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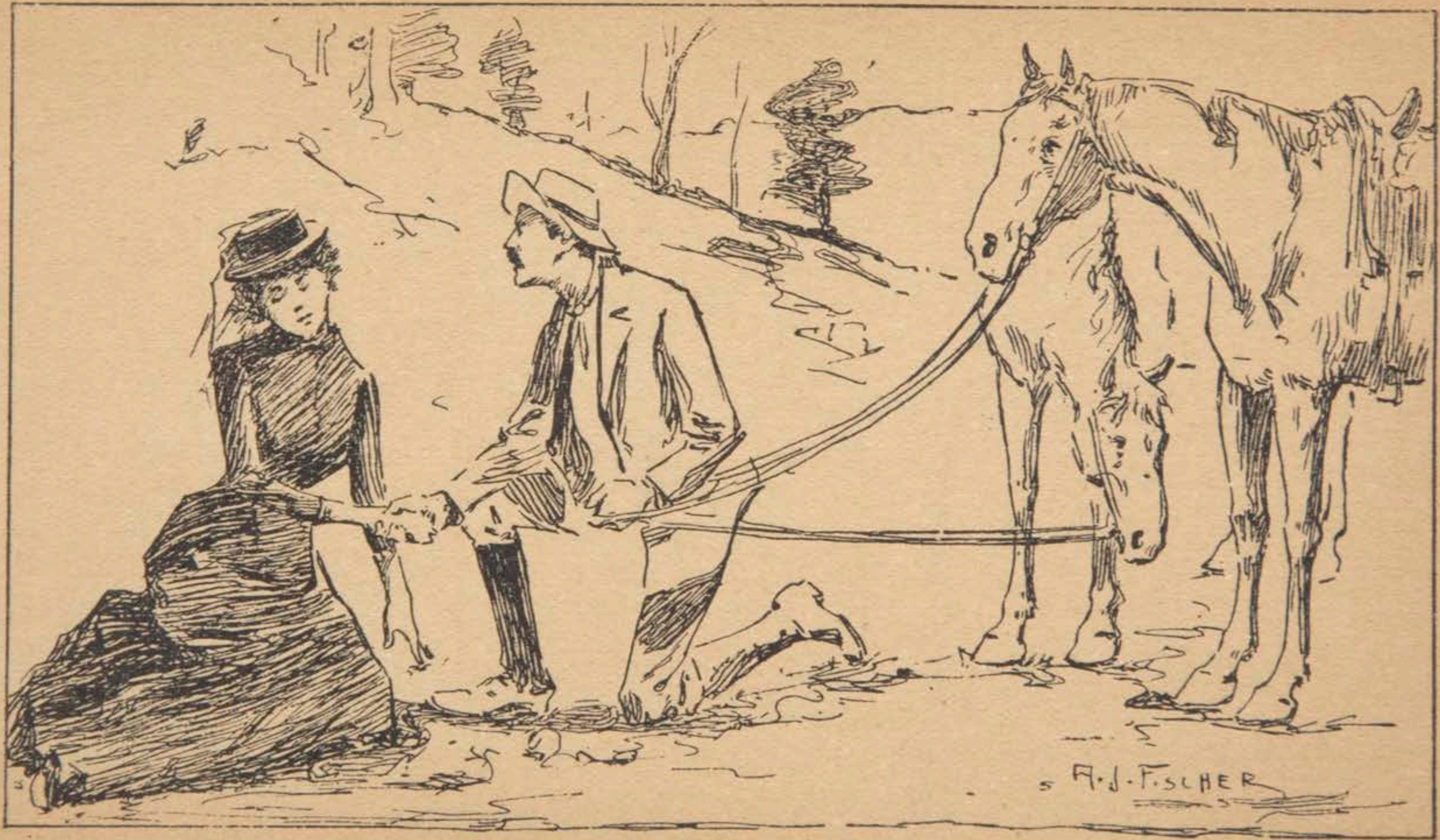

"I AM SORRY, DEAR," SAID WOOLHAM. [*Page* 212

THE SELECTOR

A ROMANCE OF AN IMMIGRANT

UNIVERSITATIS BIBLIOTHECA SIDNEIENSIS
EX DONO THOMAE FISHER

BY

JAMES GREEN

AUTHOR OF "THE STORY OF THE BUSHMEN"

With twelve full-page illustrations
by A. J. Fischer

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FOREWORD.

