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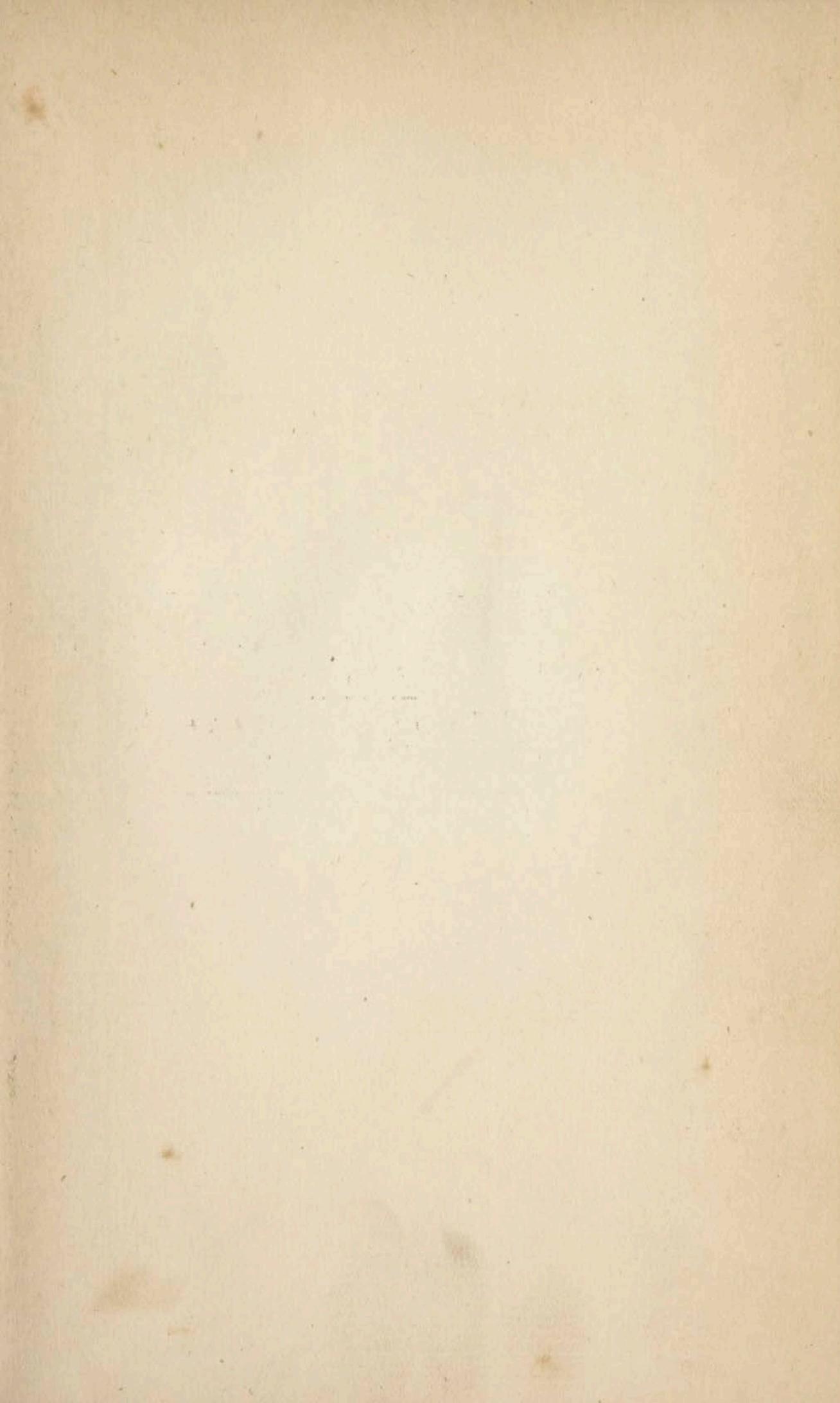


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THE ADVENTURE
OF
THE BROAD ARROW







Each one of the party was carrying two heads.
Frontispiece.]

[Page 143.



THE ADVENTURE
OF
THE BROAD ARROW

An Australian Romance

MORLEY ROBERTS

SECOND EDITION

London
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THE ADVENTURE OF THE BROAD ARROW

CHAPTER I.

NEW FIND.

“It’s possible to be damned without being dead,” said Smith, as he drank his nobbler at the Pilbarra Hotel. “And miners are the men who know it, in such a place as this.”

He looked out of the reeking bar-room on the light brown glare of waterless desert, with a few thirsty trees scattered over it.

A



"We're in the pit, so to speak," he continued, "but not the lowest, for there are drinks here still. Fill 'em up again, Bob, and have one yourself. As for me, I feel I could blue my skin and shirt for a last one before I tumble to pieces and rot finger by finger in this hole."

The men in the bar stood and drank with him silently. Yet one who was mad drunk with brandy and sunlight smashed his tumbler on the bar top, and pitched the bottom at a mongrel dog slinking outside in a thin shadow.

"What's the best news, Smith?" asked Bob, who was the only cheerful man in the crowd.

"The best news," answered Smith, "is that we are back, and the water's nearly done here, and the rain is not coming, and the camp is rotting. Tinned meats and fever water are doing for us. I might as well have stayed out yonder and got sun-dried in mulga and spinifex."

And he went off foolishly into the blazing sun, which came down at a slant of ninety degrees, and shone back from the hot dust with a glare that could blister a man under his chin.

The town that he strode through was of boards and canvas and corrugated iron. It stank in the still air, and, as man, or horse, or camel went by, the dust rose thick, and empty cans rang.

But into the stagnant desolation came men perpetually. They came in with gold fever, and went out with typhoid; and still their empty places filled up. The Western Australian papers screamed "no water," and the Eastern papers copied them with jealous additions; but men came in to drink thick mud and rot like silly sheep piled against a windward fence in a dry season, when the creeks and tanks are dry, and grass is not.

From Albany, Perth, and Freemantle, from Kimberley, Murchison, and Cool-

gardie, men rushed in, till New Find, so greatly boomed, was full of good men and thieves, of workers and loafers, of white men and of Chinamen, and they were all bent on gold, till the fever got them, and they yelled under canvas which was no shelter from the sun. But ants and spiders and scorpions gloried while men died, and the flies were thick on sick men's mouths, and ownerless dogs dug up corpses and died of blood-poisoning.

For the ways of men under ancient stresses are as the ways of ancient instinct, inevitable in unalterable channels. They drift where gold is, or where the thought of its possibility lies; they march like locusts into a ditch which is death. They pour out of the towns like ants from a disturbed ant-hill, they try the absurd, and storm the impossible; they rot and stick in the mire; they perish, and are known no more; they wither like grass, and are of no avail.

Yet each individual man is even there the centre of his world, and thinks that he will do this and do that, and each day he does what the dead day willed, and the night subscribed to, but does no more and does no other. And such as these was Smith, who braved sudden death in a bitter sun as he walked through the hideous town to his mate's hut out west on the plain.

As he went out of the sunlight into shadow, which was thick darkness after the glare of the noonday light, he stumbled across some one.

"Where the devil are you treading?" growled the somnolent man he had disturbed.

"Can't see after being in the sun," said Smith. "Is that you, Tom?"

"Yes," said Tom the water-carter, whose job looked like giving out. For water now was bought by rich men in measured buckets, and by poor ones in

mean tin pannikins. "You mean you can't see after soaking in whisky at the Pilbarra, don't you?" he added.

"A little of both," said Smith, lying down on a pile of dirty gunny sacks. "I've been out facing the Earth-destroyer and the Drier-up of water, and I wanted to get blind."

"Why are you back?" asked Tom. "I came in and saw the Baker yonder, and I found Hicks, too, so I just lay down. You had a bad time?"

The men he spoke of were at the far end of the hut; one was in an old bush bed made of stakes and sticks, and stretched sacking, while the other sat at the table, and scraped grease from it with a clasp knife.

"We funked it," said Smith. "There's no other word for it. Oh—blazes! I can't lie still."

He rose and went to the table, and sat opposite to Hicks. Reaching over, he bor-

rowed the other man's knife without ceremony, and scratched his name in big capital letters in the wood. When he had finished S M I T H, he jabbed the knife into the I of his name, and went on talking.

"We got sixty miles out across the sand, the mulga, and the porcupine grass; yes, sixty miles into the desert, and we saw its red rim dance, and its scrub crackle, and the water bags looked mean betting against the sun. So we put our tails between our legs, and crawled back sick, and ready to rot here. But when the rain comes, we're there, we're there."

"Why didn't you take camels?" asked Tom.

Smith smiled.

"Why didn't we organise an expedition? Camels and Afghans cost money. And I don't like their ways. Horses are good enough for me. You wait till the rain comes."

But another chipped into the talk.

"It'll never rain no more," said the man who lay on the bed. "I'm going home to my ma, and I'll live where there's water, and make love to the 'alf-a-crown a week slavey, and be a toff in a back street. What did I come out 'ere for? It's better to be a sneak, and be jugged in London, than be 'ere. If they did anythin' 'alf so bad to long timers as make em come to such a place as this 'ere, they'd 'ave a bally h'agitation in Hengland, and a meetin' in the Park."

"Dry up, you Cockney baker, you," said Smith, more good-humouredly than he had yet spoken. "It's never home you'll get. You and I will fill a sand-pit here, and I'll dig yours. We'll scrape it out with a broken bottle and a kerosene tin, and we'll write your name on the hide of your dead dog, and plant him with you to keep you faithful company."

But the Cockney took it all in good part,

and only pretended to weep at his mate's brutal suggestions.

"Boo-hoo, boo-hoo!" said he, "that I should ever be mates with a man whose name is Smith when mine is Mandeville."

"And that you stole with your passage money," said Hicks, who had not spoken yet. But now he angered Mandeville, who suggested forcibly in the very choicest Australian, that if he didn't dry up he would soon put the kibosh on him.

But Hicks laughed. As he was six feet four in height and five stone the heavier man, he could afford to let the Cockney say what he pleased. And Mandeville said it till Smith interfered.

"Now then, leave each other alone. It's not you that's quarrelling. It's the sun, moon, and stars, the wind and sand and weather you've a fight with. Get out and claw the sand, man. Hurrah, hurrah! Go

it, dear boys, against the devil, who is the patron saint of Pilbarra."

He lighted his pipe and smoked, and there was silence for a space in that sweet heaven.

CHAPTER II.

A SPECULATION.

“YOU’D better come with us, Tom,” said Smith, a few days after. “There’s not much need for you here now. This rain has done you out of a job which would never make you rich.”

They were walking together on the outskirts of the barren town, close by the New Find, which had turned the inside of the earth up to the sky. They were making money there, though every night the men working it had nightmares, and sweated to think the gold was done. Smith waved his hand towards it.

"They've taken out fifty thousand already, Tom," he said.

"And I daresay they'll take out no more," said red-faced Tom, whose natural good-humour and hopefulness were a little off in colour.

"What then? They'll float it," said Smith. "It would do us four. I could show my peeled nose in England again."

He rubbed his aquiline beak, which was badly skinned. His blue eyes were bright and eager and courageous.

"Oh, if you didn't drink such a lot, you'd be a daisy," said Tom, who had spent years in America, and mixed his talk as the other did his drinks.

"Hang it," said Smith, "I give you my word I'm off drink. I tell you honestly that I mean it. And out yonder we sha'n't be able to get it."

Tom looked out across the north-east plain, and shook his head.

"No, perhaps not," he answered.

But Smith grew impatient.

“This rain has filled up the holes,” he cried, “and there’ll be plenty for a week or two, even if no more falls.”

“No more will fall,” said Tom. “It’s rare luck as this fell.”

But, all the same, before they went back, he promised to go with the others upon their expedition.

“It must be out there somewhere,” said Hicks that night, when everything was ready for the morning’s start. “For Bill Herder, that brought that bit of stuff in, was only gone a fortnight. And if he was off his nut with the fever, I believe he spoke the gospel truth. And, anyhow, that lump of stuff doesn’t lie, and where it came from is not more than a week’s journey.”

For Herder, who had helped to turn their faces to the north-east, had died in the very bed occupied by the Cockney. He dropped off his horse at the door one

evening as the chums were at supper, and three days afterwards he collapsed and went out. All he had brought back with him was one lump of quartz and gold, weighing about eight pounds. He looked at them pitifully before he died, but could tell them nothing but that he got it "out yonder." So he was buried, and no one knew if he had a friend to whom news of his death should be sent.

The first expedition made by Hicks, Smith, and Mandeville, was an ill-considered and rash one. For Smith was reckless. He was always ready to take chances that any other man would shirk. He rushed his chums into a violent hurry, and got them a day out on the burning plain before they knew it. Some of the men in town believed they knew where they were going, and followed them from a distance. But when they saw the open dry horror of a flat world before them,

those who sneaked behind failed in their hearts and turned back. They spread reports of the country in that quarter, which gave rise at last to circumstantial rumours that the Smith party was already dead of thirst.

But on the fourth day they came in.

Smith had growled even then, for he swore that another few hours would bring them to water. A faint cloud-line on the horizon he described as big trees by a creek. But the water in their big bags was nearly done, and one had leaked.

"This time," said Smith, "I'm going through, if I die like a dog on a wet sack."

"A dry sack," said Hicks.

But early in the dawn, the three faced the plain once more, and with them went Tom.

"I might just as well make a spoon, or spoil a horn," said Tom. "And

there is gold in this all-fired rotten country anyhow."

It was still almost dark when they saddled up and struck out north-west upon the endless, mysterious plain, and, by the time the white-hot sun shot up on their right hands, and the light poured across the dead level, the town was ten miles behind them. But they could still see its tin roofs and tin walls gleaming.

"This reminds me that I once went from a ship in a boat," said Tom, "when it was dead calm, and the sea was thick blue oil. It's like being at sea here."

He was riding by the side of the Cockney, who nodded, and whistled.

"It's a blooming rum start, this is," said Mandeville. "To think that two years ago I was never outside London, and now to be on a plain like this 'ere. I was a moke ever to leave the

bakery business. And yet I dunno, bakin' wasn't nice work. What was you at 'ome, Tom?"

"A pound a week clerk," said Tom.

"And what fetched you out 'ere?"

"I got sacked, and couldn't get another job, so I came to my brother in Melbourne, and there—"

"And there," cried Mandeville, "it's a sight worse than at 'ome."

"That's where you hit it," said Tom. "So then I went to San Francisco, and there or thereabouts I stayed for two years, and this gold racket fetched me back."

"Do you know who Smith was afore he came out?" asked Mandeville.

Tom shook his head.

"He was a real gent; a clergyman's son, and 'ad a lot of money. Drink done him, and a woman, I daresay. But he's a rare good sort, and a good plucked un. 'E'd fight 'Icks if so be 'e sauced him. I've seed 'im fight till 'e was a red rag,

and cryin' because the other licked him. And when 'e's drunk 'e's a terror, an 'oly terror, and it's stand from under when 'e flies 'igh."

For Mandeville adored Smith, and felt that it was a high privilege to be the friend of a clergyman's son. He always spoke as if such a parentage was a kind of profession.

At about ten o'clock they made camp by a thickish bit of mulga scrub, where there was a little grass newly sprung up about a small water-hole. They ate a lunch of mutton and bread.

"No more good bread," said Smith, "our baker will have to come down to Johnny cakes and flap-jacks."

"Never mind us," said the Baker, which was one of Mandeville's names. "I'm thinking of the 'orses. It's little there is to pick. And with this 'ere sun like a h'oven for 'eat, it'l dry it up in two days."

"Don't croak," growled Hicks, whose

vast length was stretched under the only bit of shade thereabouts.

"I ain't growling," said the Baker, "I'm only just expressing opinions. And your 'orse will want tucker if 'e's to carry your bloomin' carcass far."

Hicks laughed, and reached out for Mandeville, who rolled a foot further away from him.

"What kind of 'orses do you breed down on the 'Awksbery River, old man?" he asked. "Or does your folks go on foot? Or perhaps you're bigger than most."

"I'm the little un' of the family," said Hicks. And they all laughed.

"Lord save us from your brothers," said Smith. "But let's be getting a bit of a snooze."

So they lay and sweated, and hunted off the infernal ubiquitous flies, and got sticky and bad-tempered, till the sun was two hours past the meridian.

And before them, as they rode on again, was the eternal plain, which ran ahead of them for ever.

But when they camped at night, they were thirty miles, or perhaps more, from the New Find.

CHAPTER III.

GOING IT BLIND.

THE second day found all the four men cheerful, but it left them a little apprehensive. For, as the day went on, though it appeared impossible for the morning's heat to be greater, it still grew and grew till noon. That seemed its full flood, and yet they knew it must be worse. And after one o'clock, when they guessed the time intuitively, as bushmen will—for Hicks was their clock—the little breeze that blew from the south-east failed.

They were then pushing across a patch of dense, thick scrub with openings in it, which were partially overgrown with dry

spinifex, the colour of ripe wheat straw, and every piece of exposed whitish ground shone with reflected heat which was as intense as the sun. And about two o'clock a breeze came from the north. Hicks shook his head and pulled up his horse, for they took no noon-time that day. It was better to push on even through the spinifex, which murdered the horses.

"What's wrong?" asked Smith, who was riding with both legs on one side like a woman.

"What's wrong?" said Hicks. "Well, and don't get narked about it, I should say a north wind here was nothing to yearn for. It will soak every pool of water up in twenty-four hours, and we shall be done."

"Tut, man," cried Smith, but Hicks went on.

"And now we are almost as far as we were last time, or even further. Where's your creek that you gassed about?"

They wrangled for ten minutes, and then rode on rather sullenly. Tom and Mandeville, who knew least about the country, said little. But the Baker would say "ditto" to Smith if Smith said "die." That was evident.

The north wind blew steadily at about ten miles an hour, and it was in truth like a breath from a furnace; it caught the men on the left cheek, and Tom's skin fairly burnt and blistered. The others grinned and were silent, and rode through the living invisible flame. Their horses were evidently distressed, and their legs streamed with blood from wounds made by the porcupine grass.

At last, about six, when Hicks' big horse was almost done for, they came to a water-hole. Before they could check them, the animals were half up to their knees. They drank till they stretched their girths almost to breaking point.

That night, by their little fire of scrub,

there was the usual discussion, which now bore more continually on the thing most to be considered. They did not divagate into common ribaldry, neither did they discuss horse flesh in general. They spoke only of their own horses, of water now and water to-morrow, and the prospects of getting through to some place where they could stay and prospect, or to some rise in the ground which they looked for. For so much they had gathered from Herder's dying delirious gabble.

And now it began to seem to Tom, and to Hicks, who was influenced by the condition of his horse, that they had gone out into the Big Impossible without much chance of doing anything. What had they to go on in estimating their chances? A heavy lump of gold mixed with quartz, a quantity of fevered talk streaked with a possible vein of real consciousness.

“How can we know he had his senses,

even when he talked most sensibly?' asked Hicks. "I daresay, the fever invented it for him."

"It didn't h'invent the gold," urged the Baker.

Hicks grinned.

"Yes; but he might have got that anywhere. And, who's to know, now I come to think of it, that he didn't get it and the tip from another chap?"

This damped them a little.

"But it's all the same if he did," said Smith; "and with water and a bit of grass I'm for going on. I'll go by myself."

"Not you," said Mandeville.

"I will, by the Powers," cried Smith; but, recognising what the Baker meant, he reached out his hand to his faithful chum.

"If you go, I go," said the Baker, with tears in his eyes.

"Good old man," murmured Smith.

And they lay down on their spread

blankets, and sweated through an intolerable night, while the stars winked hotly in the drying air.

At early dawn Tom filled up all the water-bags, and they ate breakfast in comparative silence. They opened no new discussion, and saddled their horses at the same time. If Hicks was a little behind the others, that was only customary.

"Is it 'go on'?" said he, as Smith mounted. And he saw Smith turn his head to the north-east. There was no more said, and they followed their leader.

But by noon Hicks stopped.

"My horse is nearly done," he said gloomily, and the others paused.

"Give him a mouthful of water in your hat," said Tom.

And Hicks grumbled, but gave it.

"And don't hist your carcass on him again," said the Baker. "Such a man as you should 'ave an elephant."

"Dry up," said Hicks. "That's enough."

And Smith frowned at Mandeville, who rode on a yard or two.

“If we go easy, he can do the rest of the day,” said Smith. “And if there’s no water, why, we can get back to-morrow.”

Against his judgment Hicks went with them. But, as he walked, their pace was slower. And the heat was peculiar and sickening. The wind was no longer quite steady, it came in blasts, as if they were being fanned by a red-hot fan, and its touch was scalding. To make matters worse, they were now on a piece of country, bare even of scrub, and the white ground was like a bright pan on a fire. The haze danced and shimmered until a bit of scrub looked alive against the faint blue of a far, low range to the south. And at last, in the north-west, they saw some trees. They were without visible support, for their thin trunks were not yet to be seen. They might even be a mirage.

“Is there water there?” said Tom to Hicks. And Hicks shook his head.

“It ain’t likely.”

They camped under those trees that night, and there was no water there—not even a dried water-hole was to be found.

The evening tea was scanty, and the talk was scantier still. The men smoked in silence, and turned in early. But Smith and the Baker, who were close together, talked a little.

“Hicks will go no further,” said Smith.

“And you?” asked Mandeville.

“I’m going on,” said Smith. “There is a low range out ahead, and if there isn’t, it’s mighty near as bad going back. That water-hole will be dry to-morrow morning, or pretty near, and if so, how will Hicks get through to the next?”

“What about Tom?” whispered the Cockney.

“I don’t know,” said Smith. “But I reckon it will be a fair division. He’ll go with Hicks.”

There was a short silence. But presently Smith was touched.

“And you, Smith, ain’t you scared?”

“Scared,” said Smith bitterly, “what have I to be scared of? Hell here or there or anywhere? And death—well, what’s life here, eh? And how shall I ever get back without money? Ah, you don’t know. But for money, young chap, they will pardon the devil.”

“Yes,” said the Baker; but he couldn’t help wondering how a clergyman’s son ever got into such a way of talking.

“’E must ’ave run through a ’eap of cash,” he said to himself. “But there, it’s all one, and I’m with ’im.” And he fell asleep.

The others had been talking too, and the result of that talk was seen when Hicks rose about eleven and rolled up his

blankets. Tom imitated him in silence. But when they brought the horses up, Hicks roused Smith.

“We’re off back, Smith,” he said.

“Eh!” said Smith drowsily, “what’s up?”

“We’re going back, mate. There’s nothing but death in this — death of thirst.”

