to go back to Sydney?" Good

God, man!" I cried—"don't torture me. I would give all I possess," I added with a burst of passion, "to be back in my old home now. To think that in the sunset of my life I should be doomed to such awful privation is enough to drive me mad." And I fell back on my couch, burying my face in the rough sail covering, with my arms stretched before me. Somehow his unexpected question had completely unhinged me, and I quite lost control of my feelings. A vision had come before me of all I had lost. In a flash I could see my old life, my happy home, my friends in business, in the city, and in the club, the interesting hours passed in my office, and the thousand and one little things which go to make life dear, but which we so little appreciate until we have lost them. Was it any wonder that, after all I had gone through, I broke down at the thought of it all?

Dorkins, however, said nothing, but waited till I had recovered from my rather womanish outbreak, of which I felt a little ashamed; then he remarked, very quietly, "It will not cost you that much, although I am glad to learn that it would be so valuable to you, for it will certainly cost you something!"

What the devil are you driving at, Dorkins?"* interjected Cable irritably. You know this is no time for acting the fool, when we have all about come to the end of our endurance. Do you really mean to say you think there is a chance of getting out of this cursed hole?"

Yes—I believe there is," was the quiet reply.

1.62 CHAPTER XXXI

1.63 DORKINS'S TERMS.

Cable and I sprang to our feet, staring at him in a wild state of excitement.

What* we cried with one voice. A chance of escape

I think so/' he replied, ** but don't forget I only said a chance. But first, before I tell you any more, I have certain propositions to make."

He stopped for a moment while we watched him anxiously, and there was a tinge of impatience in my tone as I said, Well, what are they?"

I said there was a chance of our getting away from this island, and I believe there is. But there are terms to be arranged first. Some time ago, Silmore, you signed an agreement with me. No doubt when you did so you knew as well as I did that in a sense it was not worth the

paper it was written on," and he smiled satirically, while I flushed with vexation. " However," he added, " it served my purpose for the time being. But I quite intend that you shall pay that twenty thousand pounds. Therefore, before I tell you any more, I am going to write a letter addressed to your manager or secretary or whatever he is, which you will have to sign."

I turned away in angry disappointment, exclaim— ing, Oh, I suppose this is some infernal hoax. Some 181 so—calle'd jest of yours. I do not believe you have dis— covered anything/'

Does this look like it?" I turned quickly at the note of triumph in his voice.

Dorkins put his hand inside the front of his shirt, and to the immense amazement of Cable and myself, he pulled out several sheets of fine, clean writing paper, and a handsome fountain pen, together with a small piece of blotting paper, all of which he put quietly down on the table before him, without a word.

We stared at these portentous tokens, unable to find words to express our surprise.

" I don't think you can believe that there is no— thing in what I say when you see these," said Dorkins quietly. " They are solid signs of civilisation. Of the world," he added, looking at me, " which you would give all you possessed to get back to."

We remained silent, but the hope dawning in our hearts was reflected in our faces.,

" Now," said Dorkins, " I will write this letter. Who am I to send it to? Who has charge of your affairs?"

I hesitated for a moment, but the thought of pos— sible release overshadowed all else, and I answered a little huskily:

" Robert Grabbit."

Dorkins wrote busily for a few minutes, then passed the sheet of paper over to me. It was a letter addressed to Grabbit, telling him I was alive, but that before I could be returned to him diamonds to the value to £20,000 would have to be paid over. It also arranged a meeting—place.

' Diamonds I asked, looking at Dorkins in as— tonishment.

~Certainly,he replied; ~the only things that ean^t be traced."

I felt that this man was not such a fool after all.

I signed the letter without any demur. Dorkins blotted it, and after reading it carefully through, pro— duced a parchment envelope from inside his shirt, and put the sheet of paper in it.

Now," he said, turning to Cable, ~that is Mr. Silmore's share. But I have a proposition to make to you."

Cable looked at him questioningly.