THIS story is an effort to portray the life of the settlers in the North and North-Western wheat districts.

It does not aim at either exact portraiture or exact geography.

It presents, however, some types and some impressions which may help readers to understand and appreciate the pioneering settlement now going on in the interior of the mother State. The author dedicates this book

TO THE PIONEERS OF THE NORTH-WEST,

in the hope that it may lead the "old hands" to give a hearty and sympathetic welcome to immigrants from the Old Land or from the other States.

THE AUTHOR.

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UNIVERSITATIS BIBLIOTHECA SYDNEIENSIS
EX DONO THOMAE FISHER
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CHAPTER I.

THE SWAGMAN UP TO DATE.

ALL bush townships in the north-west of New South Wales are very much alike, and in October the weather is day by day alike hot, but if there was any difference on October 14th, 19—, in Munilla, it was that it was much hotter than usual. The air simply vibrated with heat, the roads were clouded with dust, and the people of Munilla, at any rate the male portion, oppressed with thirst, loafed around the hotel verandahs—and there was an hotel in Munilla at nearly every street corner. Under such circumstances, a new arrival evoked much speculation—he might represent free drinks.

Just then a solitary cyclist appeared coming down the Tamworth Road.

"Pretty hot day for cycling," said McSwayne, the rotund proprietor of "The Royal," to Brooks the postmaster.

"My word!" said Brooks. "And a swagman too; first time I ever saw a swaggie work as hard as that."

"Oh, he is a swagman up to date," said McSwayne.

The hotelkeeper was right. This was a new sort of swagman approaching them. To begin with, he wore a tweed suit light in colour and weight, instead of the proverbial moleskins, and, instead of the usual slouch hat, a well-browned panama covered his head. But he was a swagman for all that, for there was his swag on the bike twisted horse-shoe shape around the top-bar of the frame and fastened to each end of the fork of the machine. The billy-can and tucker-bag were fastened behind the saddle, and the triangular hold-all swung within the frame was well filled with other personal necessaries.

As the cyclist drew up to the verandah of the hotel, McSwayne said to Brooks:

"Looks better than the old style, anyhow." There sitting on the verandah was a typical sundowner leaning on his swag.

His bare, hairy arms and chest had for a background a dirty flannel. His moleskin trousers were tied below the knees with boyangs of string, and his blucher boots, full of holes and almost soleless, were fastened up with the same material. His slouch hat was held around the head with a broad leather strap, his unkempt beard straggled with the hot wind, while a panting sheep dog lay at his feet.

He looked thirsty, although he had been drinking all the morning, mostly at other people's expense.

"That old buffer was round at the house this morning asking for something to eat, and the missus told him to chop some wood and she would give him breakfast, and what do you think he did?" said Brooks.

"He made a heap of wood with unchopped logs in the middle, and then he called out the old woman to see it, and persuaded her that he had chopped so much that she ought to give him a shilling. The wife was quite pleased.

" 'Why, you *have* cut up a lot,' she said.

" 'Yes,' said the old fraud, 'I'm pretty good with the axe.' It was afterwards that she found out the trick, and now she says that *I'll* have to chop the wood."

"You see the difference between these two swaggies," said the publican. "The one with the bike wants work, and he'll get it; the other, while asking for work, prays that he won't get it. He lives on the game. He's like old O'Neill, who comes round on the cadge about every month. He asked George Bowman, of Glen Airlie Station, to give him some tucker and let him stay in a hut. 'All right,' said Bowman. ' 'Tain't tea-time yet; come and help me mend up this broken fence. A bit of work will give you an appetite.'