Smith rolled over and rested on his elbows, and whistled low.

“I don’t know but what you are right, Hicks,” he said. “But to me it’s a question if it’s not better to go on. That water-hole will be dry when you reach it. If it is, can you put it through to the next?”

“If we don’t, we don’t,” said Hicks. “And it’s best to travel now while it’s cool. I guess we can strike it by the morning. Are you coming?”

Smith rolled over and touched Mande-

ville, who was a nervous sleeper, and jumped upright in a scare.

"Hicks is going, Baker," said Smith.

"And you?" asked the Cockney.

"I'm going on."

"Then what the blazes did you wake a chap for?" asked the Baker, and he lay down again.

"You mean it, Smith?" asked Tom.

"I guess so," replied Smith.

"So long then, and we wish you well through it," said Hicks. "It seems mean, perhaps, Smith, but I'm not so keen on it as you. I don't know what life's worth to you. But it's worth more than this to me."

Smith reached out his hand.

"Don't apologise, old son. It's my look-out and Mandy's here. If we don't make it we shall do the other thing."

"So long," said Hicks.

"So long," said Smith.

"Baker," cried Tom, half crying.

But the Baker was fast asleep, and didn't answer. And the two who travelled by night rode slowly to the south-west.

CHAPTER IV.

TWO IN A DESERT.

SMITH roused Mandeville two hours before dawn, and they boiled a quart-pot of tea, for the water would run to no more. They had to husband it. But before they drank Smith spoke to his chum seriously.

“Do you know the odds are against us, Mandy, old boy? I didn’t put it right last night. Though it’s bad going back, that chance is much the best.”

“I’ll do what you do,” said the Baker obstinately, brushing away a fly. “It’s all one to me, old man.”

“I’m going on,” said Smith, with a

curious, hard determination; "and I'll tell you why. I believe in this; I believe I'm going to strike it. I *know* there's gold out here. Yes, I know it as if I'd seen it, Mandy."

He drank a little tea, and munched a bit of damper.

"I want it, Mandy, bad. There's the devil to pay in England, and no pitch hot. I half-ruined my folks before I was twenty, and I heard last mail that everything was wrong; the old man crazy, and my mother living as she never lived before. And there's another woman in it, too. I'll tell you about it some day."

"But," asked Mandeville, "suppose you go under, Smith?"

"I sha'n't," said Smith; "and if I do, they'll know I'm dead, and can't help 'em. I've been a bad hat, old man, and if I rot in the sun it will serve me right."

Mandeville stopped rolling up his swag.

“You may be what you like, but you’re a blooming good pal,” said he, “and if you’re to corpse it here, I’ll corpse it too. You stuck by me when I wanted a friend bad in Albany and at New Find. And that’s enough say. If you’re in it, I’m on.”

He brought up the horses, which were not in such bad case as they might have been.

“They don’t look so bloomin’ bad,” said the Baker.

“I’ll tell you what, Smith, I believe there’s a drop o’ water round here somewhere. I heard a mosquito this morning, and it’s a deal too dry for them if there ain’t water.”

He went to look, and at the end of the patch of timber, and just under the roots of a tree, he found mud marked with trampling hoofs.

“It’s a pity they didn’t leave some, and then we could have filled up the

bags," said the Baker. He went back and told his chum.

"We're in luck's way," said Smith, who was in a fever of suppressed excitement. "That saves a quart of water. I'd have given the poor devils a pint apiece, if we'd died ourselves."

And an hour before dawn they got away and travelled fast.

For two or three hours their north-east way led them through much the same country as they had passed through before, for it was as flat as a calm sea, and bare of scrub higher than a horse's knee. But when the sun was two hours up they came to a more rolling country, which was here and there broken by a dried creek bed. Yet sign of water was none. It seemed that the heavy rain which had tempted them out had not fallen there. Yet right ahead of them was a low range which looked timbered.

"How far is it?" asked the Baker.

"I should guess thirty miles," said Smith.

"Then it's not for to-day?"

"No," said Smith.

They rode on for an hour.

"If we get no water to-night, it's all up with the gee-gees," said the Baker.

And when they had ridden half a mile, Smith spoke.

"Yes, you're right," said he.

As he rode, his face twitched, and his expression changed a thousand times. For he was wrought up to a strange pitch, and his nerves were tried. His face, which was thin and brown, and very finely cut, showed every thought in his mind, and the poor Baker watched it wonderingly.

"I wonder what's in his 'ead," said he. For just then Smith looked very gloomy.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Smith turned in his saddle, and smiled an odd, far-away smile.

"I was thinking of champagne with ice in it. Oh, but it's well this moment that I'm not with it," he said.

"You're wonderful h'awkward to deal with when you're blind," said the Baker.

And Smith nodded.

"It's damned hard lines," said he presently.

"What's 'ard?"

"That my father drank," said Smith.

This took Mandeville aback.

"What!" he cried. "But I thort you said your father was a clergyman?"

Smith nodded.

"There's many a parson doing time," said he.

"What for?" asked the Baker in rather contemptuous disbelief.

But Smith did not answer.

"Shall we drink?" he asked.

And they wetted their parched throats. When the horses heard the terrible sound

of pouring water, they turned their heads, and whinnied pitifully.

“Poor, poor devils,” said Smith. But he rode a bit harder.

Yet he gave them their pint at noon. It only aggravated their thirst, and when, after a little rest, they went on, they showed every sign of terrible distress.

That night they camped in a dry gully in a broken country. With all their searching they could find no sign of water. They rose at midnight, and travelled north-east still, having now a little over a quart of water between them.

The next night they were across the first range, and Smith's horse fell and died. They cut the throat of Mandeville's horse in the morning, for they had no water left. But they did not speak, and looked half-askance at each other. It seemed an intolerable and brutal murder.

They now walked straight ahead in a fairly timbered country. Smith kept his

eyes open for any sign of a native well ; but he saw nothing.

“It’s all a dream, Baker,” said Smith. “I could believe anything. We are where no white man ever was. No one has been within two hundred miles of this place.”

“Where are the others now ?” asked the choking Baker.

But Smith spat thickly.

“God knows.”

And they walked for hours in bitter anguish.

“It’s a country of black enchantment,” said Smith. “I daresay it doesn’t exist ; perhaps we don’t exist. Perhaps we are only dreaming. It’s devilish hot, Baker.”

And Baker nodded painfully.

“What do you talk for ?” he murmured.

“Because I must,” answered his pal. “And there’s gold here ; I smell it.”

But I've brought you to your death, Baker."

Poor Mandeville laid his hand on Smith's arm, and looked at him like a dumb animal in pain.

"Never mind, old man. But my name's Baker, and I'm baked."

He turned blind as he spoke, and stumbled.

"Hold up, damn it," cried Smith, in agony which sounded like anger.

And he could have cried, if his thickening blood had not sucked every tear out of him. He put his arm round Baker, and they stumbled on till they came to a shady tree.

"I'm done," mumbled Mandeville, and he fell on his knees.

Smith got down by him.

"Oh," said the Baker, and he was half-unconscious. But he spoke.

Smith bent down to catch what he said, but heard nothing.

And Smith laughed with a thin, dry laugh, and bending down, he kissed the Baker upon the low forehead, which held a faithful little soul now in the valley of the shadow of a horrible death.

Then Smith shook him.

“Rouse up, Baker.”

And Mandeville drew back his mind to the bitter earth.

“Yes, old man.”

“There may be water within reach, Baker. Now, listen and get hold of it. I’m going to look for water. If I don’t come back, we’re done. Do you understand?”

The Baker nodded, looking wistfully at his mate. Smith stooped and kissed him again. And the Baker smiled, as Smith went off towards the thicker timber.

CHAPTER V.

LOOKING FOR WATER.

SMITH, whose throat was dry, and whose tongue was half-blackened, stumbled on for a hundred yards before he thought of taking his bearings. For now in a country of scanty timber, which only gradually grew denser, one part was terribly like another. He returned to the tree, and, getting his tomahawk, blazed his way for nearly a mile. And though the trees were thicker, he saw no sign of water, and few signs of life beyond swarms of ants and some native bees.

As he walked, he spoke a little to him-

self, but it was chiefly of far-away things, and he chuckled now and again with a very frightful sound. Though every once in a while he became half delirious, he was yet able to control his wandering mind. It occurred to him that he felt as he had sometimes done in drink, when it was necessary to have his wits about him. So, as he walked, he stopped sometimes and said to himself, as if he were another man:

“Pull yourself together, old son.”

He stumbled on in the intense heat, and sometimes he stayed behind a bigger tree and let the shade cover him. As he slashed at one tree, he noticed the bark was not wholly dry. So, cutting into the sapwood, he got a chip, and sucked it. Why hadn't he done that for the poor Baker?

And as he travelled he was aware of men, or shadows, or ghosts behind every tree. He called to them, but when he

came up they were far ahead of him. He believed in them at last, and they terrified him a little. He held his tomahawk as if to defend himself. And then he grew angry, and remembered, with peculiar gusto, the hot taste of the blood of Mandeville's murdered horse.

But the delirium left him when he caught his foot in a root, and went headlong. For he turned about in a blind rage and cut the root through savagely. It was alive, and had done it on purpose. He was no more than a child.

And by some odd and ridiculous notion of his mind, he began to feel angry with the Baker. Why did the man not come himself, why did he send him on such a hideous and futile errand, while he took his ease, lying down in the shade? When he got so far, it struck Smith with terrible distinctness that he did not remember in any way how he came to be with Mandeville in such a position. He could

not recollect anything of the yesterday, and though he recalled the New Find, that seemed very far off and vague, and in no way connected with their present trouble. But he said at last, that when he saw the Baker he would ask him about it. Meantime he had to get water, and he held up his water-bag, which was as dry as a last year's bone.

But the trees now became denser, and there were patches of very thick scrub. He remembered that he had not blazed a tree for a good time, and he stupidly blazed every one he came to.

Presently he found himself futilely going round one tree, as though he meant to ring-bark it, and for a moment he could not remember in which direction he should go. But at last he recalled the fact, that the sun was on the right side of the back of his neck, and that his foolish squat shadow should be on his left. He walked fast, and ran.

He had been travelling about an hour, when it occurred to him with a horrible shock, that he neither knew who he was, nor what he was doing. He sat down on a wind-fallen tree, and pondered painfully, sucking his finger in a babyish manner. He knew very well that he was somebody who was thirsty, but he could not remember his own name, nor his own identity, and the frightful catastrophe appalled him. He had a peculiar desolation around him, the desolation of some newly-created being, born full-grown without knowledge of his destiny. He struggled with his brain for what seemed innumerable centuries, and it gave no answer. An intolerable melancholy oppressed him, and he still sucked his finger. And suddenly he noticed that it seemed to taste like milk, and he appeared to smell milk. He bit it, and tongued a little blood, which tasted like milk too. He resumed his fight for his own soul, and

he took up his tomahawk; looking at it idly, he saw Mandeville's name on it, and said he knew that name. And then he saw Mandeville, and his own mind came back. He knew who he was. It was an intolerable relief.

But, then, the thirst came on him again, and his aural centre went wrong. He heard frogs; he swore to himself he heard them croaking. But it was all as dry as his throat. What was a frog doing in a dry forest? He rose up suddenly, and began to run again. And then he heard frogs once more; why, there were millions, millions of them, and they deafened him! He dropped his tomahawk, and ran through a bit of blind scrub, and out into sudden silence, which was quite as appalling as the noise he had heard. He ran on again, and stopped, and ran, with his dry tongue between his teeth. He knew he had thirst delusions on him. When

he heard a frog next, he shook his head pettishly, and was as angry as a nervous man worried by drumming in his ears. He would be seeing water soon! And the big frog boomed, boomed, and boomed. He went on slowly through the scrub, and came to some saplings. The bit of whitish ground under them looked like water, and he shook his head again. A little more, and he would believe it—believe there was water.

And then the maddening boom of a world of frogs began again. He cursed them without a voice, for now his voice was gone, and he put his fingers in his ears and ran a little, and came right out of the saplings.

He stayed, glaring, and then, turning, sat down on the ground. Oh, these horrible, horrible delusions! What had he done to be so tormented? For that

time he had seen water, a deep, deep creek of cool water.

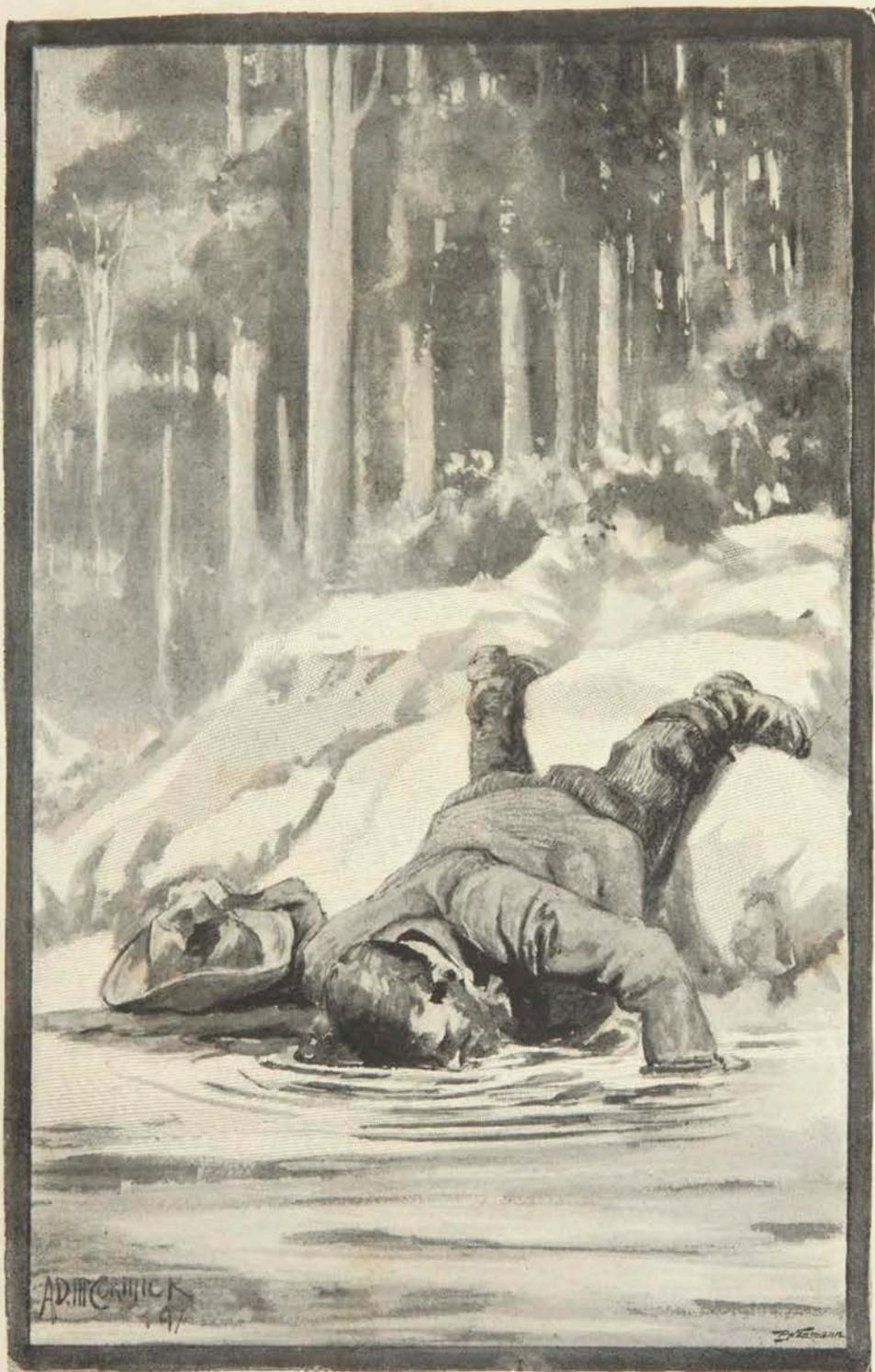
“No, no,” he cried to himself, “it’s the devil’s country, and devil’s water, and all of a piece with the frogs.”

He turned round again slowly, trembling as he turned. And then he crawled on his hands and knees, and at last he rose and fell again, with his mouth in thick mud, and water on his burning brow. He pushed forward six inches, and drank.

No! it was not a delusion. It was water after all.

He lay and drank like an animal, and then, feeling his brain reel, he twisted round and blindly clawed his way back up the bank. For he felt dimly that, if he became insensible there, he would drown like a thirsty fly. And when he was in safety his senses did leave him for a space.

When he came to, he felt for a long



He pushed forward six inches, and drank.

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time as weak as a child, but he was sane, quite sane, and the strange and horrible delusions of the thirsty bush had vanished. He remembered that poor Mandeville was dying. Perhaps, he said, he is even now dead. At the thought of that, he sprang to his feet, but went blind, and fell on his knees. When he next rose he could walk, but he filled his water-bag with trembling hands. He turned to go, but, staying, wondered if this was a creek, or only a water-hole. Perhaps there was some motion in the water. He threw in a twig to try, and found it did move slowly to the south. It was a creek, and so would be easier to discover again.

But could he find Mandeville? He almost doubted it.

For when he began to go back over his journey from the tree under which his chum was still lying, it seemed such an incredible one both by time and

distance that the sun appeared to lie. By the position of the sun, he could not have been more than three hours. That seemed absurd and ridiculous. Had he then lain insensible twenty-four hours? It occurred to him that he might possibly have been by the creek for a night. It certainly was possible; such a thing, he knew, might happen. But how was he to know? How indeed? And as he asked himself the question, his heart sank. He knew that if he found Mandeville alive, his mad journey had only consumed a few hours. But a day more would certainly kill him, when it was doubtful if a few hours would not do it. And to go back would inevitably take longer than it had taken to come. He began to run, and then he stopped. It would never do to go too hastily; if he missed the blazed way, he might never see Mandeville again. So he tracked himself back through the thicker scrub by

some hardly visible footsteps and some broken twigs. He came at last to the spot where he had dropped his tomahawk, and his heart beat more freely. He forgot how insane he had been, for now he was quite himself. He forgot how rarely he had blazed the trees, before he found himself hacking round one single trunk, like a madman. And when he came to that tree, it struck him with the shock which shakes every man, who, believing himself in a lone land, finds evidence of other human beings. For Smith could not, for a long time, believe he had done it himself. It looked purposed; it suggested some end which he thought alien to his own journey. Until he fitted the edge of the tomahawk exactly into a clean wide cut of the ring-barking, he was alarmed; but that reassured him.

“I must have been crazy,” he muttered, and, taking his direction, he went on.

But he now came to the gap which he had left in his marking, and he found no more slashes in trees for two hundred yards. He examined each carefully, and often went back. Just as he came to the conclusion that he would probably never get through, he saw a whitish mark in a tree fifty yards further south. His heart leapt up, he was once more in the true line.

And now he ran till he came upon the dry creek bed he and Mandeville had crossed. He shouted aloud :

“Mandeville, Mandy!”

And no answer came back to him. He ran like a madman, and at last spied the tree under which he had left his chum. He knew it for the same one, for he could see his own blankets rolled up leaning against it. But when he reached it Mandeville was not there.

“I say, Mandy, where are you?” called Smith in a high, tremulous voice. And

there was no answer. The silence seemed a flood; it made Smith shake. For that silence promised to be eternal; the loneliness was complete. He began searching like a madman, and suddenly he remembered that they had gone twenty yards further when he had dropped his swag, for the next tree gave the most shade. The moment after, Smith was kneeling by the Baker, who was breathing very laboriously, and quite unconscious.

Smith's face twitched as he poured a little water between the other's dry lips. For he believed he was back too late. Mandeville seemed in the very act of death; the heavy, slow pulsation of the artery in his neck looked as if it might stop at any moment. His heart strove dreadfully with his thirsty, thickened blood.

But his lips opened, and he drank unconsciously drop by drop. And very slowly life came back to him.

If Smith could have prayed at any time,

he would have prayed as his one friend turned hesitatingly from the open door of death, and not even his bitterness against the world and the heaven of brass above could prevent him from breaking down with joy, and sobbing like a child as the Baker opened his weary eyes.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BILLABONG.

THE Baker was quite himself by the time the sun went down, and, though Smith lighted the fire, he cooked the supper, such as it was; for what stores they had were chiefly flour, tea, and sugar, and bacon. And most of these lay beside Mandeville's dead horse.

“What are we going to do?” said Smith. For now, having nearly killed him, he thought it a good time to see what Mandeville really thought.

“Do you mean about goin' on or backin' h'out?” asked the Baker.

“That’s about it.”

The Baker twisted up his mouth and looked north.

“There’s water there?”

Smith nodded.

“And plenty of it?”

“Plenty.”

Mandeville made a step or two in a northerly direction. When he came back, he shook his fist in the south-west quarter.

“And do you think I’m such a nin-compoop as to go back across that blazin desert till the rains come? Not me! not by a particularly large jugful, Smith.”

“And what then? What about tucker?” asked Smith.

Mandy shrugged his shoulders.

“There’s what we’ve ’ere, sonny; and with what we left back yonder there’s enough to last us the three weeks we reckoned on.”

“It’s more than three weeks to the big rains,” said Smith.

“One thing at a time, please yer ’igh-ness,” said the Baker, who was sitting by the fire, smoking hard. “I guess there’ll be ’possums by your creek. And if there ain’t, we must ’unt grubs like the black-fellows does.”

And as Smith was quite insane about the gold, they stayed.

Next day they went back and brought in the other stores.

“Poor old man,” said the Baker to his dead horse, “you brought me ’ere, and you died thirsty. Do you know, Smith, I sometimes think it’s a bloomin’ queer world?”

“Do you?” said Smith, with a savage bitterness that made Mandy jump. “Do you? What a big discovery. Have you found out that it’s a bit queer for animals to suffer as we make ’em suffer? Yes, you’re right, it’s a queer world, a particularly damnably, disagreeably queer world. And some folks who will never

get to any heaven would actually object to meet the ghost of a vivisected rabbit there, except in a celestial pie."

"I don't tumble," said the puzzled Baker. But Smith didn't explain as he savagely humped stores under a blazing sun.

Their new camp was right on the edge of Smith's creek, in a small clearing, with thick and almost impenetrable scrub around them.

"And it had better be very small fires, Mandy," said Smith. "If there are any black-fellows about, we needn't shout to them with a big blaze."

"D'ye think there are any?" asked Mandy, who had no liking for any black, negro or Papuan or Australian aboriginal. "For if there are, I wish we'd brought more weapons than my revolver and yours. A repeatin' rifle now, Smith; that would make 'em skip."