~I have found you a man, Mr. Cable, in every sense of the word," Dorkins continued, in rather a formal tone. ~I want no written guarantee from you; I simply want your word of honor."

" For what?" asked Cable.

** That you will not interfere with my obtaining the fulfilment of the terms of that letter which has just been signed; and, furthermore, that you will help me

In what?" interrupted Cable, rather indignantly.

Don't misunderstand me. It is rather hard for me to explain at present, but the fact is that we can— not return to civilisation without the help of your pro— fessional knowledge. It might altogether depend upon that. But at present you cannot return at all, so that balances matters. What I ask of you is that if I give you the means of returning home you will give me the benefit of your knowledge in the interests of all of us, until Silmore has completed his bargain."

Cable hesitated and looked at me.

" Really/' he said, after a long pause, " I don't know what to make of all this. I certainly do not wish to join in any sort of attack on Mr. Silmore, but I am sure both of us want to get home. After all, it is really a business matter between you two. What do you think, Mr. Silmore?" and he turned to me with a troubled look on his face.

"Mr. Cable," I said, slowly and solemnly, "I want to go home."

A look of relief passed over Cable's face. He turned to Dorkins, and, putting out his hand, said: "It's a bargain."

Dorkins took the proffered hand with one of his happiest smiles, ejaculating: " Good business!"

The two of us, who had been standing up, resumed our seats, and looked at Dorkins. For my part I was simply burning with curiosity, and no doubt the same feeling possessed Cable. Dorkins, in the most aggravating way, took a cigar, bit the end off it, lit it at the rough oil lamp we had constructed, and took three or four deliberate puffs. I felt as if I could have got up and kicked him, for it was evident that he was really enjoying the situation. At last he commenced to speak.

1.64 CHAPTER XXXII

1.65 THE MEANS OF ESCAPE.

When I left you this morning/' said Dorkins, I started out with no very definite idea of where I was going. During the last few days Cable and I, between us, have pretty well explored most of the nooks in this island home of ours. As you know, we climbed about the highest peak to see what was on the other side, and got little for our reward. But there is another peak about half a mile away which we had not ascended, and, more to pass time than anything else, I resolved to do so to-day, little dreaming what I would discover. I toiled up the side of the mountain, reaching a spur near the top about midday, and there I camped to have my lunch. About half an hour or so afterwards I continued my journey, although I had hesitated for some time as to whether I would not turn back to the camp. However, I decided to go on, having so nearly completed the ascent, and I can honestly say that there are few resolutions in my life which were so fortunate. As I got near I found the top of the peak was very rough, and apparently rather flat. I was working round the side of the top. A big boulder partially blocked the view in front of me, but I could see from the contour of the land that there was evidently a large basin on the top of the peak, of the kind so common in volcanic countries. I stepped M 185 round the boulder, and a second after gave a yell of involuntary surprise.

Almost over the middle of the basin, lying perfectly still in the air, I saw an extraordinary contrivance which looked half like a balloon and half like a ship. A monster sort of balloon shaped like a cigar was floating in the air, attached, by numerous ropes and other contrivances, to what looked like a sharp-pointed motor-boat with a gigantic propeller projecting at the stern, and several blades, shaped something like wings, at the sides. I realised at once that this was an air-ship, for I had seen Dumont make one of his famous trials in Paris.

~It was attached by a stout rope to some of the great rocks below. Instinctively I glanced round eagerly for the owner of this strange-looking craft. There was not a soul in sight; the place was absolutely deserted. The only sign of life was a huge eagle which soared gracefully in the air, slowly circling round the airship, hardly moving its great wings, and with its cruel beak outstretched as if challenging this unknown aerial monster to battle for the supremacy of the sky. I don't know much about air-ships, gentlemen, but a shudder ran through me as I thought that if this huge brute should chance to tear the silken covering of that balloon with his beak or claws, our hope of escape would be gone. The bird was taking no notice of me, although only some twenty or thirty feet away. Nervously I drew out my revolver, and took deliberate aim at it. For about the first time I discovered that I had nerves. My hand trembled like that of a woman handling a toy gun.