"But O'Neill put on an offended look, and said:

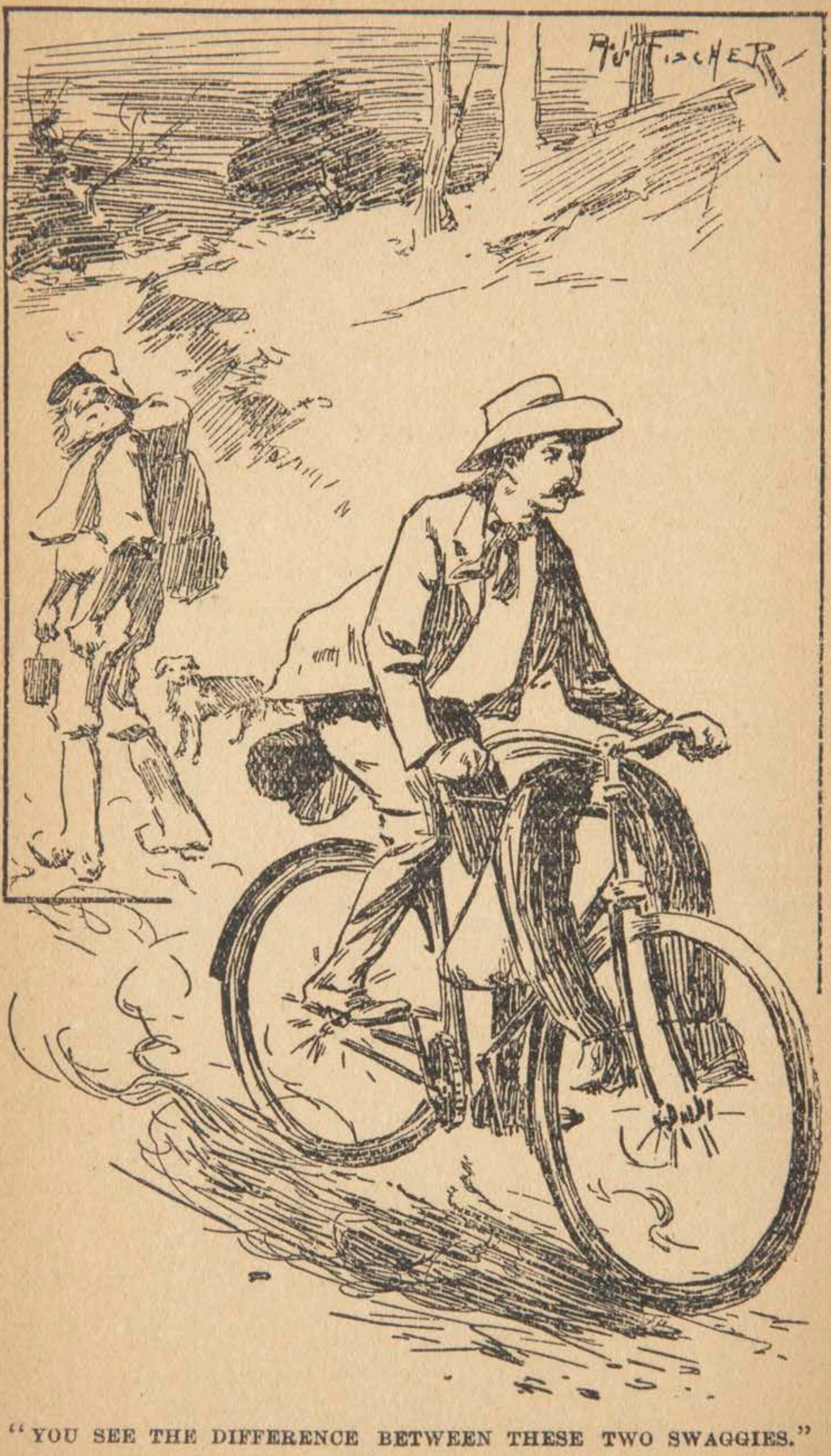
" 'Thank Gawd, I ain't got as low as *that* yet!' "

"But did you ever hear the latest about that same O'Neill?" said the postmaster.

"You know he is a good Catholic, and he works it for all it's worth. Out at Borah Crossing a few Sundays back they were opening the new Union Church. It was a great day, for they had the new parson, Mr. Donald, there too for the first time.

"O'Neill, happening to be out, thought he'd struck one of his own churches, when he looked through the open doors and saw all the new decorations.

"What an object the old fellow looked that day, to be sure! He had a bit of mosquito net for a fly-veil, with bits of cork tied round the edges of it. An old battered helmet covered his head, and he was as dirty as only he can be. Well, that day I drove the parson



"YOU SEE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THESE TWO SWAGGIES."