But Smith did not look for any trouble of that kind.

“We must chance it, and just be careful,” said he; “and we’ll put in time prospecting. It looks a good country. You might strike anything here.”

And they camped down, pulling quietly at their pipes as they lay in the smoke of their fire, damped to keep the mosquitoes off.

The whole of the next week, which was one of unmitigated heat, they spent looking for gold. They tried every gully and every range. Though they got very rich indications of alluvial, they never struck any out-crop of gold in quartz such as Herder’s specimen could come from. And Smith, now peculiarly greedy, was after this and this only. He grumbled at any alluvial work with the pan as waste of time, and as the Baker’s special leaning was “pay dirt,” they sometimes almost quarrelled. But since they loved each other dearly, their rows never amounted to much.

Yet, all the time, in the minds of both was a sense of futility whether they succeeded or did not succeed. The Baker let his mind out one night, and drew out Smith's.

"Say, Smith, old man, what are we a-workin' for? If I get a streak wot went a pound to the pan, or five for the matter of that, what use'd it be? And if you do strike Herder's Find, it won't buy tucker, nor take us 'ome to our blooming pals."

"That's so," said Smith.

"Then why work?"

"Why not?"

"Let's get out instead, old man."

"Across the way we came?"

Though they were talking by a regular black-fellow's fire of two sticks and a red coal, Smith knew what kind of face the Baker's was, all screwed up in knots and lines indicative of the keenest apprehension.

“Acrost 'ell,” said the Baker. “No; what I mean is, let's run the bloomin' creek down till we get's to a river; and then we can scoot down the river. What river is it likely to be?”

Smith grunted, for his geography was little better than that of most miners and tramps, and it was a ten to one chance that he could have drawn a rough outline of Australia, or have even placed Albany, Perth, or Freemantle, on a Westralian map.

“Well, you dunno,” said the Baker, “and I dunno, but it's likely there'll be something or other down it. And after my last little try, I ain't goin' to quit no water again. 'Ungry I've bin both at 'ome and 'ere, but thirsty for a thing like water, that I never was. I'd rather croak with the flaps of my stummick glued together, and eating each other, than go two days without water. Any common death's h'easy to 'alf-dyin' of thirst.”

Smith grunted again.

"That's what I says," said the Baker. "I know'd you agree. And now, do you reelly think as we can foot it back two 'undred mile to New Find with that lot of water, our two bags full?"

"No, I don't," said Smith; "when the horses went that chance went. How much tucker is left?"

"Ten days, I should think," replied the Baker.

"Then we'll go down the creek tomorrow if you like," said Smith. "But it's all risky, and we may get done starved or speared."

"I'll go," said the Baker, and they went to sleep.

In the morning they divided up the stores, and stowed them as well as they could in their blankets. They were in the "wallaby" track by six o'clock.

"Travellers looking for a job," said the Baker. "Can we see the boss, and if not,

can we put our horses in the paddock and grub at the men's 'ut? What's your trade, Smith, when you tike to the bush and go for a job?"

"Cattle," answered Smith gloomily, for now he was getting downcast. It hurt him bitterly not to find Herder's reef, for he had got it into his mind that this journey was his luck, and whatever misfortunes overtook him, yet there would be gold in it after all. And gold meant England, and England meant what it can mean to a man who has lived there long and has then gone into the desert.

"Ah, what wouldn't I give to touch a lady's hand again?" he sometimes quoted, but not aloud, for the Baker had an unconscious way of jumping on his better side when it came up. The only time he had quoted it in the Baker's hearing, Mandeville told a story of a "lidy in the Mile End Road," which was nothing but a vile variant of an ancient Joe Miller

translated into the language of the East End, and brought up to date.

The general trend of Smith's Creek, for so Mandeville named it with great ceremony and the emptying of some tea leaves upon its waters, lay generally north and south. It flowed south, and that made Smith a little uneasy. In spite of his geographical weakness, he had some idea that such a creek should run into a river, and he could think of no river on the coast, now some four hundred miles away, into which it could flow.

On the second day of their tramp south by the slow waters, a notion came to him which he kept to himself for some hours. But when they camped at noon to boil the billy he spoke.

"Which way are we heading now, Mandy?"

"I never give it a thort," answered Mandy.

"Look at the sun."

The Baker looked at the noon-day light, and drawing a few lines on the sand, looked up and shook his head.

“Why, Smith, we’re going south-east, and more east nor that.”

“Yes, we’re going inland,” said Smith. “And I don’t believe this is a creek at all.”

“What do you mean?” asked the Baker, whose colonial knowledge was very small compared with Smith’s.

But his chum didn’t answer; he rose and stood by the creek bank.

“Do you think there’s as much water in it as there was?” he asked, and the Baker rose.

“It may be my bloomin’ fancy, but I don’t think as there is,” he allowed.

“Then this,” said Smith, “is a billabong, and we’ve been fooled.”

The Baker, who had not the faintest notion of what a billabong was, or how

it differed in its nature from the common creek, looked extremely puzzled.

“What the blue blazes is a billy bong?” he asked. “Water that runs is a creek. At least that’s my h’idea. What is a billy bong, or what d’ye call it?”

Smith went back to his tea, and was followed by the Baker.

“A billabong,” he said a little didactically, “is a thing I never heard of in any other country but this hot jewel of the beautiful British Empire. It doesn’t run into a river at all. What do you think we shall find at the end of this?”

The Baker shook his head.

“A bit of a swamp maybe, or else it will just go on and on till the bed dries out,” said Smith. “For a billabong runs *out* of a river, not into it.”

“It’s agin the nature of things,” said the Baker, who began to think Smith was mad.

“Not Australian things, my son,” said Smith. “In some of the rivers here there are natural outlets on to the plains. When the river rises a certain height the water pours down a billabong. I know one out of the Lachlan, in New South Wales, which is full three hundred miles long, and ends in a swamp. There, must be a big river to the north of us, and the rain we had at New Find must have been very heavy up at its head waters, wherever they are.”

The Baker, after a few explanations, got hold of the main facts, which are just as Smith stated them, but he criticised the premises.

“’Ow can you be sure this is a billabong?” he asked.

Smith shrugged his shoulders.

“There’s only one way to be certain, and that’s to follow it down to the end. But I think a very little more might settle it.”

“Then I reckon as we’ve come so far we’d better be sure,” said the Baker, “though it will be an awful sickener to ’ave to do back tracks.”

So that day, and part of the next, they still went south. By noon they found the water dwindling rapidly, as the timber got smaller and scantier, and there was little more beyond it than a boundless dry desert of scrub.

“It must vanish in this wilderness,” said Smith; “it will be sucked up in another twenty miles, for dead sure. I think it’s right about, Baker.”

And turning, they faced the three days’ journey back to the first camp, upon the billabong’s banks.

They were very silent, and ate sparingly.

CHAPTER VII.

RUNNING UP THE BILLABONG.

As fate now seemed to be closing in on the two wanderers, they did the journey back much faster than they had come. For they had wasted at least six days' food in their futile southern trip. But the heat of the northern journey seemed even more intense than the heat had been before, and there was hardly a breath of air. What did blow came from the north, and scorched them by day and by night; they could not stay in their blankets, and had to camp far from the

creek, which was in some parts a hot-bed of mosquitoes.

They came back to the old camp early on the morning of the third day, and passed it in silence. But now the unknown was before them, and possibly the unexpected. For what white man had ever been there? So far as they knew they were the first.

On the second day from the old camp it certainly seemed that the billabong was larger than it had been. On the third day they were sure of it. The timber, too, was larger. But that third day the current of the water to the south had ceased.

“The river that feeds it is falling,” said Smith. “I wonder how far it is away.”

He was oppressed by all the strange uncertainties of their position; they were cut off from the world: they had seen no sign of life beyond one or two birds,

and an opossum, that Baker had extracted from a hole in a tree as it slept its daily sleep.

But the Baker was quite cheerful; nothing seemed to matter to him. He chattered on about everything and nothing, telling stories of London life and London bakeries which might have been useful to a royal commission on sweating in both its senses.

"Lord love you!" said he, "it ain't the 'eat as knocks me. If a London baker can't stand 'eat, what can he stand? The bloomin' old baker up aloft there can't put a crust on me direct. As long as the water 'olds out I'm good. It's want of that does me."

"You're very cheerful, Mandy," said Smith.

"And why not?" asked Mandy. "I'm used to be cheerful when I don't see more than a day or two a'ead. If I'd lied down and died becos I couldn't see grub and a

doss three days off, I'd 'ave been corpsed years ago."

"And haven't you anything to make you wish to get back home?" asked Smith.

"Not me," said the Baker; "I'm as good 'ere as anywhere. Give me a job, reg'lar for choice, and a chanst to get married when I'm ready, and I'm all right 'ere or in H'england or Ameriky."

Smith laughed.

"Good old man, and would a black woman suit you?"

"No!" said the Baker seriously, "I bar blacks. I want my kids such as will wash white onst a week anyhow. I knowed a woman in the H'east End, she lived in Dragon Court, Whitechapel, as married a nigger, and the time 'er kids 'ad was 'orrid. The hother women took to washin' their kids twiced a week regular, just out of spite, for they 'ated her bad. Her man was 'ead porter to

a music 'all, and got 'eaps of tips." And he took to singing,

"She's my rorty carrotty Sal,
And she comes from Whitechap-al,"

with such an air of intense enjoyment and total disengagement from his surroundings, that Smith gave way, and shouted with laughter.

"What yer laffin' at?" asked the Baker with a grin.

"I was thinking what you would do without me to cheer you up," said Smith.

"Cheer me hup, his it?" said the Baker, winking and contemptuous, "why, you are like a mute at a funeral; when 'e's going, I mean—not when 'e's coming back—jolly on the 'earse. But what would I do without you, in this 'ere 'eat and solitude? What would I do? Why, I'd go stark-starin', ravin', bally mad, and I'd

cut my bloomin' throat from ear to ear, and jump in the billabong. That's me."

And he tramped for half an hour in sombre silence.

"What's your name reely, Smith?" said he, when his spirits came back and he could hold his tongue no longer.

"Lord Muck of Barking Creek," said Smith, with a coarseness rare to him.

"I knowed you was a lord," said the Baker, "I seed one from a distance onst. 'E 'ad the same 'aughty air and ways as you 'ave, and 'is nose was quite similar, same shape as a cheese-cutter."

On which Smith felt his nose, to reassure himself on the subject.

"And your christened name, Smith?"

"Archibald," said Smith.

"It don't go with Smith," said the Baker. "It sounds like the name of a master baker I worked for once,

Bartholomew Onions. Archibald don't fit Smith reely."

"Oh, dry up," said Smith. "My name is Archibald, and you can call me what you like. When are we going to camp? How much more tucker is there?"

"It should run to three days' if we don't be greedy," said the Baker.

So they camped that night with just three days' food ahead of them. And Smith, as he preferred to be called, was rather cast down.

For they were getting further and further into the unknown, day by day, and as to the mythical river, who knew where it led? It might debouch into the salt sea a thousand miles from any settlement. And how were they to live in a starving country, where they never saw more than a rare 'possum, and had no means of killing a kangaroo further off than fifty yards? And while he had

serious doubts of his own revolver shooting, he was quite certain that the Baker could not hit the bad marksman's flying haystack, unless by the greatest good luck.

For now it was a much more serious thing than finding gold. He knew they had left plenty of that behind them, and should they again reach New Find, they could come out to his creek with every prospect of going back fairly rich men. But now they wanted food, and soon would want it badly, and there was every prospect of not getting it.

And when would they get to the river? They had now travelled steadily for six days since leaving the place at which they first struck the creek, and though they were in a more wooded country, there was no particular indication yet of the heavy timber which always lines a big Australian river. In three days more

their food would be done, unless they eked it out with another opossum, and these marsupials were not easy to find asleep. They needed a black-fellow to do that.

And when the food was done, what then? They could in desperation and misery perhaps go on for three or four days. He had heard of some starving for much longer, but to walk in hopeless misery was a fearful drain on a man's strength and courage. If nothing turned up, he saw little prospect of more than a week's life.

And now he began to hope they might come across some wandering black-fellows. If they were savage and cannibal it would be a spear thrust or two, and the farce would be played out. If they were amiable and not themselves hungry, they might help two wandering white men. If they were not accustomed to the whites, their

revolvers would stand them in good stead. And the weapons might be useful, if they met with neither friend nor foe, to put an end to unnecessary waiting.

And so one more day passed, as they tramped through the mysterious, endless, thin forest, upon the banks of the sullen, quiet billabong.

But the continued oppression of a vast and awful sameness began to get overwhelming. It was scrub and open timber, open timber and scrub. They passed jarrah forests and sullen casuarinas melancholy to see, and scrambled through sharp scrub which tore their flesh. And what they did one hour was done the next, and one day was dreadfully like another.

So the second day was done, and one more day's food remained.

And now the solemn trees seemed personal and cruel to Smith, whose

mind was the easiest affected. The Baker tramped, and whistled, and talked, but his companion only smiled his answer, and the smile was often melancholy and far away.

These tall trees, with their motionless metallic blue-green leaves, seemed to look down on him, and take the same notice that mountains far aloof take of a solitary traveller. A rustle in their sombre foliage was a whisper, and the cries of the birds were human, too. But they all said that these two white ants could never, never get out, that they would presently lie down and stay until they died.

"This is my luck," said Smith, after a long, long hour of silence. "I said that this journey would be my luck. I felt assured it would be luck for me. And I'm humping my swag through endless hell with starvation at the end of it."

"You never know," said Mandeville eagerly. "Come now, Smith, old son, cheer up. It's a long lane—"

"No proverbs, for God's sake," cried Smith irritably. "Give me platitudes in your own language, but spare me the futile and concentrated optimism of the proverb."

"That's very fine jaw," said the chop-fallen Baker, "but if you'd speak H'english I'd understand it a deal h'easier. Of course I know a nobleman, such as Tichborne, or you, must talk different from common ordinary folk. But you've bin 'ere long enough to learn the language."

And he chattered desperately, trying to encourage his mate, while Smith stalked on in silence.

That night no more food was left than would make a scanty morning meal, and all the Baker's 'possum hunting was futile.

And the next hungry day was even as the last. They went on and on to the north, sometimes going a little to the east, through the same sombre and melancholy nightmare of a forest. Their evening meal was a little weak tea and a chew of tobacco, and an earlier camp than usual.

That night Smith was easier in his mind and more communicative. He was resigning himself to the inevitable.

"You're quite right, Baker," he said suddenly, as they lay by the fire, "you're quite right in thinking my name's not Smith. I took that name when I left England, seven years ago."

"Yes," said Mandeville; "and what's your real name and title?"

Smith laughed.

"My name is Archibald Hildegarde Osbaldistone Gore," he said.

“Holy Moses!” cried the Baker, “and to think I’ve been mates with a name like that. If it wasn’t that I ’ad a name myself as looks like an ’igh ’at on a boot-black, I’d be fair ashamed. My name is William ’Enerly Mandeville, that’s what it is, and it’s always bin a damn noosance ever since I went to school. And, Smith, what did you do to get out ’ere?”

“I got through a lot more money than I’m ever likely to pick up again,” said Smith, “and I made a particular fool of myself.”

The Baker pondered.

“Was you ever in the h’army, Smith?” he asked, “for there was a bloke in New Find as said ’e knew you was a cavalry man by the way you sat an ’orse.”

“I was,” said Smith. “And why I should tell you anything, I don’t

know. But just now you are all the world, old man, and I don't think it will matter any way. I was in the Dragoons, and when I left, I left most of what I cared for, except a woman who went and married the wrong chap."

Baker squirmed uneasily, and looked as sympathetic as he dared, for Smith was talking in a cold, hard, dry way.

"Good old man," he murmured. "Then you never did nothing as you can't go back for?" he added.

"My only crime is not having money, and not having the wits to take others in a legal way."

"Then I'll see you back 'ome yet, riding an 'orse down Piccadilly. And if I goes back p'r'aps you'll give me your custom. You knows my bread."

And they talked idly till the night fell.

“ I’m pretty ’ungry,” said the Baker
before he fell asleep.

And he dreamt of fried fish.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ASHES OF A FIRE.

SAVE that the trees were a little bigger and more closely set, there was no change in the scenery next day. Perhaps the ground rolled a trifle more, and patches of thicker scrub sometimes turned them from the billabong. But the heat was the same, and the accursed flies got worse. Each time they lay down they were hunted by pismires, whose bite is a little red-hot stab, and they saw innumerable ants of other kinds. But

though the ants, and flies, and mosquitoes were maddening, their big trouble was hunger, which they found nothing to assuage. Not yet having come to the point where they could swallow their natural antipathies and cook a snake, they let one pass unharmed which would have made a meal for six men, and Smith, who was saving his strength, did not go out of his way to kill it, though it was a black snake, and very deadly.

“It can't hurt anyone in this country,” he said. “Is there a human being within a thousand miles now? The Lord, who started earth-making in this quarter of the globe, and never brought anything to perfection but reptiles and vermin, only knows.”

And the Baker was on in front. If he had endured thirst less easily than Smith, it was evident that he could stand hunger better.

“I think 'unger's very much a

matter of 'abit, Smith," he said encouragingly. "If you fill yerself up reg'lar three times a day, a bit of starvin' knocks the stuffin' right out of yer quick; but if you live 'ard and uncertain, you can go without a deuce of a time. And except when I was in a job, I never 'ave been very reg'lar. And I 'ad too much say at 'ome to keep a job long. I was too h'inderpendent, that's what I was. So now we're 'ere, that's where we are."

But all the same, to use his own picturesque expression, much nearer physiologic truth than he knew, "The flaps of 'is stummick was glued together and eating each other," and the pain he suffered was at times very intense. But he grunted little, and only stayed sometimes half-bent down, when an extra spasm of anguish got hold of him.

"I give in over thirst," he said

to himself, "but, Mandy, my boy, you don't give in about 'unger."

So he talked with courage, though the mosquitoes robbed him of his blood, and perhaps planted malaria and ague as they bored. For Smith obviously suffered badly, though he never mentioned food and made no complaint. He continually drank water and chewed tobacco. But his face got thin and thinner, and deep anxiety sat within his eyes.

That night they had to make a dense smoke to keep away the mosquitoes, for they were surrounded by half-dried swamps, which bred these pests in millions. Till sundown they saw them swaying in long clouds under the trees, but when the sun went down some horrible ancient instinct in them cried out for blood, though in that desert these creatures of a day could not have tasted it for unnumbered generations,

and they swept down upon them singing.

Yet their instincts were still true; they knew their work, and made the long, hot night an unutterable torture, and a ceaseless, bitter combat, in which victory was theirs. The two starving men fought against them till early dawn, and as they fell asleep, the mosquitoes had them at their will. They sat in the trees mere globules of red blood, rejoicing at a satisfaction granted to one in ten thousand.

When the two men woke, they felt as if their little tortured sleep had done them harm beyond reparation. They were ghastly and worn, and poor Mandeville was half-blind. But he did not growl.

They rolled up their blankets, though this day Smith left one of his upon the ground.

“One’s enough to carry,” said he. And the Baker made no answer as he

swung his swag on his back. Even without food in it, it now felt sufficiently heavy. At noon, he, too, dropped a heavy blue blanket, and felt the loss of its weight as an extreme relief.

Their progress now was slow. They often rested, and sat in silence, sometimes broken by a bitter laugh from Smith.

"For Gawd's sake, old man," said the Baker, but he could say no more.

But that day they caught a brown snake, and cooked it on the coals. Smith was ill after it, and as white as death. They rose and staggered on. And during the night Smith was slightly delirious. He spoke in his sleep, and once or twice the Baker heard him say, "Carrie!"

Next morning Smith talked a good deal.

"It won't be much longer, Baker," he said. "And when I drop you go on. I found water for you. Perhaps you'll

find food for me. I don't want to die in this hole. Some might be glad if I never turned up again, but I'll turn up if I can."

He gnawed his lip and his blonde moustache, and, turning the end of his beard into his mouth, he chewed it in deep contemplation.

"Money, money," he said, "why, what a fool a man is. There's gold everywhere in this country. It's more and more like it. I can smell it."

He rose, staggering, but, grabbing up his blankets, walked on, followed by the Baker.

"How many days without food, Mandy?"

"This is the fourth day, Smith, bar the snake."

"Paugh," said Smith; "but do you know, Mandy, I think I could do with a bit of snake now."

He laughed thinly, and walked on

again, muttering to himself. But now for a time the pains had left him. The Baker, too, was easier, though very weak.

"How much more can you stand, Baker?" asked Smith an hour later.

"Two days I reckon," said Mandeville

"That's one more than my life," said Smith. "But let's push on."

And presently Smith stayed again. He pointed through a little opening in the bush, and Mandeville saw a faint blue range.

"How far?" said Smith. But the Baker didn't know.

"Too far to reach," said Smith. "But the gold's there."

"How do you know?" asked Mandeville.

"I know," said Smith angrily. And the Baker's heart died within him. He saw his chum was failing fast. And going round the next bend of the creek,

they trod in a pile of dust that rose beneath them. Smith went on blindly, but the Baker stayed with his heart in his mouth.

“My Gawd!” he said, and called to Smith, who came back. “What’s them?” asked the Baker, and Smith went down on his knees.

“Ashes, by God!” he said in a loud voice, and then he fainted dead away.

It took the Baker half an hour to bring him to his senses.

“What’s up?” asked Smith.

“You fainted, I guess,” said the Baker. “But we must be near some people now.”

And with Smith propped against a tree, they considered the matter in all its bearings.

“Black-fellows,” said Smith. “How old is the fire do you think?”

But Mandeville shook his head.

"It's dead cold, and might 'ave bin 'ere a year."

"No!" said Smith, with his hand in the grey ashes, "it hasn't rained here since it was lighted."

"And when was the last rain 'ere?" asked the Baker cheerfully.

Smith looked at the dried grass, and tore up a thin tussock.

"Not so very long," he answered. "But the blacks who lighted it may be a hundred miles off, and that would lick us. And if we found them they would most likely spear us."

"It ain't certain," said Mandeville.

"No!" answered Smith. "But probable."

And rising, he took up his swag, and walked on side by side with his chum.

"It's likely they will stay by the billabong," he said. "There may be fish in it, and there's sure to be fish in the river."

And though we have seen very few kangaroos, yet there'll be plenty about somewhere. We may strike them yet."

He walked a little faster at the notion.