The possibility flashed through my mind that I might, by cruel fate, lodge a bullet in the balloon itself, for the bird was only a few feet from it. Ee-covering myself, with a laugh at such nervousness, I got the bead on him as he floated gracefully over my head, and let drive. The eagle gave a convulsive spring in mid-air, then dropped like a lump of lead into the bottom of the basin. That danger over, I rushed eagerly forward to the rope that was holding the balloon down, and then found that it was not, as I thought, tied to the rocks, but had evidently caught by chance between two great masses of stone. Then I noticed several other ropes hanging from

the airship, some with jagged ends, and I understood that this was a derelict that had somehow broken loose from its fastening and, by stray winds and air—currents, been driven across the island. The end of one of the ropes, by a lucky stroke of fortune for us, catching in a crack in the rocks, had been held fast, and, the weather being mild, it was apparently unharmed.

“I lost no time in making fast the rope to avoid it becoming loose by any mischance, and I also man—aged with some effort to similarly fasten some of the other ropes. My first impulse was to return to you with the glorious news, but, unable to restrain my curiosity, I managed to clamber up the rope and get into the ship. I found it was beautifully fitted up. The machinery was all in perfect order as far as I could see, being carefully protected with waterproof coverings, which, although loosened in places during its wandering voyage, had not been removed. I did not interfere with these, contenting myself with leav—ing them to friend Cable to examine, as he would un—derstand them better than I do. Standing cautiously on the narrow deck of the ship, I saw that it was fitted up with lockers all round the side. I opened these. In some I found there were a plentiful supply of heavy winter coats, rugs, and blankets. In another there were a fine lot of instruments, somewhat similar to those used at sea, and in a third locker I found these writing materials. Taking these, I made my return back to the cave. You know the result, and now understand, no doubt, the meaning of my terms.*”

Dorkins stopped speaking, and Cable and I looked at each other in speechless wonder. Truly it was a strange, incredible story we had heard, and had it not been for the silent evidence before us, in the shape of the writing material and neat pen, I would have thought I was dreaming. Indeed, it seemed too good to be true.

To escape: to be free!

Never before have I realised what the open door of the cage meant to the prisoned bird; the exquisite pleasure of a stretch of glorious sky to the felon step—ping from the prison cell; the superb ecstasy of free—dom. For we were prisoners as much as any criminal that had ever been sentenced to penal servitude, and a touch of common sorrow brings wondrous sympathy.

My joy was rudely disturbed by Dorkins, who, after a long pause, said:

Of course, we must not build up our hopes too much. As far as I know, this airship is in order, but will we be able to manage it?”

If it is in order,” answered Cable, who had listened with visible excitement to Dorkins’s narrative, I think I will be able to do this. I have studied aerial navigation for years.”

For the first time Dorkins showed signs of excite—ment, as he said: “By Jove, I was hoping for some—thing like that!”

As for me, I could only look at Cable with feelings of unqualified delight.

Well,” continued Dorkins, the next thing is bed. Let us get some rest, and make an early start in the morning over to our lucky find, when Cable can get to work and see if it is going to be our salvation.”

We agreed that that was our wisest course, and accordingly sought our bunks and tried to find sleep. But, for me, rest was out of the question, for the ex—traordinary development had aroused such cheerful anticipations in my mind, that I could not still my thoughts. But I did not regret the loss, for I passed the silent hours of the night in pleasant reverie.

It was the happiest moment I had spent since I had stepped on the “Cowra” on that eventful night which seemed so long ago.

I would not allow myself to believe that it was possible for my hopes to be disappointed.

1.66 CHAPTER XXXIII

1.67 GETTING AWAY.

We were all up before daybreak the following morning, nor did we waste much time over breakfast.

As soon as we had finished that meal, we started off inland, Dorkins leading the way. Some

four hours afterwards we came to the basin on top of the mountain, and there found the airship he had described.