[*Page* 11.

out myself. You know Mr. Donald is clean-shaven, like a priest; this strengthened O'Neill's ideas and hopes. He came up as the parson was getting out of the buggy, and, with a good deal of bowing and scraping, yanked a little dirty bag from his pocket, out of which he drew some dirty yellow beads. Would his reverence bless the beads? He counted on a blessing for himself, too, of a more substantial kind.

"Mr. Donald did not quite take him at first. He looked at the man and the dirty beads in disgust. Then he said, 'Why, they want washing, my man!' Then, catching the meaning of the old man's request, he said, 'You are labouring under a mistake. I am a Protestant clergyman.' "

McSwayne, who is a Roman himself, fully appreciated the joke, and when Brooks rose to go over to the office, he was still shaking with laughter.

From which it may be inferred that in Munilla (as, happily, in most country towns) the religious clans manage to live in peace and amity.

CHAPTER II.

HOW TO SETTLE PEOPLE ON THE LAND.

THE little Court-house of Munilla was electric with excitement. The great day had arrived. You could easily see that at the hotels. The stable yards were full of horses. Horses were tied up to the fences and tree-guards. Some of the poor brutes were tied up in the sun around the Court-house.

Probably they had been run in out of the paddocks that morning, and, unfed and ungroomed, ridden or driven into town to stand a day in the blazing sun.

At night they will be whipped or spurred home, saddles or harness pulled off their hot and sweltering backs, and turned loose again.

This is the way the *Horse*-tralian loves his noble steed. Meanwhile the owners of the said horses were expanding visibly under the influence of libations offered up at the altar of friendship.

Some of them were indeed friends that day. For instance, was not Browne of "Minaba" going to swear that Edwardes of "Ravenshill" had not enough land to bring up his large family on, and therefore his holding should be made up by three hundred acres out of "Reapit"? And had not McCurdy come prepared to take oath that in all the broad acres of Castlehow, who owned "North Park," there were not more than a hundred acres of arable land? How could Castlehow bring up his large family unless he, too, got his land made up out of "Reapit"?

That everybody knew that not only Edwardes of "Ravenshill," but his sons also, were already practically independent, and that Castlehow had at least four hundred acres arable and over a thousand sheep, not to speak of horses and cattle, on his excellent property, was merely incidental. At such a time as a land ballot the truth finds difficulty in coming to the front. Why was McCurdy going to take the oath for Castlehow? Well, shouldn't we do as we have been done by?

"And tell me this, Brady," said McCurdy to his son-in-law the night before the ballot. "Didn't Castlehow stick to me when I was in for the last bit of 'additional' from Thunderbolt's Mountain? Didn't he, I say, stand up like a man and swear for me through fire and water?"

"Fiery water, I tell ye!" rejoined the son-in-law. "He drank enough at that time to irrigate all the 'additional' ye got."

"Yes, indeed," said the elder man softly; "but it was worth it—it was worth it."

"Sorry I am, in a way, sorry I am that my own extint is made up. It's meself that would like to be in it to-morrow." And the old warrior sniffed the air like the war-horse impatient for the battle.

The old "bush-lawyer" had got all that he was entitled to under the Act made up to him. All his sons had their full extent, and this at the expense of their more honest neighbours and by dint of hard swearing.

There was not enough available land in the Munilla district to give everybody their full "possible," and it was a notorious fact that certain families, who seemed to understand the way to get land from Government, were well able to purchase privately. But there was one consolation for McCurdy; if he was out of the game for himself, he could swear for some of the others, and to-day he was in the Court-house to do it.

And after all there was a little taint of self-interest in his perjury; for Castlehow's place was divided only by a fence from his daughter's selection, and Castlehow knew how the worthy spinster fulfilled the residential clauses of the Act. There is a nice garden at the selection hut. Now, is not that a proof of residence? Castlehow knows all about that garden! But who takes the land laws of New South Wales seriously?

From the various Ministers of Lands, down to the members of Parliament and the graziers and farmers themselves, do they not all regard the various land laws as avenues through which to drive the proverbial carriage and pair? Are not these same laws administered in a way which makes it easy to do wrong and hard to do right?

But there was one man in the Land Court that day who *did* take the land laws of New South Wales seriously.