"If I have to live on grubs out of a rotten stump, I'll live," he said. And hope gave him more strength. He walked better, though he felt light-headed.

And just before sundown they came on the ashes of another fire by the creek. This time Smith spotted them first, and he thrust his hand in to feel if they had more warmth than the day's burning sun could give them. But they were cold.

Smith sat down on a fallen tree, and contemplated the ashes in silence. Once or twice he opened his mouth to speak, but he said nothing. The Baker brought up some water from the billabong, and made a little weak tea of the last tea they had, and part of that was leaves

saved from two infusions. Then Smith spoke :

“I suppose we are the first white men that ever got so far in this direction,” he said, “unless we are near Warburton’s track when he crossed the continent in ‘seventy-three.’ We’ll call it Mandeville Land if we ever get back.”

The Baker smiled faintly, and lighted a little fire.

“Not too big,” said Smith; “we want to see the blacks first, and then we’ll have a chance.”

And after the tea they lay down.

“No further to-day,” said Smith, and Mandeville undid his swag for him. And, presently, it was quite dark, and Mandeville fell unto an uneasy slumber. How long it lasted he could not say, but he was waked by hearing Smith talk. He turned over in alarm. But Smith presently broke into laughter. “Man-

deville, you damn fool, wake up," he said.

"Yes," said the Baker, shaking.

"You're a fool; I'm a fool; but I see it now. I see it now!"

"See what, Smith?" asked the Baker, and Smith came over to him and knelt down.

"It was a white man's fire, Mandy."

CHAPTER IX.

THE WHITE MAN.

THE Baker's first and most natural impulse was to curse Smith for waking him up in the middle of the night, and his second was, that now, and at last, his chum had gone definitely off his head. He groaned as he sat up and prepared to soothe the man, and combat his wild delusion. But Smith was by no means crazy or delirious. Indeed, he was keen enough to perceive from the very tone of Mandeville's voice what was in his mind.



“I’m not crazy, Baker,” he said earnestly, as he raked the ashes of their own fire together. “I’m quite sane, and what I say is right.”

“That white men lighted this fire?” said the Baker. “And ’ow the deuce did you find that out in pitch dark?”

Smith laughed, a far more pleasant laugh than usual.

“Why, man alive, I saw it last night, and I didn’t see it. It was written large, and I missed it. How, I can’t tell, for it’s plain enough. It was far too large a fire for any black-fellow to light. Haven’t you heard me often enough tell you to light a black-fellow’s fire, three sticks and two hot coals? Well, and this fire was big enough to roast a sheep whole. I tell you white men did it.”

But the Baker was not so easily convinced. His mind was acute.

“And ’ow do you know as black-

fellows always does as you say? Australia's big enough for a 'undred ways of fire lightin'?"

"That's all right," said Smith impatiently; "but I know their usual custom, and I'm justified in thinking what I say is right."

The Baker shook his head.

"And, granting as some white man lighted it, where is the bloomin' white man?"

And poor Smith's castle in the air collapsed. His head sank upon his breast.

"That's true," he groaned. "But it was a white man anyhow. When it's light we can search and see if there is nothing to confirm it."

"No," said the Baker; "if it's so, don't let's waste no time. Let's haff straight down the creek. If so be as he was 'ere at all, 'e would go that way. And I dare say we shall find 'im

a bloomin' corpse, if we find 'im at all."

"You're a croaker," said Smith, who was recovering again, and they lay down till dawn.

The pace they went at the next day was very slow, for they were at an extremity. The internal pains which had tormented them on the second and third days of starvation returned again like seven devils worse than the first, and Mandeville, who was the stronger, suffered the most. They had covered little more than six miles, when they camped just before noon.

"If we strike nothing to-night, it's all up with Smith," said the Baker, and when they started again about three o'clock, he insisted on carrying his chum's swag.

"Drop them both," said Smith.

About four o'clock they did drop them, and walked on light, the Baker

leading through the open forest, carrying nothing but the water-bags. Smith even threw away his coat, which hung on him as loosely as if it had been made for Hicks. He found it easier going, but hope was gradually dying. White-fellow or black-fellow, what did it matter? He was a thousand times inclined to stay, to lie down and die.

And when he was at his lowest he saw the Baker stop and bend down.

"Poor devil, he's got the gripes again," said Smith, in a curious detached way, as if the Baker was some one whom he was looking at from some other than a human stand-point.

But Mandeville had nothing wrong with him when he stooped. He bent down to pick something up; and that something made his eyes bolt out of his head. He put it in his coat pocket and walked on.

"No, I never picked h'anythin' up,"

he said obstinately to himself, and then diving into his pocket, he pulled the thing out again.

“If I shows it to Smith 'e'll go fair off 'is nut,” he said. “It ain't possible, that's what it ain't. But, Lordy, ain't it 'eavy.”

And sitting down, he waited till Smith came stumbling along blindly.

“I've found something, Smith,” he said casually.

“Yes,” said Smith dully.

“It's gold, Smith.”

Smith smiled wanly, and sat down.

“Let's eat it, Mandy.”

But the Baker produced his find and handed it over. It was obviously human handiwork, and Smith livened up.

“A ball, and weighs about seven pounds,” he said. “And the hole through it is for a handle. By Jove, it's a costly kind of a black-fellow's waddy. But what's this?”

And he sprang on his feet.

“Look!” and Mandy saw what he had not noticed before. He paled to the lips, and Smith fell back again on the log.

“It’s white men again; and why this mark?”

But Smith could not tell him. For the heavy ball was plainly marked with a broad arrow—thus:—  and with his thumb on it, Smith sprang up again and shouted loud:

“Cooley!”

But the forest swallowed up his cry as it had swallowed them up.

They walked again, and Mandeville carried the gold ball.

“The broad arrow is the naval sign on stores,” said Smith.

“And on convicts’ clothes, too,” said Mandeville. “I know’d a man as did time, and ’e told me.”

“We’re not likely to meet either sailors or convicts here,” said Smith. “It’s a mystery. I don’t feel hungry, but sick. What kind of a country is it? It’s full of horror, and thirst, and hunger, and cannibals, from the Leeuwin to the North Cape.” And he stopped trembling.

“Steady, old man,” said the Baker, “we may strike it yet.”

“We’ll never get out. It’s my luck,” said Smith. “This day will do me. Give me a drop of water.”

He sat down and twisted.

“Oh these accursed pains,” he groaned, and then he looked up at the Baker. “I’m sorry to howl, Baker, but it did catch me then.”

And Mandeville was quite as bad, though, being a bit stronger, he said nothing.

They went on again for half an hour by the billabong, which was here pretty straight, and deeper within its banks,

but in that half-hour they did barely a mile.

“What’s the use?” screamed the man Smith, to his inherited desire of life. “What’s the use? Why should I suffer? Why not lie down and die?”

And yet the desire for life clawed on to hope, and struggled still, driving the failing creature of a day through torture which was sometimes lulled, and sometimes grew monstrously, splitting the man’s mind as a tree’s roots drive rocks asunder, as a cancer penetrates the living tissue.

When they talked, they returned again and again to the white man’s fire, and to the great ball of gold, the lost weapon of some impenetrable mystery. And Smith’s striving with its solution was near setting him mad; he felt almost as he had done in that day of thirst when his personality left him, and he became a

nameless, brainless creature that only suffered blindly, ignorant of destiny.

But though they knew it not, a partial solution of the strange problem was at hand, a solution which solved it to present another still more terrible, still more inexplicable. As the sun went down upon the trees, they came suddenly, and without any dreadful warning in the warm wind, upon the body of a white man, only a few days dead.

But what a white man he was, said the two dying wanderers who found him lying there. No, indeed no! he was like no man they had ever seen, for his hair hung down his shoulders, his beard was below his breast. As he lay upon his back, with bared teeth, they beheld the great arched chest of a giant, and they could note, even yet, the scars of spear wounds on his breast and arms. He looked a savage, a strange and awful survival, for in the aspect of him was

no suggestion that he had ever known any influence of any civilisation. He might have been solitary from his birth, for aloofness and suspicion were visible in him still. His face was burnt to an extreme brownness, which might have left doubts as to his race, but the muscles under the arms were white. He lay there with a rudely-tanned kangaroo skin just across his feet. There was no ornament nor any sign of personal adornment upon him. But in his hand was clenched a short stick, which Mandeville dared to drag from him. It fitted the golden ball which he still carried.

“My God,” said Smith, “what’s all this? Didn’t I say it was a nightmare land? What’s it mean, Mandy?”

But the Baker shook his head.

“Save us from such white men,” he said, in a whisper. “Did he die, or was he killed?”

When they went round the other side

the answer was easy. They saw the broken shaft of a spear still in his side.

“He fought down yonder, and came here to die,” said Smith. “But, Mandy, whom did he fight with?”

“Let’s get away,” said Mandy hurriedly. And they left the awful sight in silence.

“Was it blacks or other white men that killed him?”

They fought the question out for an hour, but could give it no answer.

“What could he be? Did we dream it?” said Smith. “He looked just like a savage.”

“Perhaps ’e got lost, like us, years ago,” suggested Mandeville.

But Smith shook his head.

“If he had been lost as a child it might have been.”

And, with that horror behind them and death in front, they wandered on, presently half forgetting what or where they were. They sat down, and rose again,

until it got almost dark, and just as they were failing utterly, they came out of the forest to a line of big gum trees.

“The river at last,” said Smith; and he fell in a limp heap.

Mandeville left him, and running twenty yards, he saw the river. Across it was the light of a camp fire.

CHAPTER X.

THE BRODARRO.

"ACCORDING to Smith's notion, it's too big to be black-fellows," said the Baker. "But black or white, it's all one! And here goes for death or glory, spears or grub."

And he cooed very loudly, standing right out in the open, on the edge of the deep-cut bank. As his voice echoed from the dense trees opposite, he saw a figure or two pass in front of the blaze.

“I’ve roused ’em,” said Mandy, and he felt his revolver in his belt. “If they’re man-eaters, I’ll do for one or two.”

Then his cooey was answered from the other side of the river.

“Hallo,” said the Baker, and he dimly distinguished some tall figures on the opposite bank. But his answer appeared to disturb them curiously. He could hear a quick, low chattering, and saw them disperse. He cooed again impatiently, and this time he was answered in an unknown tongue.

“Blacks,” said the Baker disconsolately. “I guess we’re done.”

But he replied.

“Don’t understand your lingo,” he said boldly; “but we’re starving, and want some grub.”

And, to his horror, for it was now utterly unexpected, he was answered in English, but in English of an accent

that he had never heard. It sounded rather guttural, and quite foreign.

"Who are you?" said the man who spoke.

"Two miners," said Mandy; "and for Gawd's sake send over some grub. I and my mate have bin five days without food, and we're near dead."

"Where do you come from?" asked the voice.

"Up the billabong."

He heard them repeat the word "billa-bong," and then there was silence.

"How many are you?" said the voice again.

"Only two, damn it," said Mandy, and then he heard a bit of harsh laughter.

"Then stay where you are till we come," said the voice. And Mandy sat down, with his face to the river.

But in five minutes someone leapt on him from behind, and had him pinned

as in a vice. He could not move, and would not have been able to help himself if he had had his full strength.

“Hallo, what’s this?” he said, as he heard the heavy breathing of the man who held him. Then he saw another figure in front holding a spear. “If it’s whites the other side, it’s blacks this,” said Mandy; and he called aloud to Smith, “Good-bye, old man, they’ve got me.”

And Smith, who had recovered from his faint, came staggering to his doom like a drunken man. He, too, was made a prisoner in a moment by yet another man whom the Baker had not seen.

Then their captors spoke in English. “Is that all?”

Mandy made a struggle.

“Why, are you English? Holy Moses! I thought you was black-fellows.”

“No, we are English,” said the man who held him.

But the voice was so strange, so wild, so utterly unlike any voice that he had ever heard, that it made his blood run cold. His skin crept, and his hair bristled.

"Then why do you hold me?" said he, when he got his own voice back. "I'm half dead, and my mate's worse than I am. Lemme go, do now."

And at a word from the man with the spear, Mandy's captor let go. The Baker went to Smith.

"They're English, old man," he said, "and it's all right. They must be miners, too, or something, I don't know what. By the Lord, my head's gone wrong I do think."

He looked up, and saw the big man who had ordered his captors to release him. He saw his great beard dimly, and like a flash there came back to him the great bearded white savage whom they had seen that day.

"If they are like that, why, the Lord

save us," he muttered. "It's a dream."

But Smith was lying there dying. The thought of that brought his courage back.

"We can talk to 'em anyway," he said, and tried to get Smith upon his feet. One of the others helped him. And they went down to the river bank silently.

A little way further down the river than the place the billabong entrance lay were some rough canoes, and they put Smith in one and Mandeville in the other.

"Cheer up, old man," said the Baker, and they shot out on the gloomy water, just there some thirty yards across, and with about ten strokes, they reached the other side.

The Baker landed easily, and the other men helped Smith, a bit roughly, but not unkindly. They went up the bank, and going about fifty yards, came out on an open space in which was a large camp

and some native-looking gunyahs, or leaf and branch huts.

And then Mandeville could see his hosts, or his captors, whichever they might turn out to be, and his heart sank within him, for they were nearly all big, and one was gigantic, and their whole appearance was that of the dead man whom they had seen. It was like a nightmare truly to see them clad in skins, rough and hairy, and burnt as black as white men can ever get. But their features were English, if strangely altered, and very few appeared to have traces of black blood in them. Those who had were the smaller, and apparently the less considered.

And he saw the women, too. They did not at first lessen his fear of the men. But he had no time just then to speculate ignorantly; Smith called for his attention. He seemed absolutely dying; he lay quite unconscious, and only moaned a little every now and again.

“Can you give me somethin’ for my mate?” he asked, and the chief nodded and spoke to one of the women. She disappeared into the largest gunyah, and brought out a dish with some boiled or stewed meat in it.

“I ’opes to God it ain’t man,” said the Baker. But when he took the dish from the savage woman, whose matted hair hung to her bare knees, he nearly let it drop. It was heavy truly, but it was of pure gold!

“I’m done,” said Mandy, going on his knees by Smith. “I’m fair beat. This cooks my goose. When did I die?”

And he fed Smith with his fingers until the same woman who had given him the dish snatched it away from him, and taking Smith’s head on her lap, she fed him with a rudely-fashioned spoon of the same metal as the dish.

Then another woman, who was younger and fairer to look on, brought Mandy

some food, which he ate too ravenously. But when he nearly choked, he put the brake on, and forcing himself to stay, he took out his pipe, and lighted it with a hot coal.

This proceeding was curiously, not to say anxiously, watched by every one of the twenty or thirty people, young and old, who composed the camp. But when he took a deep inspiration, and then blew out the smoke, there was a stampede among the little boys and girls. But the men were intensely interested.

“Is that ‘bacca’?” asked the big man.

“Yes,” said the Baker.

“I’ve heard of it,” said the chief; “my father’s father told me. Is it good? My father said it was good.”

“Would you like to try it?” asked the Baker, holding his precious pipe out. “But not too much, or it will make you sick.”

And the chief very solemnly took a draw, which he managed fairly well. It did not seem to commend itself to him, however, and he handed it back to Mandy, who, alternately eating and smoking, was soon in a state of repletion, which prevented him caring what happened. And now Smith began to get really conscious.

"Where am I?" he asked the Baker, whom he found sitting by him.

"We're in a camp with white men," said the Baker loudly, and then he added rapidly, and in a lower tone, "And I'm beat, Smith. They are all like the man wot we saw dead this afternoon."

Smith sat up as if he had been pricked by a spear, and looked at their captors standing in the glare of the fire.

"Pre-historic men," he said. "I knew I was crazy. I want to go to sleep."

And the Baker took off his coat to roll it up for a pillow. He still had the golden ball in his pocket, and he took it out. It was snatched from his hand the next moment by the chief, who seemed greatly disturbed.

“You, where did you get this?” he demanded.

And the Baker related as simply as possible what they had found by the billabong. His recital was listened to with groans, and one woman shrieked, and was taken away by the others. She was his wife, and apparently the dead man was the chief's brother. When the Baker finished, he placed his coat under Smith's head, and his chum fell fast asleep.

But now the camp was in agitation, and every one got out his arms, which were all of a kind resembling black-fellows' weapons. But most of the clubs were of gold, with wooden handles, and

some were globular, some pear-shaped, and some the shape of a jagged nugget. When they were ready, the chief called to the Baker :

“You will stay, and I will leave five men here. To-morrow night we shall be back. You are friends. But if you are not, we will burn you alive.”

And he departed with fifteen others towards the river, while the Baker lay down under a kangaroo skin, given him by the girl who had offered him food.

“She’d be good-looking if she’d comb her hair, and take her first bath,” said the Baker. “But who they are, and what they are, and ’ow they came here, just licks me.”

He fell asleep, and every time he woke during the night he heard the melancholy wail of the bereaved woman. It struck him as if she ought not to feel it so much, being so savage to look at.

When he woke in the morning, he found Smith sitting up with his hands to his head.

“Am I crazy, Baker?”

“If you are, I am,” said the Baker.

“Then, we are alive, and not so hungry, and in a camp of pre-historic men?” asked Smith.

“I dunno about prehistoric, but we’re in a camp of jumped-up white savages that talk English,” said the Baker.

Smith rose.

“Look, here, Baker, draw it mild!”

“I tell you they talks English just as good as you or me, though sometimes they shoves in a word I don’t savvy,” said the Baker. “And what’s more, everything they ’ave is solid gold—jugs and pots and clubs and h’everything. And they thinks no more of it than you or I would of a bally old iron camp oven.”

And to convince Smith of that, he

went to the outside of a hut and brought back a hammered-out basin, which must have weighed eight pounds at least.

“Is this my luck?” said Smith. But he could believe nothing till a girl came out into the dawn. “Do you mean she talks English?” asked Smith.

“That’s what I mean,” said the Baker stubbornly.

And Smith called to the girl, who came nearer, somewhat in the manner of a shy and curious filly.

“Are you English?” said Smith.

“Yes,” said the girl.

“And you can talk it?”

“Of course,” said the girl; “what the devil do you mean?”

But she used the word in an odd, wild, natural way, which showed mere curiosity, not anger. It struck Smith as being so utterly incongruous that he was absolutely thunder-struck, and for a mo-

ment could say nothing. Presently he recovered.

“But what are you all doing here?” he asked.

“I don’t savvy,” said the girl a bit sulkily.

“Have you always lived here?”

The young savage shook her head, and looked at him contemptuously.

“No fear,” she replied; “we came here from Wonga Wonga.”

“And where’s Wonga Wonga?”

But this was too much for the girl. If this strange-looking man didn’t know where Wonga Wonga was, and couldn’t believe she knew her own language, he was evidently neither more nor less than a fool.

She didn’t answer, and turned away. As she went, two of the men came from the river with some fish. They were absolute savages to look at. A Fuegian, or the wildest Tartar on

the Siberian steppes was a civilised being to them.

Smith rose, and said, "Good-morning."

The bigger man of the two looked at him with peculiar apprehension, mixed with some ferocity, and passed on, but the younger, who was far more open countenanced, returned his salutation civilly.

"Will you have a fish?" he asked, and without waiting for acceptance, he dropped a Murray cod or big barbel at Smith's feet.

"Thank you," said Smith, and as the man looked quite as friendly as his gift showed, he invited him to sit down and palaver. But it was a continual effort for him to comprehend that the other understood him if he used any but the very easiest words. And, indeed, he soon discovered that many abstract terms were beyond them.

“How long will the other men be away?” he asked, as he and the prehistoric person sat on a log, and the Baker lay on the ground.

“Not long, mate,” said his friend. “When they have killed all the Emus they find.”

“Emus?” said Smith.

And his new pal explained that he meant a tribe of black-fellows.

“What’s your name, mate?” asked Smith.

“Billy.”

“Billy; and what else?”

But this the man didn’t comprehend. He was Billy, and was the son of Bill who was out Emu-hunting, and the man who didn’t understand that must be a fool. That was his opinion.

And now it began to dawn on Smith, that the accent, which had sounded so strange even to the Baker, was nothing else than a variation, or descendant, of

the purest Cockney. The aspirates were invariably omitted, and most, if not all, the *a*'s had come *i*'s, and the open *o* of English was undeniably the *u* with the umlaut of German. What other changes had taken place were due, probably, to the influence of climate, and some black-fellow lingo, which they could all talk fluently, and mixed with their English, especially when talking together.

But now Bill wanted to satisfy his curiosity.

"Give me the smoke thing you gave Big Jack yesterday," he said to the Baker.

And as the Baker filled it, some of the others came round. When it was filled, Mandeville struck a match on the seat of his trousers, and this caused a monstrous and absurd commotion. One of the men at last grabbed hold of Mandeville, and insisted on examining

his breeches, and the Baker only obtained release by striking another match. They stood a little further off then, and were terribly suspicious. But Bill tried the pipe very courageously.

"That's enough," said Smith, when he had had a few puffs, "or else you will be very sick."

But Bill was loth to relinquish the extraordinary object he held.

"I like it," he said, as if that settled it. However, after a few more puffs, he gave it up, and resumed the conversation, this time taking the lead.

"Where do you come from, and what tribe are you?" he asked.

"We come from New Find; many days' journey," said Smith, pointing to the south-west. "But we are not a tribe. We are English."

"So are we," said the big, suspicious-looking man, "and you are not like us."

"Then, how did you come to be in

Australia at all?" asked Smith. He was rapidly reaching the conclusion that they must be the descendants of people shipwrecked generations ago upon the Australian coast. But his question was greeted with laughter. The real question to them was where these white men came from.

"We shall 'ave to ask Big Jack," said the Baker; "he seemed to 'ave more savvy than all this lot put together. Blow me, if I hever saw sich a bloomin' crew."

"Dry up," said Smith; "you'll get your head caved in, and mine too, if you shoot off your mouth here and they catch on to your guff."

And as the community proceeded to make a morning meal in the most savage and primitive way, they joined in, and, roughly cleaning the fish Bill had given them, they cooked it in the hot coals in the approved manner.

“Where does all this gold come from?” asked Smith, when he was satisfied.

And Bill pointed east.

“Over there,” he said.

“How far?”

“Not far,” said Bill.

“Show it to us, Bill,” said the Baker greedily.

But Bill shook his head.

“Not now; wait till Big Jack comes back. And what is your name?”

He spoke to Smith, who told him.

“Smith, Smith,” said Bill; “and you?”

“Mandeville,” said the Baker.

Bill tried it, but seemed to decide it was too long.

“He called you Baker,” he said, looking doubtfully at the little man.