Cable climbed up the rope into the vessel, and was soon busily engaged examining it.

"Jerusalem," he cried joyously, "it's 'La Belle France,' the airship which broke away during a trial in Paris. Of all the marvels "

Dorkins and myself, although I am afraid I was not very useful, put in some time making a rope ladder with some of the rigging cast up from the wreck of the "Queen of Virtue" and a couple of ropes which Cable cast off the airship. When we had finished this Dorkins tied it on to one of the ropes that was hanging down from the ship, and Cable pulled it up. It was long enough to reach the ground, and Dorkins promptly climbed up this new ladder to the ship. He asked me to go up first, assuring me that it was quite safe; but my nerves failed me, and I resolved to leave this experience till necessity compelled me to undergo it. So I sat on the edge of the basin gazing idly at the men busy in the ship. It was now a couple of hours since 190 we had arrived, and I began to experience some anxiety as to whether Cable would be able to manipulate the machinery.

After a time, however, I heard a whirring sound, something like the engine of a motor boat, and noticed that the ship that had been lying almost motionless in the air began to vibrate violently. Cable leant over the side, and sang out in a cheery voice: "I fancy we've got her going all right. Do you think you could unfasten those ropes "

I nodded assent, and, going over, after considerable trouble managed the unfastening. But I was unable to release the rope that had caught in the rocks, so they were compelled to let it go at the other end.

Almost immediately afterwards the boat dipped slightly, the propeller at its stern revolved steadily, the blades at the side began moving with a motion something like the oars of a boat, only more up and down, and the ship then started mounting steadily upwards. It was a most impressive sight, and as the vessel sailed steadily across the mountain I simply yelled with delight, stumbling along after her like an excited school-boy. As she grew gradually away, however, my joy turned to fear at the prospect of perhaps being left behind. But I remembered Cable, and felt reassured. Nevertheless I felt relieved when the airship came back to where I was, and, Cable having stopped it not far from the ground, Dorkins climbed down the rope ladder and joined me.

"We will walk back to the cave," he said, while Cable takes the ship over to the shore."

On the way home Dorkins told me that there were a splendid lot of instruments on the boat, and that he and Cable had been taking readings of the sun, and had a pretty good idea where we were. As we trudged along, the airship slowly floated away up over our heads. I walked with easy footsteps, for my heart was light. "We arrived at the cave about sundown, and soon had the airship fastened securely to the rocks.

Over our evening meal we discussed plans for the future, and it was decided that, as Cable was satisfied the ship was in working order, we would take our chance and get away the next day. We retired to rest early, and, to avoid any accidents, Dorkins and Cable decided to sleep in the ship. I was too excited to go to sleep for a time, although very tired, and a couple of times during the night I could not resist walking out to the front of the cave to make sure that the craft was there. Very strange and eerie did she look lying motionless in the air.

The sun was rising slowly over the sea the following morning when, having carefully put all our provisions on board, I climbed the ladder while Dorkins held it tight. He then untied the ropes, gave a final look round to see that we had forgotten nothing, and then followed me up the ladder, which he pulled up after him.

"Now, Silmore, make yourself comfortable. You'll find a warm coat and plenty of rugs and blankets here. We are also carrying plenty of water," he added with a grin, for we were all in the heartiest of spirits, "and Cable tells me that with economy and some favoring winds we should have oil enough to get back to Australia/"

Then he leant over the side of the ship, and sang out with a laugh: " Good—bye, old island. May I never see you again."

I cordially echoed the wish.

We had embarked upon our strange voyage through the air.

1.68 CHAPTER XXXIV

1.69 LIGHTS IN THE DISTANCE.

The aeroplane rose slowly, moving forward at the same time, and thus rising on the long incline.

The sensation was not unpleasant, excepting for the vibration of the delicate boat with the force of the machinery. When it dipped downward, however, it gave one a sickly feeling for a moment, very similar to that experienced when a lift goes down suddenly.