It was our friend the swagman up to date, otherwise Edward Woolham. He had come to Munilla on purpose to try to get a selection out of the "Reapit Exchange." The opening-up of this property was a well-heralded and much-trumpeted part of the policy of the New South Wales Government to open up big estates on the outskirts of country townships to selection. Fortunately this was an exchange and not a resumption, so it would not cost the Government any purchase money.

The Dalgety Syndicate wished to exchange ''Reapit'' for an equal extent of land to be added to their Tilmundra Estate.

This would suit the syndicate better, enabling them to concentrate their interests, and the Government recognised that ''Reapit'' would be a valuable addition to the ''hinterland'' of the prosperous little town of Munilla.

''We shall settle one hundred and twenty new families on this land,'' said the Minister in the House. The local Land Board, after consideration, reported that sixty-six new families could be settled on the estate.

As a matter of fact, only twenty-one new settlers were put upon the land.

Of how this was managed we have already received some hint.

Skilfully piloted by unscrupulous land-agents, some of whom were members of Parliament, the neighbouring selectors applied for additional land to their already sufficient holdings.

No one was more surprised than Edward Woolham at the severe cross-examination he was put through by the three members of the Land Board.

In answer to questions, he said that he had been attracted to New South Wales by the advertisements issued from the Agent-General's office in London.

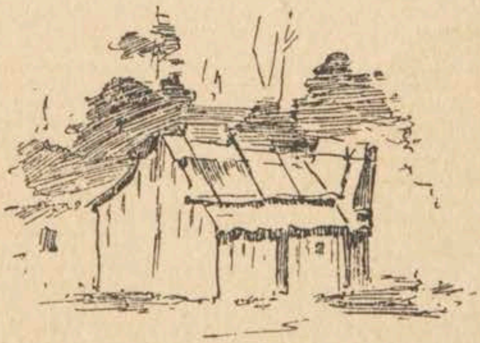
He paid his own passage out, and had a little experience in farming, as his people at home were on the land. He had worked in the South Coast district and on a North Coast dairy farm, but he wanted to go in for mixed farming, wheat and sheep. He understood that this was the proper district to come to for that.

Yes, he had enough capital to start. He had £200 to his credit at the local bank, as his book produced would show, and could if necessary—he hoped it would not be—get more from the old country.

After consultation, the members of the Board, for a reason not given, informed him that he could not go to the ballot.

They would advise him to find other land and make application.

He was stunned. Why had this land been advertised so much, if such as he could not go to the ballot?



CHAPTER III.

OUR IMMIGRANT PLUNGES.

GO on the land, young man, go on the land!'—that is the text they are all preaching from now, isn't it? You get it at every political banquet; you get it from the newspapers, from the pulpit; everybody dins it into your ears—'Go on the land, young man!' " The speaker was a comical-looking individual with a big Roman nose and a long grey beard.

He was looking down at Woolham with a merry twinkle in his eye, as the disappointed new-chum stretched himself out under a pepper tree in the Courthouse grounds.

"It's no joke for me," said the young man. "I have been seeking land for a year. I have just earned enough to live on, and I have been all over this State, and it does not seem that I can get in anywhere. Why do they advertise the State so much and induce people to come here, if they are not going to make it easy for them to settle when they do come out?"

"Do you see that crowd of perspiring and profane humanity there, and do you understand the meaning of that excitement?" said the land agent. "It means that they are giving gold mines away, and don't you forgit it!

"This is a good country, make no mistake, but it's badly run; too much government, of a sort, too many members of Parliament, although I did try to become one myself once.

"Every one of the men who gets land to-day is set up for life. In ten years they should be made men. You can't beat wool and wheat; they are our true golden harvest, young man, and don't you forgit it! My advice to you still is, 'Go on the land, young man!' "

"And so I will," said Woolham. There was a hard look in the light-blue eyes and a firm pressure about the lips that the old land agent evidently liked, as the young man said: "I'll not be beaten, even if I have to camp on a stony ridge or sink in a swamp.

"Look here, Mr. Scarsdale; there is the map of the district that I got at your precious Lands Office in Sydney. Do you know any available land here other than 'Reapit'?

"What of this nine hundred acres, parish of Ringari, within John Stuart's lease?"

The land agent looked at the place pointed out, and then broke into a loud laugh.