“Baker will do,” answered Mandy.

And the idle throng returned to them, and asked questions about their journey

and their people, which made Smith despair. He prayed for night and the big man's return.

CHAPTER XI.

A SOLUTION.

THEY spent the remainder of the day in sleep, when they were at last left alone, except by Bill, who seemed to consider himself their companion or custodian. For Smith was thoroughly done up by the journey and starvation. The excitement had been too much for him, and the speculations his tired brain indulged as to the origin of an English-speaking white race of savages, nearly drove him crazy. Who could they be? The likeliest

solution was certainly the one he had struck on. It occurred to him once that they might be the descendants of some lost explorer, such as poor Leichardt, who had taken up with some tribe of black-fellows. But there were very many in the camp obviously without a taint of black blood in them. Some would have been as fair as himself if they had not been burnt so intensely by their wild life, and nearly all had big blonde beards, and moustaches which reached to their shoulders.

And so far, whether they had legends as to their origin or not, he had not been able to get them to speak plainly. They had come from "over there" a long time ago, Bill said when pressed; but "over there" was not definite, and though he pointed due east, it meant little. He tried once before he fell asleep to find out if Bill understood anything about the sea. Yes, the word was

familiar to the man, but it obviously meant nothing more than a lagoon or water-hole much bigger than any piece of water he had seen. And when Smith suggested to him that the sea was like the boundless plain and without limit, the notion became abstract, and as unintelligible as eternity.

That this was so seemed to dispose of the notion that they were castaways, such as the Pitcairn Islanders might have been if they had reached their island without any implements of civilisation, and had been left to a hand-to-hand fight with a barren land and fierce savages. He fell asleep thinking that he had perhaps discovered a new white race who had learnt English from the lost explorer whom he had once believed their ancestor. But why they should give up their native tongue was an insoluble problem, unless indeed they had regarded the new white man as their

superior, and had learnt his language by a quasi-court language fitter for them than their own. And from what period did they date? Obviously, he said, they must have been savages for centuries.

When he woke it was quite dark, save for the light of the camp fire, at which he saw the Baker sitting with several of the younger men, some of the boys, and one or two girls. The girl whom they had interrogated was on Mandeville's right hand, and the strange party seemed to be enjoying itself thoroughly. For the Baker was singing "Sweet Belle Mahone" to them, and the simple melancholy of the old air seemed to please them greatly. They tried to join in the chorus, and the Baker's right-hand neighbour caught the air pretty accurately. Smith advanced to the fire, and was greeted with a "Sit down, mate," which, if he had closed his eyes, would have seemed to emanate from

any ordinary crowd of miners. But there they were, savage, hirsute, wild, and half-clad in untanned skins.

Smith was careful not to sit next to the Baker, for he wished to be as friendly as possible with those who might resent with a gold club any sign of suspicion or aloofness. He squatted amicably between two of the men, and held out his hand to the blaze.

"How goes it, matey?" said the Baker.

"Bully," said Smith. "And you?"

"Fust-rate," said the Baker. "I'm all at 'ome, and makin' a regular sing-song. These chaps are a good sort, a bally good sort."

"I should have been dead now but for them," said Smith, and catching Bill's eyes shining under his matted forelock.

Bill appealed for his pipe. It was lighted and passed round; the boys and girls each took their turn to

splutter and cough over the magical instrument. When it was returned to Smith, he was glad that it was out, for he would have felt obliged to continue smoking without wiping the mouth-piece. As he filled it again he managed to do that furtively.

“Sing again, Baker,” said Bill, showing his teeth. And the Baker began the song of the old convicts :

“I’m off by the morning train
To cross the raging main.”

And to the astonishment of Smith, they all burst in and joined the Baker, knowing both the air and the words. He sat as if he was turned into stone and could not sing, for his jaw had dropped.

But when they came to the lines,

“Doin’ the grand in a distant land,
Ten thousand miles away,”

the truth came to him like a lightning flash, and he half rose, to sit down again, gasping.

“By all that’s holy and unholy, by all the gods and little fishes,” said Smith, “I’ve hit it this time.”

The Baker, too, though he did not understand, was so taken aback that he stopped in the middle of the verse, and let the wild crowd thunder through it by themselves.

“’Ello!” he cried, “and ’ow the blazes did *you* learn that ’ere song?”

“Our fathers sang it,” said three or four, wondering at his astonishment.

“And ’ow the deuce did they know it?” asked the Baker.

But that was too much for them. Why did these strangers ask such silly questions? Their journey from their

far-off tribe had obviously affected their minds.

But just then they heard a cry from across the river, which was answered, apparently, by a sentinel on the bank, and the crowd deserted the fire at once, leaving Smith and the Baker alone. Bill and the other man and the boys took their spears, but without any such haste as would suggest an enemy. And then they heard a wild noise, which sounded strangely like a clamorous "hurrah" repeated angrily.

The women who were in the gunyahs came out, and thronged to the edge of the open space on which the camp stood. Presently the throng split open, and the fifteen warriors, who had left the night before under the command of Big Jack, came through, amidst strange guttural cries and screams of triumph and revenge. The woman whose man had been killed was the only one who did

not join in the triumph. She sat moody and alone outside her savage hut, in terrible and inconsolable mourning. Her face was scored with the marks of her own nails, and the blood dried on the wounds made her look as if she were tattooed.

“Where is the wife of the Slayer?” said Big Jack, as he came into the light.

“She is by her gunyah, father,” cried the others.

But the Baker clutched Smith’s arm.

“What have they got, Smith?” he cried in a thick whisper.

And Smith did not answer; for each one of the party was carrying two heads. And Big Jack came to the woman, and without a word put his terrible trophies on the ground in front of her. The next man did the same, and turning, joined Big Jack at the fire. As each burden was put down, a yell arose from the crowd, and when there were thirty grin-

ning heads in one awful pile, they shouted "hurrah" once more.

"D'ye think they ate the rest?" asked the Baker.

But Smith, who felt sick, could not answer that question. How could he tell if these men were cannibals? If they were, what a strange and awful reversion! what a savage satire upon the white world of a boasted but vain civilisation!

And meanwhile Big Jack related their experiences.

"We found the Slayer's body, and his wound was made with an Emu's spear. Yesterday we followed their tracks, and caught them by noon. There are none left."

But some of the men were wounded, and the woman attended their hurts. Their chief or captain was not touched. The others told stories of his strength and skill in a strange, mixed dialect, that

came to them easiest when excitement stirred them.

Smith and the Baker, who kept rather out of the way until the fervour of the savage welcome was overpast, now came into the crowd about the fire; for Smith was horribly curious to know if they had brought anything else home from their hunting but heads. He was reassured when he saw the women cooking fish and a big kangaroo.

"Yet that says nothing," Smith told himself. "They have been away twenty-four hours and more. They may be cannibals when they are pressed. May Fate send them plenty while we are here, if indeed we ever get out."

So, when the feeding was done, he came in again, and sat down by Big Jack.

"Good-day to you," said he civilly, and Big Jack nodded a grim salute.

“You did well to-day,” said Smith.

“We killed them all,” mumbled Jack with gusto: “men, and women, and the children. It is a bad day for the Emus. But the heads we brought were all men’s heads.”

“May I talk with you?” said Smith; “or are you weary?”

“I am never weary,” said the giant. “And I want to talk with you. Who are you? and where do you come from?”

Smith told him.

“Then there are many white men in this land?” asked Big Jack.

“Very many.”

“Then why do they not kill all the black-fellows?” asked Jack.

Smith explained to him that the white men had done so as far as they could, until the law stopped them.

“The law!” said Big Jack. “My father’s father used to speak of the law.

But I never understood it. Tell me what it is."

And Smith toiled hard to explain that enigma. But he had to come to concrete examples.

"The law is a custom which says one man must not kill another except in war. And if he does he is killed, too."

"Who kills him?" asked Big Jack.

"The people who have the power," said Smith, who was rapidly becoming confused.

"Then it is not wrong to kill if you can?" asked Jack.

"Yes it is, unless you are in the right," said poor Smith.

"What is right?" asked Jack.

And then Smith was quite done.

"It seems foolish talk," said Big Jack.

"Let us speak of other things. Why did you come here?"

"To look for gold," said Smith.

“Do you want to make clubs with it?” asked Jack.

And when Smith had finished explaining currency, Jack wanted to ask no more.

“The tribe you belong to must all be fools,” he said. “Gold is useful to make clubs with and things to boil food in, but who would give me a fish for a little bit of it when he can go out yonder and get all he wants. It is foolish talk. My father’s father used to speak of such things, but he was an old man, and very silly.”

“Who was your father’s father?” asked Smith eagerly.

And the Baker, too, came closer. He had been listening to the talk with his mouth open, for the mystery weighed on him heavily.

“He was an old man, and silly,” said Jack, “but he was a good fighter when he was young. And my father says he

had killed white men belonging to a tribe over yonder."

He too pointed to the east.

"Where, at Sidney?" asked Smith.

"I do not know," said Jack, who was wearied of the aimless talk. "You can ask my father, who is now an old man, and no good except to talk and eat. And very soon he will die, which will be a good thing, for now he cannot even catch fish."

And Big Jack dismissed Smith with a wave of his huge paw.

As they went to their tree, they saw the widowed woman sitting close to the pile of heads, and talking to them. The Baker shrank away, and got the other side of Smith. They lay down close together.

"Do you know who these people are?" asked Smith.

"Ain't got a notion," said the Baker.

"They are the descendants of con-

victs escaped a hundred years ago," said Smith.

And the Baker fairly gasped.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BEGINNING OF TROUBLE.

WHETHER Smith was right or wrong in this assumption of his remained to be seen, and from the vague way in which Big Jack spoke he might never get sufficient evidence to corroborate or upset his theory. The evidence for it would depend on the chatter of a senile old savage, who, in his turn, had obtained it from an outlaw. Smith knew enough of testimony to be aware that this might be no more than a presumption easily

capable of being upset. But he desired intensely to solve the mystery, and not even the danger and uncertainty of being the guests of people little superior in their habits and customs to men of the Stone Age, could prevent his feeling ardent curiosity.

And then there was the question of the gold. From the way they employed it, from Bill's talk, and from what Big Jack said, it was obvious that there must be sufficient near at hand to make the fortune of a hundred men. On a rough calculation he estimated that there was then in the camp, consumed in the making of their waddies and other weapons, and in the rude bowls which represented their degree of civilisation, at least two hundred pounds weight of the metal, and that at £4 an ounce was worth roughly about £12,000. Besides this, he found lumps of gold quartz about the camp sufficient to make any ordinary miner go

clean out of his mind. The boys used the smaller pieces as missiles, and one big lump was used in putting the weight. On lifting it, Smith found it weighed at least forty pounds, and its bulk was gold.

"There must be an outcrop of a vein here," he said to the Baker, "which would take our breath away. There can't be a mine like it in the universe. If we can only get out of here and find it again, we shall be the richest men in the world. That is, unless we sell it to a syndicate. But the getting out's the thing."

"I've a notion," said the Baker, "that it will be good to slope pretty soon, as soon, any way, as we see this 'ere mine, for, to tell the truth, Smith, I think there will be a row."

He looked so serious, and yet so ashamed, that Smith was puzzled.

"What have you been up to?" he demanded.

The Baker shook his head, and looked down half bashfully.

“Well, Smith, I ain’t done nothing,” he began, “but do you know I’ve a kind of a notion that the wild cat that gives me the tucker reg’lar, is a bit mashed on me.”

Smith was uneasy. Of all things, this was the most likely to cause trouble.

“Go on,” he said severely.

But the Baker remonstrated against the way he spoke.

“You ain’t no call to look at me in that tone of voice,” he said. “If it’s true, I can’t help it, and, Lord knows, I’ve done nothin’ to encourage her. But she just freezes to me quite natural, and the bloke that goes with Bill, I think he tumbles to it.”

Smith was quite alarmed.

“If you aren’t careful, you’ll do for us, Baker,” he said. “You must be careful. Are you sure of it?”

The Baker shrugged his shoulders.

“You just watch it yourself. You’ll see me icy perlite, and ’er tryin’ to thaw me out. And if the bloke’s about, ’is eyes’ll be like gimlets. It fair gives me the ’ump for a savage woman to be gone on me. I’ll ’ave my ’ead opened when I ain’t lookin’.”

“Then just avoid her,” said Smith.

“And then, maybe, she’ll jab me with a spear,” said the Baker, half between crying and laughing. “I’m glad I’ve got my revolver. Where’s your’n, Smith?”

Smith tapped the waist of his trousers.

“Inside, in the lining,” said he. “I wish it was a bit bigger. But it will scare them anyhow, if it comes to trouble.”

The Baker, forgetting his woes and the danger he stood in between the lady and the savage, fairly laughed.

“I should think so, mate,” he said.

"Sometimes I think it would be a good thing to let 'em hear it, and see what it'll do."

But that meant the loss of a cartridge, and one out of about fifty between them might be wanted in a tight corner.

"You keep it dark till it's useful," said Smith, "and find out what you can about the canoes in the river. See how many there are, and keep your eyes skinned. For they may shove us out of this at any moment."

"Or shove us in if grub gets scarce," cried the Baker. "I wish I was h'out of it. If I was on the track with ten days' tucker, I'd be 'alf inclined to 'oof it back down the billabong, and make a big shy for New Find."

And then their conversation was cut into by Bill, who came demanding a smoke. The Baker, who, for a moment, thought he was the man he was most particularly in dread of, stepped aside.

When he saw his mistake, he couldn't help watching the two men together.

For Smith was as tall as Bill, and very lithe. His beard was almost golden, and short and curly. In spite of his moleskin trousers, his broken boots and his ragged shirt, he looked a gentleman. And to see him give his pipe to a savage, who, ten times over, satisfied all the Baker's child-like notions of savages, was something strange, horrible, and yet irresistibly ridiculous. For Bill was broad, and as muscular as a young Hercules, and if he had been shaved both on his breast and back, as well as his head and face, he might, except for his feet, which were over large, and flat and misshapen, have stood as a model for the nude. But it was the possession of his beard and hair, and the skin which covered him, and his wild carriage, which made the contrast tremendous. If he had been black, it would have

seemed natural enough. If he had spoken some unintelligible language, it would not have presented so many features of tragic and comic interest, irresistibly combined.

So when Bill remarked that he now wanted a pipe of his own because he liked tobacco so much, the Baker was all of a sudden taken with a hysterical fit of laughter, which he could not control. He fairly screamed and shouted, and at last lay down.

Smith, who had a notion of what had taken the man, was at first alarmed lest Bill should understand. But he reckoned on his possessing keenness and a sense of humour which were both beyond him. And, like a flash, it came to his chum that it would be no bad plan to suggest that the Baker was not quite in his right senses.

"He's mad, I think," he said to Bill, who was puffing at the pipe quite calmly,

and taking no notice of the laughter. "He's mad, Bill. The hunger was too much for him."

And at that the Baker yelled till the whole camp came in sober curiosity to see a phenomenon which was curious and highly absurd, for they very rarely laughed. During generations life had been too hard for humour, and not advanced enough for sarcastic or sardonic laughter. It pleased Smith to see the girl whom the Baker believed to have taken a fancy for him, looking at the lunatic on the ground with something resembling contempt.

"Perhaps someone once hit him on the head with a waddy," said Bill. For such an incident might account for a man's acting in an absurd way.

But when the crowd dispersed, and Bill was full of as much nicotine as he could take, Smith gave the Baker a word.

“They think you are off your chump, old man, and if you keep it up a little you will choke off the girl. And as soon as we get a look at the mine, and I have a bit of a jaw with the old man, we’ll try and hook it.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FATHER OF THE TRIBE.

THAT evening Smith asked Big Jack if he might see his father, and have a talk with him.

“He can do nothing but talk,” said Big Jack gloomily, returning to what he evidently considered a grievance. “If, when you go back to your tribe, you will take him away, I will give him to you.”

This completely took the wind out of Smith, and helped him better than any-

thing he had yet seen or heard to understand how these poor devils had reverted to absolute savagery. He recalled stories of African savages putting their elderly relatives to death, sometimes with a view to the needs of the commissariat. That the old man who talked was still alive showed that pressure had not at any rate been yet so severe as to suggest resort to such extreme measures.

And in another minute he was squatted in front of a very old man, with snowy white hair and beard, who was seated inside a gunyah about big enough for a large dog.

“This is the white man who came from the billabong,” said Big Jack, without saluting his parent in any way, “and he wants to speak with you. And, Smith, give me your pipe and bacca.”

For a moment Smith resented the tone in which the man said this, but knowing how absurd the impulse was, to say nothing of its uselessness, he handed his smoking implements over, together with his knife.

“What is this?” asked Jack. And Smith had to explain what it was. He saw Jack go back to the fire, where he was presently surrounded by a crowd, to whom he expatiated on the wonders of the new weapon, which, as a cutting instrument, far surpassed anything they possessed. Then Smith turned to the old man, who, if unable to fight, showed no particular sign of great senility.

“Where did your tribe come from, father?” said Smith.

“From the east, Smith. Is your name Smith? I remember my father speaking of a man called Smith,” said the old man. “But that is a long time

ago. I was young then, quite young, and we was fur from this 'ere place."

He mumbled a little as his mind went back. But his talk was easier to Smith than that of the younger generations. It was more like ordinary vulgar English, and not so mixed with aboriginal terms.

"But who was your father, old man?" asked Smith.

"Let me think a bit. It was a long time ago," said he, "and I have almost forgotten. But now I remember—yes, I remember. He was a very big man, and he and Smith were together when they took to the bush. Yes, it was Smith, but I never knew him. He was killed over yonder, before I was born."

And he returned upon the strange memories of the long plains which they had overpast.

"But who was your father?" insisted Smith gently.

“He said he was a lag,” said the old man, “but I don’t understand what that is. If Jack’s mother was alive she could tell you.”

“He must have been a prisoner,” said Smith.

“Yes, a prisoner,” said the old man; “he was, perhaps, taken in war, and escaped.”

Smith shook his head.

“I mean he had committed a crime,” said he.

“What is that?” asked the old man. “I don’t know what that is.”

And Smith could not tell him either.

“He did wrong,” he suggested.

“Yes,” cried the old man, brightening; “I heard him say he did that. I remember.”

“What was it he did?”

“He said he could have killed all of his enemies, and he only killed two. It made him feel bad even when he died.

I always killed mine, and so does Jack—
my big son Jack—”

And grasping at Smith's arm, he
nodded, and his eyes brightened.

“They brought in thirty heads just
now,” he cried; “I never brought in so
many, no, not even I. And I was a big
man once.”

His voice ran out low into a whisper,
and he bowed his head, thinking of his
brave youth and manhood.

“But where did the white women come
from?” said Smith. “I mean your
mother.”

The old man laughed.

“I remember that, yes, because
my mother told me after my father
died. She helped him to escape from
his enemies. But Smith took his wife
by force as they went. I remember
that.”

“And was the place they came from
Sydney?” asked Smith.

The old man shook his head, but looked up, and smiled.

“Yes, he was a Sydney Sider,” he cried. “But I do not remember any more, Smith. When I was a man, and led the tribe, we came towards the setting sun always. And the weak ones died, or we ate them, and the strong ones were saved. And our tribe is small, but it is strong, and the black-fellows fear us as they do the devils. And when they see our mark they fly.”

“What is the mark?” asked Smith.

“The Brodarro,” cried the old man, as if it was a war-cry, and the word was so like the sound of a native word, that for a moment Smith did not understand. Then he saw it.

“Ah, the Broad Arrow,” he said.

“I said the Brodarro,” cried the old man again. “And where we come the others go. They call us the white devils of the Brodarro. But they are

snakes, snakes and scorpions, and we tread on them, we tread on them! My boy Jack eats their tribes up. He is a man, and can fight."

And the old man fell upon his knees, and pushed Smith away.

"Let me come out to the fire."

He crawled till he came to the entrance, and then rose.

"I was a man, Smith. Take me to the fire."

Smith took him by the arm, and led the feeble father of that fierce race into the light. He saw then that the man who talked was the wreck of a giant. Though he stooped, he must have once been taller even than his son, who over-topped Smith by inches. The old man trembled as he walked, and his knotty joints creaked; but there was a gleam in his eyes still.

"Let me come to the fire," he said, and those near it gave him and Smith

scant room, with scantier courtesy. Old age had no claims on them; it was but a burden. He who could no longer fight, who could not hunt, who was no longer able to fish, of what use was he? Let him die, and free them of a useless member of a band who could give no hostages in a merciless fight with nature.

But the old man would not trouble them long.

“Where is Jack?” he asked, looking round the camp.

“Here,” said his son, who was seated on a stump, smoking Smith’s pipe in a business-like way that made the owner wonder if he would ever get it back again.

“I wish to speak to the tribe of the Brodarro,” cried his father. “For the man of another white tribe has brought back the past to me, and I remember my father, and the time when

I was young, when I could fight and run as fast as a flying doe, when I was as strong as an old man kangaroo. And now, men of the Brodarro, I am old and feeble, and nearly blind, and there is no pleasure for me in the fight. I can bring no more heads to the camp, I can neither hurl the spear, nor throw the boomerang, neither can I lie in wait for our enemies."

His voice became a melancholy wail, like the night cry of a curlew. But as he spoke again, strength came back to him, and his form straightened, and his voice grew resonant.

"But, men of the Brodarro, all of you my children, this is what I say to you as darkness opens to me, and I go out among the spirits of the bush. My father came out from a white tribe who were his enemies, and with him came another man and two women, and their life and the life of their children

was free. We could fight and live as we wished, and there wasn't no man over us. And I remember how my father said that among the other white tribes were many damn cruel customs, and that no man was the equal of another, and that some starved though there was food in the camp, and, if one, who starved, took from any of his mates, he was tortured, and kept alive to be tortured, and given no meat, nor fish, nor was he allowed to look upon the sun. And he told me, as he died, to live as a free man with my children, and to have nought to do with the other white tribes, who were too cunning. So now I say this to you," and his voice was like a trumpet, and he rose to his full height, "even as my father said it. Have nought to do with the white men of any other tribe, for they are blacker in their hearts than an Emu, and more powerful

and more cunning than the little devils in the caves of the northern country."

And he called to his son Jack, who came to him as obediently as though he feared the old man. For his father was as one possessed.

"Come, my son, give me a spear in my right hand, and let me shout our war-cry once more, as I shouted it when I led you against the Jinwarries, and when we brought in the heads of the Red Kangaroos."

And they brought him a spear, placing it in his hand.