We slowly rose some hundreds of feet in the air, and, looking down, the island which had been our prison, seemed only a small black speck.

We continued to rise, and I gradually began to feel the effect of the atmosphere we were now in. Breath—ing became almost painful, and I could feel the blood pounding through my veins and throbbing in my brain until I had a violent headache.

I glanced over the side once, but did not repeat that performance. I could hardly distinguish anything down below, for we were now soaring away among the clouds, and looking over created a nausea and an extreme giddiness. I noticed that both my companions were also affected by the unusual atmospheric environ—ment, but not to the same extent as myself.

Gradually, however, as the hours passed my system seemed to accommodate itself to the change, and I felt more comfortable.

Returning vitality brought with it, to an extent, an enjoyment of our novel situation. Certainly I had never anticipated travelling in an airship, but after my experience I make bold to say that the future will see this mode of transit very popular. The only dis—agreeable thing was the intense cold, and, had we not found the airship well supplied with blankets and rugs, we would have been, I fear, in a grievous plight. As it was, during the night time, the cold was simply awful, and we were nearly frozen the first night out. It was not until nearly midday, when we got warmer sur—roundings, that I became sure that I had not lost the use of my hands and feet.

Can you wonder, gentlemen, that when I look back on the past few weeks I feel as if I had passed through some hideous nightmare. The extraordinary cruise on the "Queen of Virtue," following on the still more extraordinary departure from Sydney; the awful inci—dent on that terrible island, and then the strange voyage above the clouds.

I think that the last experience, although the most extraordinary, was also the most endurable. Above all, there was the glorious feeling that I was returning home, and I felt that that was worth any course or any trial. As the aeroplane raced swiftly through the clouds, it was ecstasy to know that the miles were rapidly lessening between us and home, and I could see that my feelings in that respect also applied to Cable.

That gentleman seemed to have no difficulty in controlling the vessel, and I could see that he was faithfully fulfilling his bargain with Dorkins by fully explaining to that individual the mechanism and how to manage the aeroplane. He evidently proved an apt pupil, for the next day he drove the concern himself. They appeared to have no doubt as to the way they were travelling, which Cable informed me was owing to the magnificent collection of instruments on board.

About two days after we had left the island, just towards sundown, I noticed them taking careful obser—vations, and shortly afterwards looking eagerly over the side of the ship.

Dorkins turned to me with a strange smile as he said: "How would you like to be down there, Silmorer?"

I looked over the side, for by this time I had be—come more accustomed to the sensation,

but all I could see was a mass of tiny twinkling lights peeping up through a dull haze far down below us. I gazed at them without comprehension for a time, then asked: What is it?

"Sydney," was the answer.

Sydney!

My heart seemed to give a great bound as I leant over the side and gazed at those lights, which were becoming dimmer and dimmer. To think that that was home. That down there were my friends and dear ones blissfully unconscious that I was sailing over their heads embarked on such an extraordinary adventure.

My emotion was too strong for words, and I could only sit with my head resting on my hands, sadly watching the disappearing lights.

The others respected my silence. No doubt Cable shared my feelings, although I wondered for a time that he did not risk everything and let the vessel sink down to earth. But he had given his word, and I was learning that there were men whose word of honor was indeed more sacred than any written bond, irrespective of the circumstances in which it was given.

Dorkins had truly shown that he knew his man.

When the city lights had totally vanished, and only dark irregular shadows outlined the earth below us, Dorkins turned to me and said, "Never mind, Silmore; you'll be back there in four days' time, unless Grabbit is a fool."

We went steadily along, heading in a westerly direction, and I could see we were going inland. About midnight I felt the boat slowly ascending, and was soon able to distinguish what seemed to be mountains just below us. For a time we went very slowly straight ahead, Dorkins and Cable watching carefully over the side. We now seemed only a hundred feet from the top of these hills. Suddenly I saw a glare in the sky, and, looking down, could see several big fires. The atmosphere was very smoky, and a few sparks floated up past us. Cable started to circle the boat round gradually, and in answer to my inquiring looks Dorkins said: "This is Lithgow."

I understood then that the fire I had seen came from the furnaces. We circled back round the top of the mountain, gradually getting nearer to the surface, and at last the airship stopped, swaying slightly in the breeze.

Shortly afterwards I heard the whistle of an engine, and, looking downward, could see a train slowly puffing up the Zig Zag. The sight below us was really a magnificent one, with the glare of the furnaces, the sparks and rose-colored smoke pouring out of the funnels of the engines, the lights of the carriages all standing out visibly in the darkness of the night, the whole surrounded with the rugged outline of the hills. The train got to the top, and then with a scream started racing down on its journey to Sydney, and again I felt a wrench at my heart as I thought of the joy I would have had in being one of its passengers.

When the train had disappeared Dorkins carefully dropped the rope ladder over the side of the aeroplane, and, after a few whispered words with Cable, slowly descended. A little later we heard a whistle, and Cable drew the ladder up into the ship.

He's gone to post that letter, he explained.

I looked at him for a few moments, and then said, not without some hesitation: "Why not go off and leave him?"

Cable looked at me with an angry frown.

I have made a bargain, Mr. Silmore, and I intend to keep it. Whether you are going to do the same is your business, not mine!"

I felt myself flushing hotly, for these men seemed to be continually putting me in the wrong.

But the whole thing has been done under compulsion," I retorted with some asperity. You know that as well as I do, Cable."

"Well, I should have thought that by this time Dorkins had satisfied you that there is mighty little in this world that is not done under compulsion. Anyhow, it's no good arguing about it. This ship is going to wait here till Dorkins returns."

I saw that it was futile to say any more, but I could not help thinking that Dorkins had been

remark— ably lucky in gaining such a partisan, for I thought that he would not find many men with such high ideas of honor. Reflecting over the matter since, however, I recognised that this was only another proof of the sagacity of this remarkable man. He had summed Cable up accurately. If he had not been satisfied it would have been comparatively easy for him to have made arrangements to safeguard against us playing him false

1.70 CHAPTEE XXXV.

1.71 THE IRE OP DOEKINS.

It must have been over an hour afterwards that we heard a peculiar whistle below us. Cable lowered the ladder again. I could see it tighten, and a few moments afterwards Dorkins clambered over the side of the airship.

There was a touch of admiration mingled with respect in his voice as he said to Cable: "I see you are true blue all right, old man. If there were more men in the world like you there would be less like me. Til bet old Silmore tried hard to shake your views of honor;" and he glanced at me contemptuously.

I felt a flush of shame come over my face. I was thankful that it was too dark for even Dorkins's keen eye to see it. But I said nothing, and Cable was also silent.

"Ah," continued Dorkins, "I guessed as much. It's hard luck for you, Silmore, that some men are honest. Anyhow, matters are well under way now, and old Grabbit will get the biggest shock he ever got in his life."

"He was not far out, either!" interjected Grabbit grimly.

Silmore gave a slight smile, and continued his narrative.

Cable started the ship going again, and we seemed to be heading in a northerly direction. We travelled all night and the next day at a steady pace, and I noticed that the temperature had got much milder. That night we repeated the performance of the previous evening. "We stopped again amongst some hills near a town which I learnt was Charters Towers, and Dorkins informed me when he returned that he had just sent another wire to keep old Grabbit moving.

Well, gentlemen, I will not tire you with tedious details of that journey, which was uneventful. They sent another telegram to my friend Mr. Grabbit from Cobar, where we went after leaving Charters Towers, and then headed south. It was about a week after we had left the island that one afternoon Dorkins said to me: "We should get rid of you to-night, Silmore, as the time is getting near now." We had got a good way down south, and it was very cold. Between four and five o'clock we were circling round about the Snowy Ranges.