"Farewell, men of the Brodarro, and the big plains, and the rivers, and the ranges. Come, my children, shout with me before I go."

And the tribe rose to their feet, shaking with excitement, as the old man lifted his spear and brandished it like a youth.

“ Brodarro,” they shouted, but above all was the clarion cry of the old man, who cried it thrice, and at the third time pitched headlong, and rolled over upon his back, by the red edge of the blazing fire. Smith dropped on his knees by the old warrior, but he knew that the father of the Brodarros was dead.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GOLD OUTCROP.

THE sensation which the old man had caused subsided as rapidly as it rose, and most of the tribe resumed their idle occupations at once. But Big Jack and three others lifted the dead and went rapidly into the bush. Smith crossed over to the Baker, who was sitting by the side of Bill.

“What have they done with the old man, Bill?” he asked.

“They will give him to the big ants,”

said Bill carelessly, "and in three days his bones will be as white as his hair. It is a good thing he is dead."

"But why did the bloomin' old prophet want to do us a bad turn?" said Baker.

"Um?" said Bill, as Smith squatted by him.

"I mean, why did he say as the men of the Brodarro was to 'ave no truck with h'other white men?"

"He spoke foolishness," said Bill; "but, then, he was an old man. It don't matter what he said, as long as Big Jack likes you. And I like you," he added, with a grin.

"Good old chap," said the Baker, "and to-morrow, Bill, will you show us the gold?"

Bill nodded.

"Show us to-night, Bill," said Smith, "There's a good moon, and I will give you a smoke. At least, the Baker will, for Big Jack has my pipe."

Bill rose and fetched his spear.

"Come," he said, and they slipped out of the camp, and getting beyond the big trees, they were soon in the full blaze of the high moon, which shone almost like day. The shadows the trees cast were very solid and opaque; their own shadows were peculiarly black and clear-cut, and against the sky every branch was like a silhouette. When they looked behind them, they saw the big blaze of the fire like a great red eye.

"Why do you make such big fires, Bill?" asked Smith. "Do not the black-fellows ever attack you?"

Bill laughed contemptuously.

"If they saw two men of the Brodarro they would run like wallabies and hide."

"But they killed the Slayer, Bill," said the Baker.

"The Slayer was a fool," said Bill, "He always went alone to get heads, and though he got many they killed him

at last. For he had to sleep after three days. And when a man is asleep, a snake can bite him. But when two men are together, one can sleep, and the eyes of the other are open."

And he stalked across the bush.

"There is not a black-fellow now within a day's journey," he said. "They are frightened of us now."

"And I don't wonder at it," cried the Baker. "I'm scared to death of you myself."

"Eh?" said Bill.

The Baker went up to him, and felt his arm.

"By Gosh! I say I'm frightened of you myself. I'm such a little 'un by you, Bill."

"There ain't no need," said Bill shortly; "but look out for my brother. He thinks the little girl likes you. And he wants her. He might kill you."

“What did I tell you, Smith?” exclaimed the Baker in alarm. “There it is. I’m courted by a young wild cat, and there will be ’ell to pay and no pitch ’ot, as I said before. I say, Bill, when we get back, you tell that brother of yours that I’m not on. You say that I think the young lady—”

“Lady! What’s that?” asked Bill.

“I was only just respectful,” said the Baker.

But Bill shook his head, and turned to Smith.

“The little man uses strange words, and sometimes I don’t understand.”

“’E don’t savvy respectful,” said the Baker. “Well, Bill, I mean this. I likes the girl, and thinks she’s all right, but I want to get back.”

“To your own tribe?”

“That’s about it,” said the Baker, “and I don’t want no wife to trouble me on the journey.”

"If she was a trouble you could kill her," said Bill simply.

"Thank you," replied the Baker, "but I don't care about it. So, you say to your bloomin' bloke of a brother that 'es welcome to the girl for me."

"I think she likes you," said Bill.

"Then my goose is cooked," replied the Baker in melancholy resignation. "I want to sling my 'ook right now. 'Ere, urry up, Smith, let's do our prospectin', and I'm for offin it quick."

And he lagged behind, considering his prospects between the devil, Bill's brother, and the deep sea of savage and unsophisticated maidenhood.

After about twenty minutes walking, they came to some broken ground that rose gently. Here and there Smith saw some quartz glittering in the moonlight. Every bit he picked up was rich with gold; or it would have seemed rich to any ordinary miner. He also remarked

some rocks jutting out of the ground. They looked like the outcrop of reefs. But still Bill went straight ahead, and going through a belt of thin scrub, they came on a narrow valley about fifty yards across, and some hundred and fifty yards long. It evidently ended in the river, for the belt of heavy timber rose blackly at its south end. But in the middle of this gulley was a huge lump of rock some yards square, which gleamed white in the moon.

"That's it," said Bill, and the two miners went on, while he sat on a little knoll, which commanded a view of the near country.

"Stop a minute," said Smith, when they got within twenty yards. "Stop a minute, Baker. I can't believe this. Man alive, it's all gold, with just a quartz casing."

But the Baker went on, and was followed by Smith.

All round the casing of the vein were scattered lumps of quartz studded with gold. But inside the casing it was pure, though here and there divided by thin bands of stone, for the grass and earth had been torn away, and sufficient gold cut out to leave the mass visible. Smith sat down on a lump of stone.

“Is this my luck after all?” he said.
“Oh, if I can only get back!”

And if the Baker had been near enough, he might have heard Smith speak the same name that he muttered on that night of his delirium.

But the Baker was on the top of the golden hill. He was dazed, but, as ever, half-humorous.

“I suppose it’s the stuff, Smith, but I’m half inclined to doubt it. There ain’t so much in the universe. If it’s only just a lump on top there’s millions in it; and if it runs a true reef, why,

gold's come down in England as it 'as 'ere to the makin' of cookin' pots."

And Smith joined him. The sight was one calculated, if ever any sight was, to make a man crazy who had been hunting for wealth but never found it. Smith had to hold himself tight, and suddenly he leapt off the golden throne.

"Come, Baker," he cried, "that's enough. Let's try and get away. The sooner the better. If we get through we're millionaires. And waiting won't help. Come."

And the three men went towards the camp.

"It's very useful," said Bill. "For it makes better waddies than wood. The black-fellows never found that out. But they are fools. What does your tribe do with it, Smith?"

But Smith was not to be drawn into any more explanations of currency and exchange.

"We make things of it, too," he said. And after avoiding this opportunity of puzzling poor Bill, he turned the talk in a direction which might be useful.

"Have you been down the river, Bill?" he asked.

But Bill shook his head.

"We came here from the East the last big rain."

"How many boats have you?"

"Two. We made them with fire," said Bill proudly. "They are better than a log. For Jack's father, who is dead, and was not so foolish a little while ago, told us about hollow logs which he called boats."

And he went on chattering, while Smith was thinking how he could get possession of the boats. He wondered, too, whether it would be wiser to take them or to make some kind of an exchange. It was possible that the knife which Big Jack had might be considered an equiva-

lent. He wished now they had brought their tomahawks, and pondered about the possibility of returning down the billabong for them. For with them they might make canoes for themselves.

But Fate solved the problem for them far more suddenly than he thought possible, and solved it that very night not long after they returned to the camp.

"Just sneak off if you can," said Smith to the Baker an hour later, "and try and find out where they keep the canoes. And see if the paddles are there."

"I don't like leaving you," said Mandeville; "that's a fact, for there's some that's took up the old un's prophecies. That I can see. And Bill's brother is talkin' agin us plain."

And when Smith looked, it certainly seemed that the Baker was right, for the objectionable suitor for the "wild

cat's" hand was holding forth by the fire on a subject which made those with him continually look at the two from that other tribe of white men.

"Never mind," said Smith. "I'll stick to Bill and Jack, and they're all right so far."

So presently the little Baker casually sauntered into the darkness, and went down to the river, with his heart in his mouth.

"I want more 'bacca, Smith," said Big Jack, and Smith reluctantly parted with what he had left.

"If you will send one of your young men back with me," said Smith, "I will give you a great deal of tobacco, and many knives."

"Um," said Big Jack ponderously. "How far is your tribe?"

"Ten days' journey," said Smith.

And just then he saw the girl Baker feared so slip out of the camp on the

river side. Apparently her departure was usual, or not noticed. As far as Smith could see, in spite of Bill's suggestion that a troublesome wife might be clubbed to death, the women had a great deal of liberty, and were greatly considered. They were not the beasts of burden that they become in agricultural communities.

But when Smith looked up again he saw that Bill's brother was gone, too, and this seriously alarmed him. If the wild cat had gone after the Baker with any notions of gentle dalliance on the river bank, it was possible that her savage suitor might catch them. He made an excuse to go into the bush, and when he was out of the range of the fire, he ran rapidly to the river. When he reached the bank, he went slowly, and kept as much as he could in the shadow of the trees. Once, as he stayed, he fancied he heard voices below him, and then he made sure he

heard a little twig break. He looked round, and saw Bill's brother peering over the bank into the darkness.

Smith's impulse that moment was to call to the Baker to warn him, but the next brought him caution. He might have to fight the man himself, and it was certainly better not to let the savage know he was observed. He lay still, and waited.

But the next moment Smith had his revolver sights dead on him as he was lifting his spear. He could see the man's very expression, the snarl of rage, the deadly intent, as he took aim. But before the spear could leave the strong hand Smith fired, and without a sound the would-be assassin leapt in the air, and went tumbling down the bank.

He heard the Baker cry out, and heard a woman's scream, as the whole camp behind him rose. He almost fell down

the bank, and found his chum with the girl.

“Where are the canoes?” he said. “He was going to spear you, and I had to shoot. Quick, quick!”

And the girl ran to the dead man. When she saw who it was she came back.

“Where are the canoes, girl?” asked Smith again.

And she nodded, and ran as they followed her close. The next moment they were at the water's edge in a narrow-cut gully. The girl thrust the canoes out.

“We must take both,” said Smith.

And as he got into one, the Baker sprang into the other. The girl shoved both off into deep water, but as the Baker's left the ground, she sprang into it, and grasped a paddle. They shot out upon the slow, dark stream.



Without a sound the would-be assassin leapt in the air, and went
tumbling down the bank.

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But behind them they heard a terrible shouting and clamour. And above the hubbub rose the cry, "Brodarro."

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIGHT ON THE RIVER.

THE current in the river was running barely a mile an hour, and it was difficult to make the canoes go more than four or five, even by paddling desperately. And at first they did not dare paddle too hard, for fear of being heard.

But as soon as they got well round the first bend, they put their backs into it, and finally the Baker's boat drew ahead. When he saw this, Mandeville stopped paddling.

“Get in ours, old man; one’s enough.”

“What about this one?” said Smith.

They steered over to the other bank, and left it there. For when they capsized it, they found it would not sink as they hoped.

“But we’ve all the paddles,” said the girl, the beautiful cause of the war.

They paddled steadily once more, until Smith suddenly made a sound expressive of entire vexation.

“What is it?” said the Baker.

“We’ve no food, and the water-bags are left behind.”

The Baker laughed.

“Water enough, sonny; and h’as for food, Miss Kitty, ’ere, will have to find it.”

“What made the big noise?” asked Kitty, which was what the Baker had christened the girl.

And Mandeville showed her the revolver in his belt.

“Smith has one like it. It makes a noise and kills men. She came down to the river to tell me about the row as was likely to be, Smith.”

“And brought it on right off,” said Smith; “and if this hadn’t happened we might have got away with tucker and everything else to-morrow. It’s cursedly annoying.”

And they paddled steadily for half an hour, still keeping as much in the shade as possible. The river ran here between deep-cut, steep banks, lined all the way with very high and heavy timber. As it seemed, there was much scrub as well, and this gave Smith hopes that if they were pursued by land they would not be seen. In any case, the presence of scrub would make pursuit difficult. He wondered what the girl thought of it. She should know how her tribe would act.

“Kitty, what will your people do?”

he said, when they took a spell after an hour's steady paddling, which made the sweat pour down them like water. But Smith noticed that the girl, who worked quite as hard, had never turned a hair.

"If they catch us they will take your heads," she said.

"And you?"

"They would kill me unless I said you had taken me against my will, Smith. And I would not say that because I want to go with Baker. I am glad you killed Tommy. I did not like him."

"But do you think they will catch us?" asked Smith, as they began paddling again.

She shook her head.

"Perhaps the big noise frightened them. If they do not find we took the boats, they will not come after us. They were afraid of you, Smith, many of them. Because, in spite of what Big Jack's

father said, we did not believe there were any other white men in the world. And they said you were jumped up after being dead."

The Baker laughed.

"You didn't, Kitty?"

"Not after you kissed me," said Kitty.

"Oh," said Smith, "indeed. "That's it, is it?"

But the Baker took his paddle again. They worked hard for another hour.

"Thank the Lord this river isn't like the Lachlan," said Smith, "all curls, and whirls, and meanderings. It does seem to go straight. Kitty can you get anything to eat here?"

"I could get a 'possum, perhaps," said Kitty, "but we shall not be hungry till to-morrow. And there are plenty of white grubs under the dead bark."

At which the Baker visibly squirmed. That his wild lady-love should eat grubs seemed rather too much.

He began to wonder what he would do with her if they ever got back to some kind of civilisation, and could only console himself with the poor consolation that they were never likely to do so. For to be on an unknown river, going into the unknown with no food and little chance of any, and a savage set of head-hunters after them, seemed heavy odds against a lucky termination to their wanderings. He was glad to slave at the paddle to keep from speculating.

And as Smith worked, the whole adventure assumed the peculiar quality of a dream. It was just that kind of vision which sometimes comes to a man who has had adventures. Often in the old days, when in some kind of ease, he had dreamed such dreams, which began suddenly with his going somewhere in a strange impossible land, with some strange and yet more impossible perils in front of him. As he thought of the last week

or two, it seemed to him that he had never left New Find at all. Was not the whole adventure of the nature of a nightmare. He had suffered dream thirst, and dream hunger, and had come into a mere vision of mixed origin, of knowledge and fantasy, and had handled fairy gold. And now he and his dream companions were stretched on the rack of imagination, toiling down a black river, margined by ghostly trees, clear-cut against a gibbous moon, with pre-historic devils behind them. For he conceived it as possible that no one would credit their story if they ever returned. But, then, the girl was with them. If they brought her back, and did obtain belief through her corroboration, it pleased him to think that he could make a rare stir in the world of travel. At the very notion, ambitions long dead within him began to lift their heads. But was not that the biggest dream of all?

By this time the moon, which had been almost in front of them for some time as their river turned nearly due west, came closer to the trees, and was soon hidden. It was now close on midnight, perhaps even later, and he was conscious of feeling fatigued.

"Spell, oh!" he said softly, and they floated idly for some minutes.

"I've been thinking, Baker," he said, "that the most dangerous time for us will be in the early morning. For if they go for the canoes and see we have them, as they must, and if they do determine to chase us, they will surely have the savvy to go as fast as they can down the river, and wait for us. At the utmost, we can't have done much more than thirty miles when it begins to get light. And if they aren't scared of going into an unknown country, they can do that too, if they hurry and trot a bit."

The Baker nodded.

“And what’s your notion?”

“I think as soon as it begins to show the first sign of dawn we had better shove the canoes into the bank here, hide them, and lie up and see what happens. What’s the girl think, I wonder.”

“She’s asleep,” said the Baker. “Poor little devil.”

She was lying in the bottom of the canoe, with her head on the Baker’s knees.

“Yes,” said Smith, “and you’ve acted like an idiot over this, Baker.”

“I could’n ’elp it,” said the gay Lothario anything but gaily. “She’s a reg’lar scorcher, she is, and she fair rushed me. And if ’er ’air was combed, and she was washed, she’d be good-lookin’.”

“Um,” said Smith, “lay her down, and let’s start again.”

So they paddled once more, and

Kitty, who was not used to such exercise, lay on her arm and her matted hair, which would have defied anything less than a horse's mane comb, and slept like a child in a rocked cradle.

"If we get through, you'll have to marry your catch," said Smith, when they eased.

"I'd as soon do that as marry some as 'ave clawed after me," said the Baker. "I reckon she's a kind of princess, and if so be as we land some of the posh, and are rich, I'll 'ave 'er eddicated at a 'igh school. Lord, but she'd wake some of 'em up, if she got slingin' yarns about 'ead 'unting. 'Ow does a man who marries a princess call 'imself, Smith? is 'e a prince, too?"

"He's her husband, Baker," said Smith drily, "and is often mistaken for a waiter. But I'd hold on if I were you."

When they spoke again it was black dark, for the moon was lower, and the heavy timber made the river as sombre as a narrow cañon two hundred feet deep.

“Go easy,” cried Smith, “and look out, Baker, for any snags. It won’t do to get capsized. How’s the girl?”

“Dreamin’ of ’er ’appy ’ome!” said the Baker cheerfully. “I was just wonderin’, Smith, as to what that long, sulky swine, ’Icks, would say, if ’e know’d what ’e’d missed. ’E could ’ave took up with the Brodarro, and been king, being big and hugly enough. And what the boys will say about Mrs. Mandeville ’ere rather does for me.”

“You’ll have to stand a lot of chiack-ing,” said Smith, “but I’m sorrier for the girl. What she will do in civilisation I don’t know. But it is getting light in the east, Baker. Look out for a hiding-place.”



They pulled in close to the southern bank, which was steep, but broken with small gullies cut by the rain.

"None of those will do," said Smith, "and I'm afraid the river's too low for us to get much cover, unless we find a creek. The one we passed an hour ago would have done. Wake the girl up. We'd better push on till we reach some sort of cover."

When Kitty was roused, she sat up and stared about her, as if she were dazed. They explained to her what they wanted, and after kissing the Baker's hand, an act of loving homage he received with every visible sign of discomfort, they paddled on faster. And just as it was obviously dawn, they came to a bit of a creek, and shoved the canoe into it.

"If they come down this side, we're cooked," said the Baker.

"We must risk something," replied

Smith. "They would hardly swim over, when one side's like another."

And he uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" asked the Baker.

"By Jove! perhaps they think we just crossed, shoved the canoes adrift, and went back the way we came," he said.

"They might, but if they did, they would soon find out they were off it," answered the Baker. "And then they might come down this side, and our name would be—"

"We must chance it," said Smith. "Have you any tobacco? Jack took all mine. I hope he'll go in for a debauch and get sick.

The Baker handed him over a fig of black twist, and he took a chew.

"Give it me," said Mrs. Mandeville; "I can eat, too."

It took a deal of explanation before she could understand that they were

chewing what would make her very ill, and even then she insisted on trying.

“Don’t take much,” said the Baker anxiously, “you’ll only spit it out.”

And spit it out she did with every sign of disgust, when she got the savour of the luscious black morsel.

“I told you so, missis,” said the Baker. “But ain’t she just like a woman, Smith?”

He said this with an air of intense enjoyment in discovering feminine qualities in Kitty.

But Smith chuckled.

“What the devil else did you expect her to be like?” he demanded.

And Kitty, to take the taste out of her mouth, went ashore, in spite of their remonstrances, and found something to eat, which they refused with every sign of abhorrence.

“You eat bacca, I eat these,” said

Kitty, and the Baker found it so difficult to explain to her that he was entitled, by his customs, to make a beast of himself, that at last he began to see dimly that chewing tobacco might be objectionable from some points of view.

And just as they were discussing the matter in low tones, Smith, who was on a nervous stretch which made every sense preternaturally keen, held up his hand warningly to the others.

"I thought I heard something," he said. "Listen."

And then all three distinctly heard the noise of some one or some thing making its way through dense scrub.

"Kangaroos?" said the Baker.

But the girl smiled, and Smith shook his head.

"Lie low and say nothing," he whispered, as he got out of the canoe with his cocked revolver in his hand. He

lay flat on his stomach, and wriggled a yard or two till he could see the further bank.

“Which side is it, Kitty?” asked the Baker, who began to trust the girl’s instincts better than his own.

She pointed across the stream.

“That’s good,” said the Baker; but, nevertheless, he got out his weapon, turned the barrels to see they all had cartridges, and cocked it.

And presently Smith came back, feet foremost, and inch by inch.

“They’re there,” he said.

“How many?”

“I see six, and there are some on the bank; at least, I think so. They came from down stream. I was right, you see.”

The Baker nodded.

“Who are they?”

“There’s Big Jack, and some of the rest. Poor old Bill; I hope we sha’n’t

have to wipe him out," said Smith. "He's the best of the gang."

"Yes," said Mrs. Mandeville, "he is good. I like Bill. I want to see, Smith."

"No, no," whispered Smith. "Keep quiet."

But she got out of the boat, sliding like a snake, and lay by him. And gradually, with the invisible motion of a snake who sees its prey, she crept out of the skin, which was her only garment, and went the three yards between her and the low-growing scrub which concealed them. She lay with her head in the scrub for ten minutes, and came back again as she went.

"There are ten," she said, and, after the manner of a savage counting, she showed her five fingers twice.

Smith, who had once read something about the low arithmetical powers of savages, had noticed that these had not

degenerated so far as to come to the inclusive word "many," under a hundred.

"Yes, there are ten," she repeated; "and some want to go back, and some want to go down the river again; and I think, Smith, that some say, 'let us swim over.'"

"We can kill them all in the water," said Smith, showing his revolver.

She nodded.

"But they might come over further up," she added presently.

Smith looked behind him apprehensively. This was now all that he feared. If they were taken by surprise in the rear, it would be a close shave.

"Baker," he said, "turn round, and keep your eyes skinned and your ears open. Don't trouble about this side. And you, Kitty, go back and watch them."

Smith held out his hand to the Baker.