It was a dull cold winter day, and the hills were covered with snow. It was the most dreary prospect I had ever seen. The ship had got down as low as Dorkins reckoned was safe without being seen, and he was now carefully examining the country below with a powerful glass he had found on board the ship.

Suddenly he leant forward a little, and then, drawing himself up viciously, exclaimed in angry tones: "By God, I thought as much! They have set a trap."

He turned and handed the glass to Cable, saying: "Look down there a little to the left." Cable did as he was directed, and I saw a disappointed look pass over his face.

Then Dorkins turned to me, and while holding the glass in one hand told me roughly to look through it. The ship was now perfectly still. At first I could distinguish nothing. Then the earth seemed to jump towards me. I could see a great mass of white snow with bare clumps of rock jutting out. Then I saw, a little distance away from the road, some men crouching down behind rocks.

"Look on the other side of the road," said Dorkins harshly. I did so, and saw another bunch of men in a similar position.

"What does it mean?" I faltered, although I had a strong suspicion of the truth.

Mean burst out Dorkins, who was angrier than I had ever seen him, and for the moment had lost his usual cool self-possession. "It means that your lovely Mr. Grabbit has been too

damned smart this time." He went quickly to the engine, and the next moment I felt the vessel rise suddenly and move away rapidly towards the west.

I was too surprised to say anything, although a feeling of horror came over me as I realised that I was being taken away from rescue.

Cable also sat silent, as if stunned, while Dorkins worked at the gear. When we had got well away Dorkins came over to me and cried savagely: So this is how you business people keep your bargains, is it? For very little I would throw you over the side down to your friends below there;" and he raised his hand threateningly.

I cowered back in fear, for I had never seen Dorkins in such a condition, and I must say that at that moment I wished most fervently that Mr. Grabbit had not attempted to capture my captors. I understood that it was done for the best, but to me, his idling in the stern of an airship some thousands of feet above the earth, Avitli a violent unprincipled man storming at me, and a prospect of an awful death, money seemed very little indeed, and I wished a thousand times over that it had been paid and I was safe on land. But wishes were of little avail at such a time.

When Dorkins came towards me, Cable rose from his seat, and, approaching him, caught his arm as he raised it, exclaiming:

"Steady, Dorkins, steady! Don't spill blood! It is not Silmore's fault."

Dorkins glared for a moment, then slowly dropped his arm, as he muttered, "Yes, that's right. I suppose he is not to blame."

He moved away from me, and I gave a sigh of relief as I recognized for the moment that actual bodily danger had passed.

"It's damned annoying, all the same," he continued. "I think we are all pretty well sick of this game, wandering about in an airship, but I can tell you straight that you don't get out of here till those diamonds are handed over."

I summoned up enough courage to stammer, "It is not my fault, Mr. Dorkins. God knows, I added passionately, I'll be glad enough to get out of this."

Dorkins made no response, but sat as if in deep thought near the engine, while the boat raced steadily along.

At last he got up, saying, "I think I know what to do." He went to the small locker near where I was sitting, and, bringing out the writing materials, commenced writing, using the seat as a table.

"When he had finished he handed it to me and said brusquely: "Here, sign that." I read what he had written. It was another letter to Grabbit, and I signed it, for of course I had no alternative, although I could see it was going to cost me another five thousand pounds.

"We'll go across country, where I will post this, and also send our friend Grabbit a telegram congratulating him on his clever plan," Dorkins said, sarcastically. We went across to Yass and posted the letter.

1.72 CHAPTER XXXVI

1.73 A CHANGE OF VIEW.

Three days afterwards we were at the head of the Murray among the hills near Tumbarumba.

My story is nearly finished. As it was getting dark we glided across the hills and slowly ascended till we were only a little above the road. The ladder was again brought into use, and Dorkins, who had evidently again made arrangements with Cable, got down from the ship on to the roadway.