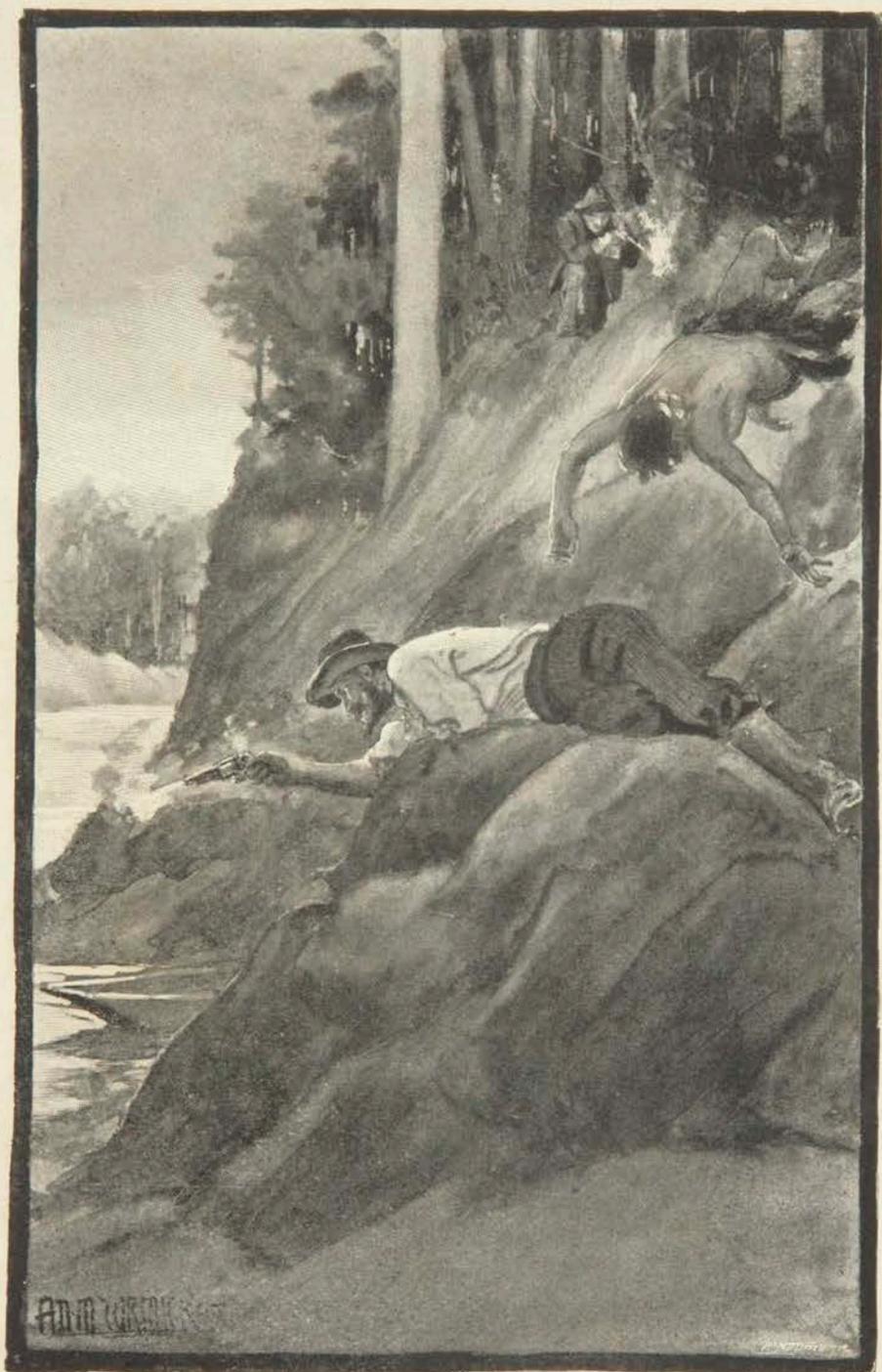
"Shake, old man," he said with emotion. "If we don't get out we've been good pals."

"Right you are," replied the Baker. "Good old man."

And then Kitty put one hand behind her, and held up one finger. Then she made a motion with her hand which suggested swimming.

"There's one swimming over," said Smith; "but don't you look round unless I tell you."

And he went a little bit up the bank in order to get a view of the stream. He saw a head in the water half way across, and was heartily glad to see that it was not Bill. He looked at his six-shooter again. It was only a forty-two calibre, and he had always been accustomed to a forty-five; but he thought he could hit the man at fifteen yards. He bent down, and made a low noise, which caused Kitty to turn her head.



He did not know that the Baker had fired at the very same moment as himself.

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He put his fingers to his ears, to make her understand that she was not to be afraid, and, raising his revolver, he brought it slowly down till he saw the foresight right in the nick. Staying one second to make sure his hand was steady, he pulled the trigger. He noticed that never in his life had the time seemed so long from the time the hammer fell to the explosion of the cartridge. But, as the shot echoed, the swimmer gave one plunge, rolled over on his back, and went under.

And until a heavy body came tumbling down the bank and struck him from his seat, he did not know that the Baker had fired at the very same moment as himself. For one of their enemies was lying dead with his matted hair in the very water under the canoe. And as the double shot rang out, the men of the Brodarro rose upon the other bank, and shouted terribly.

“But they are awful scared,” said Kitty, who was now back with the Baker. “Who did you kill?”

And reaching out, she caught the dead man by the hair.

“It is Bill,” she said lamentably. “I did not want Bill killed.”

And the Baker could hardly speak. If it was possible to feel affection for any man among that awful tribe, he had felt it for the poor wretch who lay in the water killed by his hand. And this was the first time that he had ever fired a shot in anger in his life.

He called to Smith in a low voice, but Smith waved to him angrily to keep quiet. For he was wondering what the rest would do. Presently he slipped down the bank and joined them.

“What will they do, do you think, Kitty?” he asked.

But the girl shook her head.

“If you kill Big Jack they will go,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“The others are not brave unless they see their enemies,” she said. “When we fought with the devil men in the caves, they were always frightened at night. For the little men killed many of us with small arrows.”

“Give me your pistol, Baker,” said Smith, and taking the bigger weapon, he crawled down to the scrub.

It was a shot of forty yards, and he doubted his skill. But the affair was desperate. If they went up or down stream, and swam across, there were still eight to their two, and, in a hand to hand rush, he could not doubt the termination.

Taking very careful aim, he at last fired, and fancied he heard the bullet strike. He could even see the man's face, which was turned towards him.

He noticed in that brief space of time that Big Jack dropped his spear and put his hand to his heart. An expression of futile rage passed over him as he staggered. He made an effort to keep his balance, but, failing, fell on his knees. He rose again, grasping his spear, but as he endeavoured to hurl it towards the quarter whence his unseen death had come, he staggered again, fell headlong, and rolled into the river.

And after one moment, in which the rest stood as though they were carved figures, they broke, ran up the bank, and burst into the scrub like startled kangaroos. Smith heard them breaking through it for a long minute, and when the noise died away in the distance, he returned to the canoe. He found the Baker looking greatly distressed, for the girl was on the bank with the dead man's head upon her knees, and she was sobbing terribly.

“She says she doesn’t think Bill meant any ’arm,” said the Baker, “and for all I know, she’s right, for she says him and his brother never ’it it off. And perhaps ’e just meant to tell us to lie low.”

And the Baker broke down and cried too.

“I feel just like a murderer,” he said.

Smith, as he looked on the man stretched out upon the bank, could not help thinking that he was as magnificent dead as he had been alive, and far more like an ordinary human being who was not degenerate or an unparalleled reversion. For, in the quiet sleep of death, much of the ferocity natural to a savage had disappeared, and there was a calmness on his face which gave him an air of peculiar and strong serenity. He looked still like some ancient warrior, but centuries had dropped away

from him; instead of a savage of the Stone Age, clad in skins, he might have been a Viking slain in some uncommon adventure. His hair was now drawn backwards from his forehead by the girl who mourned him, and she had separated his long golden moustache from the deeper brown of his curly beard, and wiped away the bloody froth from his lips. He looked like a man, sufficient to himself in life or in death, brave, enduring, and now, almost wise. Smith turned away with a sigh.

“I’m sorry for this,” he said. “What shall we do now? What do you do with the dead in your tribe, Kitty?” he asked.

“They are given to the ants,” she said.

And between them the two men with difficulty carried the corpse up the bank. Kitty, who went in front, showed them where she wanted the body put. They returned in silence to their boat.

"I am very sorry, Kitty," said the Baker.

"You could not help it," sobbed the girl.

"And what shall we do now," asked Smith. "Do you think they will come after us again?"

Kitty shook her head.

"They will be too frightened," she said. "I am frightened. How did you do it?"

But there was no time to explain the inexplicable to her.

"Do you think we can go on?"

"Yes," said Kitty. "But first let us go over and see if they left anything to eat on the other side."

"I tell you she's got a lot of savvy," said the Baker, who was getting furiously hungry, and talked as if glad to discover the strange girl who had attached herself to him was not quite a fool. "She's got a lot of savvy."

And, crossing the stream, they found some lumps of kangaroo flesh which had been half cooked. They turned the canoe down stream again, and ate as they paddled.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RIVER SINK.

THE next twenty-four hours were without incident, as they went through the intolerable and blatant monotony of Australian river scenery, in which all change was quiet renewal. The banks of the stream were still steep, and one bend was so like another that their progress seemed vain; they were like three ants floating desperately in a ditch. The sun set and the close heat remained; the heavy odours of the bush drifted down into their drain,

and the mosquitoes made their lives a burden. And then the sun rose once more, and climbed into a brazen sky, and burned them into blisters. For no breeze tempered its fierce rays, not a shadow of a cloud protected them. They went steadily west, towards the sea, perhaps, but more certainly still into the unknown.

Though Smith believed that the Brodarro would now leave them, being terrified by the inexplicable and terrible loss of four of their best and bravest men, it was by no means certain that they might not at any moment come across some tribe of black-fellows, as hard to deal with, and of infinitely more natural ferocity. The Brodarro, descendants of white men, had some of a white man's qualities, and they were not naturally the enemies of their own colour in these later generations. But with the blacks it would be different; at any rate,

it might be. If the Brodarro were ever cannibal, it was only under exceptional and heavy pressure; but many of the aboriginal tribes were men-eaters always, and needed no other excitement than common need. They could, then, only pray that they might meet none.

It was curious, however, that Kitty showed little fear of the aboriginals. Her people had so harried and destroyed those with whom they came into hostile conflict, that she could hardly understand how they would dare to attack two whites together. And now that she was with two white men of an entirely superior order, who had weapons which made a most awe-inspiring row, and killed as far as a well-thrown spear, she entirely despised the black-fellows.

“They are foolish men,” she said, “and do not really know how to fight. They can throw spears at a man who is asleep,

that is all. Only the little devil men of the caves are bad."

She had referred to these before.

"Who are the little devil men, Kitty?" Smith asked.

"A long time ago we fought with them," she said. "They lived in caves over yonder," she pointed to the north-east; "and when I was smaller we came there. And every night a man died, and sometimes a woman, and they had a little arrow in them as long as my hand. But we never saw those who shot them. We were very much frightened, and thought they were spirits. But Big Jack found they lived in caves, red caves, and we made a big, big fire in the mouths of the caves. And then we saw the smoke come out far off; and some went there and found a hole big enough for a dingo. And then a little woman came out; she was white like clay; and Bill speared her. Then some men came; they were no

bigger than a child when it no longer sucks, but they were very strong. So we speared them until no more would come out. The rest died in the smoke. We found them after three days. They had little spears, and little bows and arrows, and the scratch of an arrow killed a man like the bite of a snake."

"Horrible," said Smith. "On my soul, Baker, Mrs. Mandeville can spin a yarn. I'm not surprised at her caring nothing about the ordinary open-air black-fellow after that. But, then, these were white, too."

And he pondered over all the problems this journey presented for solution. What did we know yet about all the world's secrets? If we were told anything out of the way, we smiled; and those who exercised their little faculties in little books sat on the judgment-seat.

But neither Smith nor the Baker had

overmuch thought to spare for quiet speculation. For now their stock of burned kangaroo was almost done for.

“How are we going to live?” asked Smith.

“We might go up the bank, and lay for a kangaroo,” said the Baker.

“Lay! How long?” asked Smith. “Kitty, how are we to get more to eat?”

“I can get grubs,” said Kitty, and when she saw the men shake their heads, she suggested she might find a 'possum.

“You can try later,” said Smith.

And that night she caught a 'possum, which was coiled up most comfortably in a hole in a rotten stump. She banged it on the ground, and killed it, and they cooked their dinner.

“I think,” said Smith, as they smoked the Baker's pipe in turns, “that we are

coming to a change in this infernal scenery."

The Baker looked up the banks.

"Don't see much bally h'alteration," he answered.

"You have as much observation as a policeman," said Smith. "The timber is scantier and not so dense, and the banks are not so high. If I'm not off it, we are going into a brown burnt desert, with no trees at all."

"The Lord forbid," said the Baker piously. "But there's water any'ow. That suits me. I don't mind 'unger."

"No, not when ye're full of 'possum," said Smith.

"Who stood it best on the billabong?" asked the Baker.

"Why, you did, old man," said Smith.

"Then that's h'all right," cried the Baker cheerfully; "and don't get snake-headed if I says so. If we gets very

hard up for grub, we can eat Mrs. Mandeville. Eh, Kitty?"

And Kitty grinned, and snuggled up close to her man.

"You can, Baker," she said, "but not Smith."

They camped that night on the bank, but by the earliest dawn they were afloat again. And long before noon it was obvious that Smith's prediction as to the change in the scenery was rapidly coming true. For the trees were scantier and scantier still, and the banks obviously lower. Finally, the timber disappeared, and they came to a low range through which the river flowed. The only vegetation was a small dense scrub, and even that grew in patches among sand.

"If this ain't an un'oly-looking country, I dunno what a Gawd-forsaken place is," said the Baker. "You can't catch no 'possum in this 'ere place, missis."

But Mrs. Mandeville laughed. If there

were no 'possums there were sure to be ground iguanas, she explained. So they paddled on through the red desolation.

The range was no more than five miles across, and at its highest the river flowed through a cañon-like passage two hundred feet deep. When they were through, the range dropped away pretty suddenly, and just before they came to a bend, they could, by standing up, see an illimitable plain before them.

"By Gosh," said the Baker, "it's good to 'ave a river to take us through that. It reminds me of the look-out from New Find, Smith."

And they drifted out upon the open plain, which was not quite level, but rolling like sand dunes.

"And it is sand," said Smith, as he worked the bow paddle. But gradually anxiety grew into his keen, brown face. "If it's so, God help us," he said.

The two behind him saw nothing, but chattered together.

“Good old Baker,” said Smith, “he’s quite happy with this girl just now. And I’m thinking of another kind of woman. Shall I ever see her?”

And he shoved his paddle straight down into the water. It touched the bottom.

“’Ullo, Smith,” cried the Baker, “don’t go and miss your bloomin’ tip, and tumble h’overboard.”

They rounded a bend.

“It wouldn’t matter,” said Smith gravely; “where’s the river, Baker?”

And they grounded on a sand bank.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SAND TORNADO.

THE canoe was now in a part of the river which looked like a lagoon bounded on every side by sand-hills, and it had no visible outlet, nor was there any current. But every now and again air bubbles came up from the bottom, and at one place the water appeared to move in a circular direction. Smith gave a stroke or two of his paddle, and the canoe came within the influence of this circle. It moved slowly round and round. Mean-

time the Baker sat motionless with a fallen jaw ; and even Kitty seemed disturbed.

“What is it ?” he asked at length.

“It’s a river sink,” said Smith gloomily ; “the water goes in the sand or under it.”

“Rot,” cried the Baker ; “there must be a way out.”

He took his paddle again, and made the canoe move fast. But behind each little mound of sand was only a bay. It was true there was no outlet.

“Is this another billabong ?” he cried.

But Smith shook his head.

“This is a true river, but here is its sink,” he answered. “It’s not such an uncommon thing. There’s one on the Humboldt River in Western America.”

“And does it come up again ?” asked the Baker.

“How can I tell ?” cried Smith impatiently. “What are we to do ?”

“And how the devil can I h’answer that?” said the Baker.

They were again in the slow circle of the sinking water, moving slowly round and round.

“Did you ever see anything like this, Kitty?” asked Smith; but the girl shook her head, and was silent.

“Shove her into the sand,” said Smith. And he went ashore. He climbed with difficulty upon the highest dune, and looked west. Presently he called to the others.

“Come up and tell me what you can see, if you can see anything.”

They ploughed their way through the sand, and stood by him, looking west.

“You, Baker?” said Smith.

And shading his eyes, the Baker looked across the glaring, white, uneven plain, rolling in big sand waves, with here and there a few wattles upon its barren surface.

"There may be a bit of a bluish range out yonder, but I ain't sure," said he.

"You, Kitty?" asked Smith.

"There's a big tree, Smith," said the girl.

And Smith nodded.

"It stands by itself," he said, "and the trunk of it isn't to be seen. What shall we do, Baker?"

But at the sight of the hideous thirst-land the Baker was done.

"I guess I'm finished," he said. "I'd rather stay and die where there's water."

He sat down, and looked despairing for the first time. It made Smith pluck up courage. It would never do for both to be down at once.

"Cheer up, old man," he said. "I guess this river must come out again. It's not likely to go into the bowels of the earth. And that tree is not more

than thirty miles away. We can do that easy."

"No water-bags," said the Baker.

And Smith sighed. If the sand were as heavy all the way they could hardly hope to do much more than a mile an hour. If they started at sundown or a little before, that would mean toiling through the night, only to reach it by the next night, if they had no other bad luck.

"We must try it," he said. "Let's have the canoe up. It will give us a bit of shade. And we must start the moment the sun begins to go down."

They dragged the boat out of the water, and laying it bottom upmost, scooped some of the sand away on the south side. They could, at any rate, get shelter for their heads.

But Kitty would not lie down. She asked the Baker for his knife, and went away a little distance.

"She's after guanners," said the Baker. But he was wrong.

She came back in half an hour, or even less, and dumped what looked like a particularly fat and shapeless 'possum down by him. He felt it, gave a cry of joy, and, catching hold of her, kissed her most violently.

"What's up?" said Smith, withdrawing his head from his hole.

"What's up," said the Baker deliriously, "why, this is up. Mrs. Mandeville is a darling, and cleverer than they make 'em. She's made a water-bag, Smith."

"What?" said Smith.

"She done it with the bloomin' old 'possum skin," cried the Baker, hugging Kitty still more violently; "ain't she a darlin'; just tying up the neck 'ole and three of 'is legs."

"Kitty," said Smith, "you're a genius, and have very likely saved our lives."

But he wondered why he had not thought of it himself. They started within an hour on their heavy and toilsome journey, as the hot sun went down a peculiar and bloody red. They had nothing to eat, and only about three quarts of water between them.

Smith, taking his direction by the setting sun, led the way, and the others followed side by side. As soon as it became dark, a star served him as a compass till midnight.

The aspect of the sand desert in the darkness was one of peculiar desolation, and the fact that it rolled sufficiently to prevent them seeing fifty yards ahead, made them exercise caution even when caution appeared unnecessary. They could not tell whether some black-fellows who knew the country might not cross it occasionally, and they might possibly stumble upon them sleeping. But as the heavy hours passed, and the labour of

merely lifting their feet became painful, their needless caution vanished. They went blindly, and hardly noticed the visible changes in the sky.

For now there was a cool, quick breeze springing from the north-west quarter, and in the low north-west were clouds.

Just as the wind became strong enough to blow the sand in their teeth, it suddenly failed, and the air got hot and heavy once more. But it seemed hotter than it had been; the sweat poured from them and ran saltly upon their lips. And still the clouds grew in the north-west, until at last they suddenly obscured the star by which their leader steered. He stayed till the others joined him.

“Rain,” he said, pointing to the heavy cloud bank. And as he spoke forked lightning ran upon the clouds and split them wonderfully, opening intense and awful depths.

As the Baker opened his mouth to

speak, he heard a sound such as he had never heard before.

“Listen!” he cried, “what is it?”

And Smith stood still as he heard a roar which was not thunder nor loosed waters. It was the sound of a tornado in the desert, and he saw even in the dark a dun cloud low down, but close upon them. For as the distant thunder roared at last, another flash of lightning showed the white sand sea as in noon-day, and he beheld the desert rise.

“Lie down!” he cried, and the next moment the wind swept over them with a roar, and the grit flew like fine shot, screaming, and they grasped at unstable sand, which fled from between their fingers, to hold to the moving earth. At last they grasped each other and waited as the sand piled about them, as if it was alive, and got into their eyes and their hair and their dry mouths. They could not speak, and if they could have

spoken, their voices would have been swallowed up; they could not open their eyes, and if they could they would have seen no more than if they had lain drowning in a turbid flood. But there was no rain.

Through the frightful uproar and the red blast there came now incredible and incessant flashes of lightning, which burnt into their brains even as they lay face down with closed eyes. And through the vast diapason of the organic storm were short splitting roars which shocked and half deafened them. They felt like blind beasts stricken of God in the wilderness; they were scapegoats for the crimes of things, and then they were nothing but struggling physical blots of mere suffering life. For the sand drifted upon them and covered them up. They struggled out of it, and were rolled over. They tore at each other for something to hold to.

And then as suddenly as it came, so



They tore at each other for something to hold to.

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suddenly the dry storm passed, and went howling across the wilderness in the chariot of the winds. For now, overhead, the stars were shining, and the moon was clear-cut and bright and splendid.

They rose out of the sand which had so nearly been their grave, and spat thick dust from their parched mouths.

"Where's the water?" asked Smith.

And Kitty gave a cry.

"I've lost it," she said.

And their being half-blind gave them a horrible shock. For it lay at their very feet. The girl had held on to it until the very last gust.

"That was a close one," said the Baker, "and now I 'ope we've done. The devil must have his finger in our pie. But after this we should get through."

"Don't be too sanguine," said Smith. But there he asked for something quite

beyond his chum's strength. For the Baker's remarks on the storm, and the desert, and their luck, were of an extremely sanguine nature; at least, his one adjective was.

And Kitty, too, was about as badly frightened as she could be. Though sand storms are not uncommon in the bush, yet she had never had such an experience as this. She clung closely to the Baker when they resumed their interminable tramp.

"Cheer up, old girl," said the East Ender, "we'll be in the Mile End Road yet. I'll show you life."

And Smith, for the first time in a week, burst into a shout of laughter.

"If Smith can smile that way," said the Baker, "there ain't nothing very wrong, not to say reely wrong. But when 'e bites that 'air moustache of 'is, and shuts 'is eyes, that's when I funk it, day or night. What's o'clock, Smith?"

"It's five-and-twenty to three, by the clock on Bow Church," said Smith.

"Gahn," said the Baker. And they went on through the sand in silence.

Presently Smith stopped.

"Did you hear anything, Baker?" he asked.

"Distant thunder," said the Baker.

"Um," said Smith, "I don't know."

But he walked on again.

"D'ye reely think we shall strike that bloomin' river agin, Smith?" he asked.

"It's quite likely, Baker. It's pretty sure to come out somewhere. And if this infernal desert ends at the tree yonder, it may be there."

"What kind of a tree is it?"

"A pine, I suppose," said Smith, "one of the beautiful useful colonial pines."

"Yes," cried the Baker; "drive a tin tack into a board, and it splits from one end to the other. That's it. But I wish we was hout of this. And I'm

as 'ungry as I can stick. How goes it, Kitty, my girl?"

Kitty came closer to him, and smiled.

"More thunder," said the Baker, presently. And then he stopped. "Smith, what's up? Look at it; look."

And right ahead of them there was a great jet of sand. It rose in a cloud, and then died away. There was another low roar.

"What is it?" said Smith to himself, and then he turned on the Baker. "How should I know?"

When they came to the place where the jet was, they found nothing but a deeper hollow than usual.

"Perhaps it's one of those whirlwinds, dust devils some call 'em," said the Baker, whom the strange phenomenon had frightened.

But the dawn was growing up behind them like a magical golden mango plant, and the light gave him courage.

"We'll do it," he cried cheerfully. "And as for the bloomin' tree, I'm beginning to see it myself. Let's take a spell, Smith. I'm that tired I can 'ardly stir."

As Smith was fearfully tired, too, he did not require much asking, and they sat down. And continually there was the sound of distant thunder. Once it was not distant, but quite near, and the very desert trembled.

"Can it be an earthquake?" asked Smith. But he could not remember any happening in Australia, and he dismissed the notion. He lay back on the sand, and half went to sleep.

Presently the Baker caught him by the shoulder.

"Wake up, Smith," he cried, in a curious voice so unlike his own that Smith fairly jumped. "Come, get out of this."

And he saw the Baker ghastly pale.

“What’s up?” he cried.

But Mandeville was stumbling blindly up the dune towards Kitty, who continually rose and fell again on a steep slope.

“Come, or you’re a dead man!” shrieked the Baker, and Smith ran.

But as he ran with labouring limbs, the sand ran down beneath him. He did not think, he could not, but it seemed to him that some black horror was behind, that he was in a nightmare in which he could make no progress. And looking up—yes, looking up, he said he saw the Baker on the top, shouting madly, “Come, come,” and the man looked over and past him.

He made an incredible effort, and fell flat, but rose and leaped. As he fell again, the Baker caught his hand.

“Hold my feet, Kitty,” he cried, and the girl clutched his ankles.

The next moment Smith was on



As he fell again, the Baker caught his hand.

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the top, and looked back on a round pit about thirty yards across, which went down to a point at a rapidly increasing angle. And the sand perpetually ran down the side; he could see it moving; but still the pit deepened and deepened.

“What is it?” he gasped.

But the Baker clutched him.

“Come away,” he said in a whisper. And just then there was a black mouth to the pit, a little funnel hole, which grew till it was big enough for ten men to drop through. And the sand drained over its edges into a bottomless chasm.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ROAD WITH PITS.

“COME,” said the Baker, “come!”

“Where?” asked Smith, with a sick heart.

And looking at his chum, he saw the horror in the poor fellow's face. For it was wrinkled and seamed, and the courage and hope, which had helped them both so often, had, for that time at least, left him utterly.

“I don't know,” said the Baker, and he caught Smith's hand, and then let it

go, and took hold of Kitty, who was also the victim of extreme terror. The sight of the others broken down brought back strength to the older man.

“What are you scared of?” he cried contemptuously. “Do you funk death so much, Baker?”

“No,” said the Baker in a whisper, “but to go down into a pit, when one is asleep, oh, my Gawd! it’s ’orrible.”

He kept glancing round him uneasily, and anxiety made him stare. He stamped on the loose sand.

“How did you notice it?” asked Smith.

“I slid,” said the Baker, “and I saw the sand trickle and trickle. And we was on an ’ill when we lay down, but when I slid, we was in a sort of cup, Smith. What was it, Smith?”

But Smith shook his head.

“Let’s come on,” he said.

“Where?” asked the Baker. “Smith, old man, I’m scared.”

His shaking hands and his loosed lips bore witness to the truth of that.

“Where?” said Smith. “Why, out of this, and as soon as we can. I’ll go first.”

And then he heard again the sound of distant thunder. Or perhaps it was subterranean, for, once more in the hot morning light, they saw ahead of them big jets and spurts of dun sand thrown up against the sun, as though some strange beast blew blasts like the spouting of a whale in that dry sea. And with each dust spout the ground was shaken, and the sound was heard.

Smith caught the Baker muttering mixed prayers, half child-like entreaty to an anthropomorphous god, half savage blasphemy against a treacherous fetish. He remembered, with a smile, the old story of the sailor who prayed for help,

and, as an inducement for the deity to assist him, said that he had never asked before, and wouldn't again. He turned and looked at Kitty, who walked like one dazed. It had taken the courage out of her too.

They walked slowly towards the west, where the tall pine was now visible. Beyond it was a low range of hills. But their progress was slow. They avoided every sand hollow, and wound in and out across the little ridges. If some sand went sliding from under him, the Baker whimpered like a dreaming hound. And then they stopped again.

"A pit, a pit!" cried Mandeville, with staring eyes, and they saw an open, black hole before them, crater-shaped and crumbling.

"God help us!" said Smith. "Shall we get off this before the night? Be a man, Baker. Do you want to spend

the night here, and be sucked down like sand in an hour-glass?"

"I'm coming," said the Baker, gulping down his horror. "Come, Kitty."

But the sun would soon set. It shot level over the desert, and turned the pine, now some five miles away, into a black bar across the mouth of a furnace. Then it touched the range, bit out a red gap, plunged, and left a red star on a blue crest for a moment, and died. The night came with a swing from the east of lucid stars, and a moon, with its horns turned westward, was sharply visible towards the north.

"Come," said Smith, "while there's a little light left."

He led the way as fast as he dared, and did not stop even when the last daylight was gone on the wings of the after-glow, for, on the whitish-red sand, the light of moon and stars showed the way almost as clearly as in the thin

day of an Arctic winter. Yet every now and again there came the noise of subterranean thunder. He began to guess at its cause. If they could but get off that road of pits, it bade him hope.

Yet now he, too, was so terribly fatigued that he could hardly lift his feet; every motion he made required resolution, and his eyelids dropped as he walked. The Baker was in worse case physically, and only Kitty held out. Sleep, as heavy as that which takes men in deep frost, laid hold of Mandeville; he rocked to and fro like a drunken man. He implored Smith to stop.

"Lemme sleep," and he pitched upon his face.

"Wake him," said Smith, and Kitty lifted him on his feet.

"We are close to the edge of the sand," said the leader. "Let's try a bit more."

He caught the Baker by the hair; he wrenched his ear till it almost bled, and Mandeville struck at him blindly. Kitty cried out aloud in anger, and yet she understood. But at last they could not move. The Baker lay down like a dead man, and Kitty took him in her arms. She was asleep in a moment, and then a sudden dream caught the Baker.

“The pits, the pits!” he shrieked, and again deep sleep had him, as Smith smiled wanly and drifted into dream-land.

And in his dream he saw the desert, and under the desert the sunken river, which, for long generations had eaten away the foundations of the desert until the flat rocks and baked earth under the sand was supported by little columns that melted day by day. And he heard the columns give, and then the ruptured rocks cracked. There were distant sounds

of thunder, and the huge tilted slabs threw sand into the air. Down each rift, as through horrible funnel-holes, the sand fell which measured human lives. He saw himself slip; he heard the others cry. And then there was loud thunder in his dream, and the blown sand filled his mouth. He heard an awful scream, and woke with it in his ears.

“ Help, Smith, help ! ”

He sprang to his feet, and saw a dark body, which was Kitty, sliding on the flat in front of him towards a great cup, whose edge was within six feet. He threw himself down, and grasped the girl by her ankles, and, digging his toes into the sand, he wrenched her back.

But as he did so, she screamed dreadfully, and on her scream there came another further cry, half-choked, half-dream-like—such a cry as a man would make in a nightmare, if he could free his

chest form the horrible squat beast that chokes him. And Kitty, whom he had saved, writhed round on him, and struck at him.

“Let me go!” she screamed.

“Where’s Baker?” he said.

And she writhed and shrieked terribly.

“The pit—in the pit!”

And rising, he saw the big, black cup which held death. Kitty rose, too, and half escaped him. In another moment she would have been beyond help. He caught hold of her, and they fought upon the increasing verge of the slipping sand, which was like quicksand, and seemed to cling to them. But Smith lifted her desperately, and ran ten yards, and, throwing her down, held her till the mad fit passed.

And shaking with horror, and sick at the loss of friend and lover, they sat there till dawn, with deep holes about them.

But Kitty perpetually wailed for the man

who was gone, and half she said was unintelligible to her companion. For now, not caring to be understood, she used the commoner talk of the Brodarro, which was mixed strangely with fragments of many aboriginal dialects.

“My man is gone,” she cried; “my little man who was strong and brave.”

Yes, the Baker was gone; gone without a farewell, without a handshake, and his good-bye was a terrible shriek, which still rang in Smith's ears. Perhaps those who were left would now escape, but all the joy was gone out of him at the loss of his faithful companion, whose courage was proof against any natural horror, and only failed in dangers which appeared ghastly beyond all imagination. But he was gone, gone, said Smith, for ever.

And the dawn came up in the east upon the plain, and he saw, within half a mile of him, the big pine tree which

had been their landmark. He rose and took Kitty by the hand. She wished to look into the crater which had swallowed her man, but he drew her away towards the west. She walked quietly, with her head hanging down.

As he approached the pine, Smith began to see other smaller timber about it, and further on, what seemed like the usual gums lining a river.

“If I’m right,” he said, “we shall come to the river; we need it badly.”

The ground was now more broken and not altogether sandy. Here and there he saw rocks projecting, and once they came to hard ground. They passed one or two of the ghastly funnel holes, and finally came out of the sand upon a little higher ground. Right beneath them was the silver lost river, running slowly through a flat which rose gradually to the north in the low range they had seen the day before.

As they came in sight of the stream, Kitty broke down and cried.

"Oh, Baker," she said.

But Smith knew what she meant. And he touched her arm.

"Come, Kitty."

Even as he spoke he stayed.

"What is that on the bank, Kitty?" he asked.

For, two hundred yards away, there was a black spot on the white sand.

"It looks like a body," said Kitty with a shiver.

And they went slowly towards the stream, wondering what this could be. Was the dead man black or white? It might mean so much to them. It might mean further hazard, or strange, quick release from all their anxiety. But suddenly, when they came upon the level ground, Kitty loosed her hold of Smith, and ran along the river's edge like a deer. Smith stopped, and then ran, too.

Was it possible—possible?

Yes, it was possible. For Kitty had the Baker's head against her bosom, and she was crying over him like a mother.

He was still alive.

Smith dropped on his knees.

"It's half a miracle," he said. "Yes, he's alive, Kitty. Rub his hands. He dropped into the river, the sunken river. Good old Baker."

And Smith broke down himself, as the Baker opened his eyes, and then shut them, relapsing once more into unconsciousness.

They stripped off his wet clothes, and laid him in a sunny, sheltered place. Smith wiped his body with his own shirt, which he took off; and presently the Baker opened his eyes and saw them.

"Such a bally nightmare" he said. "Where's Kitty?"

And Kitty bent and kissed him.

“Good old girl,” he said; “what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing,” cried Smith cheerfully; “we’re out of it all now.”

“Ah!” said the Baker, “I remember.”

He sat up, and, as real consciousness came back, memory returned, too, and he shivered. A strange, wan, pinched look was on his face. He looked a worn, broken man, and much, much older. From that hour his hair rapidly whitened. But he was quite sane.

“Do you feel all right now?” asked Smith.

“Will I ever feel right?” asked the Baker. “But I feels ’ungry, and I suppose that’s a good sign.”

But there was nothing to eat. They held a bit of a council while the Baker’s clothes dried.

“Tell us all about it,” said Smith.

But the Baker shook his head.

"Give me a bit of time, old un," he pleaded. "Can you get any tucker, Kitty?"

She said she thought she might get a lizard. But if she did, they might have to eat it raw, for the only matches among them had been in the Baker's possession, and they were wet through. This reminded them of that, and they spread them out to dry.

"Never mind," said Smith cheerfully, "if they are done for. Mrs. Mandeville will make a fire aboriginal fashion."

And she acknowledged that she might be able to do that if she tried, though it was a man's job.

Fortunately, however, there was no necessity for her to attempt it, as they saved at least half a box of the wet matches. Their dinner was made of a particularly objectionable-looking lizard, with spurs and frills, and of a couple of bull-frogs, which Kitty caught near

the river. It made their courage rise again.

“And now it’s for the coast,” said Smith. “D’ye think you can travel, Baker?”

“I can that,” said Mandeville. “Ain’t I a new man? Last night I was killed. I died, and went down into the pit.”

“Tell us,” said Smith.

“I’ll show you where I came out,” said the Baker; and they walked up stream till they came to the place whence the river issued.

There were several mouths to it along the edge of the sand desert, some large, and some small, but it was evident that it had once issued from a single big cave. The new mouths were made by slabs of rock fallen together or resting on huge lumps of sandstone, mixed with a harder conglomerate, and they were, pretty evidently, the result of the last night’s destruction.

"I guess I came out 'ere," said the Baker, pointing to a triangular opening near the north bank. "For this one close to us is very shaller, and I should 'ave come ashore. But I drifted considerable after I got into the light. I'll tell you about it."

They all sat down on a sand heap to listen.

"I don't remember going to sleep, Smith—"

"No," said Smith, "you went to sleep walking."

"Anyhow, I don't remember it, and the first thing I do remember, was doing the bloomin' sliding trick again. And then Kitty 'ere collars me, and I 'eard 'er 'oller for you plain."

"I caught her by the ankles," said Smith.

"And that done me," said the Baker, "because I was tore out of 'er 'ands before I could ketch 'old myself. And

then I gives a yell, and I just slid, and I thinks, 'Now you're done, Baker,' for I keeps on fallin' for h'ever. I guess it warn't reely far, but it seemed so, and then I was over'ead in water all of a sudden, and chokin' with sand and water at once. Of course, I strikes out blind, and swims easy, but near choked with the 'orrible scare. And the darkness was stinking thick, I never see the like, no, never. And I thinks little bits of you and Kitty over'ead, not able to 'elp me. And you may believe it or you may do the other thing, but I feels quite sorry for you. I remember, too, what a bloomin' coward I was over them pits. And I thinks of 'ome and the Mile End Road of a Saturday night. Then my 'and touches a rock; I tries to grab the thing, but it was smooth, and it 'ad nothing to hold by. Then I finds I was slipping past it easy. And mind you, h'all this time I

made sure I was dead; I couldn't see h'other than that I'd drown. But when I finds the water was going, another bloomin' horror strikes me. I thinks, 'Now, am I going into another bloomin' water-pit?' I screams then, and my voice comes back on me, and a'most stuns me. I grabs at the rock, though what for I dunno, and just then I thinks, 'Why, to be sure, this is the blooming sunk river, and maybe it comes out.' So I lets up trying to 'old, and swims easy with the current. And I believe that I swum steady for years, for years, yes, and as I got tired I felt old. Oh, but it was bad, Smith. And just as I thinks I'm done, I sees that three-square 'ole of light, and afore I knowed, I was through it, and I seed the stars and the banks. I scrambled to it and clawed out a yard or so, and then I tumbles flat where you found me, you and Kitty 'ere; Gawd bless 'er and you."

He kissed Kitty, and held out his hand to his old chum.

They rose, and began their journey once more.

CHAPTER XIX.

DELIVERANCE.

THEY camped that night on a clear little flat, close by the river, and again Kitty found a 'possum for them to eat.

“If it hadn't been for you, Kitty, I believe we should have died of hunger long ago,” said Smith. “You're a darling.”

“Ain't she just,” cried the Baker proudly. “Kitty, my girl, when we gets into a

town, and you 'as your 'air trimmed, and gets a good dress on you, you'll be the belle of the ball, that's what you'll be."

And he explained to her in simpler language that she was very good-looking, which was indeed true, for her figure was magnificent and her walk perfect. If her feet and hands were rather big, that was nothing to the Baker, and her carriage would prevent any male critic from being severe on minor details.

"But I'm sorry for Kitty when she gets among the so-called civilized lot," said Smith. "They will be for tearing her in pieces."

"I'll tell them she carries poison in 'er finger nails," said the Baker, "and you see they'll be civil. Besides, we'll be rich, old son, and if Kitty's rollin' in gold, she can wear skins and eat lizards if she likes."

And Kitty, who was beginning to get curious about the women of her lover's tribe, inquired about their manners and customs. The Baker got so entangled that Smith fairly screamed.

"'Old your row," said the Baker, "and you an old bushman, too. You'd bring black-fellows from ten mile, you would."

"That's true," said Smith; "I forgot."

But, then, to hear the Baker distinguishing in terms of the East End between a lady and one who was not a lady, was too exquisitely ridiculous, especially when his pupil in the difficult art of social estimation was one to whom every term he used was blank mystery. For, roughly speaking, Baker's definition of a lady amounted to asserting that a woman who could go out on Sunday in a pony-cart was one. And if she or her husband kept a public-house, there

was no doubt of her status. Smith refrained from upsetting any of the Baker's statements, but the notion of Kitty in Whitechapel was not to be endured.

"You won't take Kitty to London, will you?" he asked.

"Of course," said the Baker. "D'ye think I'm ashamed of 'er? She'll bang the 'ole crowd."

"But she won't be happy, Baker," said Smith. "If you want to do her a good turn, you'll buy a big cattle station when we land the rhino."

"Do you think so?" asked the Baker.

"I'm sure of it."

"It's not a bad notion," said the Baker. "And I'll 'ave a real swell governess from H'england to teach 'er the tricks. And are you goin' 'ome, Smith?"

Smith nodded.

“I’m not going to do any more mining, old man. I’ll float a company, or get a syndicate together, to come out at once, and take up the mine. And, Baker, you keep your mouth shut. If we come across any one, pitch them the beastliest yarns about the country. And don’t let Kitty give us away.”

“I see,” said the Baker. And they turned in for the night.

They walked next day along the river bank without much difficulty, for the country was fairly free of scrub. They camped at noon, and made a dinner of smoke. For Kitty could not find them anything but a few grubs, which they were not yet hungry enough to eat. They were hungry enough, however, to lose some of their spirits. It was all very well to talk about London, as if they were out of their troubles, but were they out? They did not know in the

least where they were. They might yet be a thousand miles from the mouth of the river, they might be eaten by black - fellows any day, and if they were in no immediate danger of thirst, yet hunger fairly walked with them cheek by jowl. No, the end was yet unknown.

But as Smith lay on his back a little apart from the others, it seemed to him once or twice that he heard a curious noise in the far distance. It was so faint that he could not be sure, and he did not draw the Baker's attention to it. Sufficient for the day was the hunger and trouble of it.

Still, he did hear something at intervals, and it made him uneasy. Was it like the cry of some distant and strange bird, or what was it like? It might be some black-fellow's call. He got uneasy, and, rising, walked to the river's bank, passing the Baker and Kitty,

who were both asleep in the shade of some ti-tree scrub, which came out on their flat.

He lay down where he could get a view of the stream, and hearing nothing, began dreaming about England, and the troubles that had sent him to the devil. He had been very weak. He wondered if any woman was worth it all? He decided that the Carrie of his dreams was worth it, and fell asleep.

He woke half an hour later with a strange sound yet ringing in his ears, and as he awoke, he looked across the river, and saw a party of black-fellows running as if for their lives. They were not coming their way, and in any case, the river was between them, so he lay still and watched. As the aboriginals ran, and disappeared in the thicker bush, he heard a peculiar and strange throbbing.

What could it be? He turned to call the Baker, but as he turned his head, there was a tremendous whistling scream, which echoed through the bush, and woke the others for him. They came running.

“What is it?” said the Baker, as Kitty clung to him.

And Smith tried to speak, but could not. He pointed down the river. A steamer was coming round the point! This was then their deliverance, and the very seal upon his luck.

“What is it?” cried Kitty. “Can you kill it, Baker?”

But he took her in his arms, and hugged her till she cried out.

“It’s all right, Kitty,” he said; “it’s only a white man’s fire canoe. Don’t be scared.”

And pulling out his revolver, he fired it into the air, dancing like a madman.

In twenty minutes, Smith, the Baker, and Mrs. Mandeville were on an exploration steamer which had come from King's Sound, and had tried their river.

They were received as if they had risen from the dead, for an account of their probable loss had been published in all the colonial papers. Smith found he knew the engineer, and in five minutes they were seated in the stuffy little cabin drinking bottled beer. Kitty, who was the admiration of the whole crew, refused it in terror. But she was glad to eat what they gave her.

"Where did you pick her up?" asked the captain.

"It's a long story," said Smith, and he gave them a rough outline of their adventures.

"And no other luck?" he asked.

"No," said Smith, "and there's no

need to go any further. It's not navigable for more than thirty miles now."

He told them the story of the river sink.

Then the gentleman who was the scientific head of the small party, tried to interrogate Kitty. She shook her head, and referred him to the Baker, who spun him a yarn that got into print, and was universally and most rightfully disbelieved. For the Baker considered that the real yarn was Smith's, and that Smith's injunction to keep the gold dark was a sort of general order to mislead every one in every possible way.

The expedition returned to the Sound in about a fortnight, and Smith raised enough money to take them south, and to carry him to England on his errand of finance. But before he went he saw Kitty dressed in the gar-

ments usually affected by the women of the tribe to which her husband belonged. For the Baker considered it his duty to marry her, and he did so, in spite of Kitty's violent remonstrances.

The ceremony, which was witnessed by a larger crowd than had ever gathered together on a similar occasion in the whole history of Western Australia, affected her nerves worse than the desert of pits, and to this day she cannot understand why it was necessary, or what good it did her or those who saw it. Among the crowd were Tom the water-carrier and Hicks.

It is possible that Smith's, or rather Archibald Gore's, wife may have explained the meaning of the ceremony to her. For, two months after Smith left for England, the Baker received a cable from him :

"Syndicate formed; am coming out with wife. Sailing to-day."

"Smith's coming out, Kitty," said the Baker, when he received it.

"I'm glad," cried Kitty.

"He's got a wife, too," said the Baker. "I suppose it's bound to 'appen to a man if 'e only lives long enough."

"Yes," said Kitty; "and will she like me?"

The Baker looked at her indignantly.

"If she don't, she ought to come through what we went through, old girl. And 'ave you alongside to show 'er what's what."

For the Baker was firmly convinced that Mrs. Mandeville, in spite of some eccentricities, was absolutely the best woman in the world. And what she did not know about civilisation was compensated for by what she knew of the bush.

When he got that governess out, he had great hopes of his wife's taking a prominent position in society.

THE END.

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