The machine was then driven very slowly forward by Cable, after he had pulled the ladder up again. We were still keeping pretty low down, and seemed to be following the course of the road. After we had travelled a couple of miles we heard a sharp whistle.

Cable immediately started to make the vessel descend. We came lower and lower until it seemed to me we were almost touching the ground, then Cable stopped it. He threw the rope

over the side again, and, turning to me with a smile, said: "Now, Mr. Silmore. let us see how you can get down a ladder. Your journey has ended!"

I was almost overcome with excitement, and could hardly believe my ears. It seemed incredible that I could really be a free man. Recovering myself a little, I managed, with his assistance, to clamber down the rope.

I had only descended a few feet when I found that I was touching earth again. I stood for a moment half bewildered, peering round in the darkness.

I heard a voice call, "This way!"

Stumbling forward in that direction, I bumped into Dorkins, who was standing alongside another man.

You can imagine my intense joy when I saw that it was my dear old friend Grabbit. I could not speak. I could only take hold of his hands and wring them again and again, while Dorkins looked on without saying a word.

A few moments afterwards we heard Cable's voice above us calling to Dorkins.

"All right," was the reply; I'll be there in a moment."

Then he turned, looked at me for a moment in silence, and said slowly:

"Well, good—bye, Silmore. We have had a strange trip together. I don't suppose we will ever see each other again, but possibly we may remember one another for a good many years to come."

He hesitated for a moment, as if uncertain, then held out his hand. Governed by some strange impulse I almost unconsciously put my hand in his. He clasped it strongly for a moment, then turned and walked away in the direction of the airship.

A few minutes afterwards Cable joined us. He was strangely quiet.

Almost at the same moment I heard the whirr of the engines from the airship above.

We all turned in that direction, and could just discern a vague, shadowy outline in the darkness, but we heard a voice ring out in the clear night:

"Good—bye !"

The Honorable John Silmore stopped speaking, then gazed around him like a man emerging from a dream. As his recital had progressed he had seemed to gradually forget the place and presence he was in. Now he colored violently as he realised the extent of his confessions. An awkward pause followed. No one seemed disposed to break the silence. Grabbit alone appeared to realise that this was a business meeting, and that three or four hours had been spent in listening to the adventures of one of their number. It was he at last who brought the others to their senses by saying—

Gentlemen, I think Mr. Silmore has the sympathy of everyone present in his sufferings, and none of us can but admire the fortitude and bravery he has displayed under such terrible circumstances."

A murmur of assent ran round the room.

"And now I propose we proceed to business," he continued. "Every gentleman present knows the proposition before this meeting, and it has been too fully discussed already to need any further explanation. Plainly, gentlemen, the opportune return of Mr. Silmore means that the organization which has been proposed may now be brought about. We will be able to govern the supply of coal in such a manner as will benefit the members of every company which cares to join the combine. If there are any gentlemen present who are not prepared to come into the amalgamation, I presume they will withdraw."

Grabbit sat down, and there was a moment's silence. Most of those present turned and looked at Black.

That individual looked undecided for a moment, and then, with a smile, he rose to his feet, and quietly addressing the chairman, said:

"I presume, Mr. Silmore, you are still in favor of this combine Silmore gave a start, then, with a short cough, he rose and replied : Ah, of course. . . I hold the balance of power. . . Do

I favor the amalgama— tion . . . " His expression changed, his hands shook nervously. He stood staring vacantly at the office wall.

~~~Yes, yes!" said Grabbit impatiently, fearing ' that his friend's mind was giving way. i  
'^There's something wrong about the system,") Silmore proceeded in a dazed way. Coal is like  
— water. It's all the same—water and coal—coal an'd ' water."

- Are you mad ?" whispered Grabbit hoarsely.

~~~No, I've come back to my senses. I—I am against the amalgamation."

~~~What on earth do y/)u mean ?" cried the other, clutching him desperately by the arm.

~~~I—I don't know," feebly replied the Hon. John Silmore. You—you'd better ask Sandy Dorkins !"

THE END.