"Crikey, that's a good joke!" he said. "It ain't much good, you bet; it's rough, hilly country, but, Lor', it's right in the middle of old Graball's property. He'd give you a hot time if you got there."

"I'll apply for that," said Woolham, rising. "I don't care if it is as stony as a quarry, or timbered like a jungle. I intend to get in somewhere."

And the young immigrant made arrangements with Mr. Scarsdale for the application there and then.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROMANCE BEGINS.

A HEAVY dew lay on the grass, and the tiny gossamer webs of hundreds of spiders sparkled in the sunshine as if sprinkled with diamonds. The river wound in and out among the hills, and on its gently-sloping banks were to be seen scores of contented and well-conditioned cattle.

The mellow notes of the piping crow could be heard in the distance, and the shrill call of the mud-lark blended with the cries of the sparrow-hawk.

Now the deep hum of the cicadas joined the chorus of the bush and, with the screech of the many-hued parrots, mingled into one morning hymn of praise such as can be heard only in the sunny lands of the Southern Cross.

Altogether it was such a morning and such a scene as to stir one's pulses and to make the heart go out in praise to the Creator.

The girls were in high spirits as they drove down the bush track which leads through Rangari to the Munilla Road.

Bessie, the younger sister, was driving the sturdy chestnuts, which had already become quiet under her careful management.

These two Australian girls were worth a second look.

May Stuart was tall, with abundant dark hair. She was considered a beauty in the district, but perhaps her beauty verged too much to the large type. With a rather florid complexion, a voice rich, but not low and sweet, and a manner rather imperious, she impressed one as a fine, dashing, masterful girl.

Bessie, however, was the favourite with those who knew the two sisters. Not quite so tall and grand as her sister, she had a gentler and quieter way and a sweet, sympathetic voice.

She was beautiful as her sister was handsome, and there was a firmness about the slender and graceful figure which suggested power, as did the expression which dwelt upon the mobile face.

Her clear, grey eyes looked out from under long brown lashes, and her smile was like the summer dawn.

But a squeaky wheel and a hot axle will spoil any landscape.

Soon the girls discovered that they would have to stop. One of the axles was quite hot.

"How annoying!" said May. "And Arthur Yates said that he had greased the wheels."

"He did—I saw him," said Bessie.

"I suppose it is a tight washer which is causing the bother."

It was an awkward situation. It was equally impossible to go on or to turn back. Just then they heard the sound of hoofs pounding on the turf, and much to their relief a horseman appeared coming round the hill.

"Thank goodness!" said May. "It's the new-chum boundary-rider."

"Good morning, Mr Woolham," said Bessie. "You have just come in time to help us out of a difficulty."

The prefix "Mr." was a little unusual, though it is much commoner in Australia than in the old country, but it serves to show the position occupied by Woolham on the Rangari Station. He was hardly a "jackeroo"—that is, a young man of means living as a guest, to get experience of sheep-farming before setting up for himself as a grazier—and yet he was more than an ordinary boundary-rider on wages.

He had obtained work on the station through the introduction of our old friend McSwayne, who christened him the "up-to-date swagman." He was avowedly there to get colonial experience, prior to starting independently some day, and yet his previous experience had enabled him to demand at any rate a living wage.

The Stuarts recognised that he was an educated man who had probably been brought up as a gentleman, and they were inclined to treat him with a respect not accorded to the usual sort of employee.

As for Woolham, it is to be feared that the pleasure and interest he found in his new work had caused him almost to forget his vocation as a settler, and the fact that his people looked to him as the pioneer who had gone out to the new land to prepare the way for his younger brothers to follow. The two sisters were really interested in Woolham, for there was an air of mystery about him and his past which savoured of romance, and, besides, he had an attractive personality, and where is the young woman who is not interested in a well-set-up and muscular young man who happens to have the frame of an athlete and the manners of a gentleman?

"The axle-box has become hot, and we can't go on. I think it is a tight washer on that wheel," said Bessie.

Very soon the young man, with the help of the girls, for bush girls usually know how to manipulate harness, had the horses out of the pole. Drawing the wheel off the axle, which he had propped up with a log, he succeeded in cutting the troublesome washer out, and soon it was seen that the wheel ran free. Then the horses were put in again, and all was ready for a fresh start.

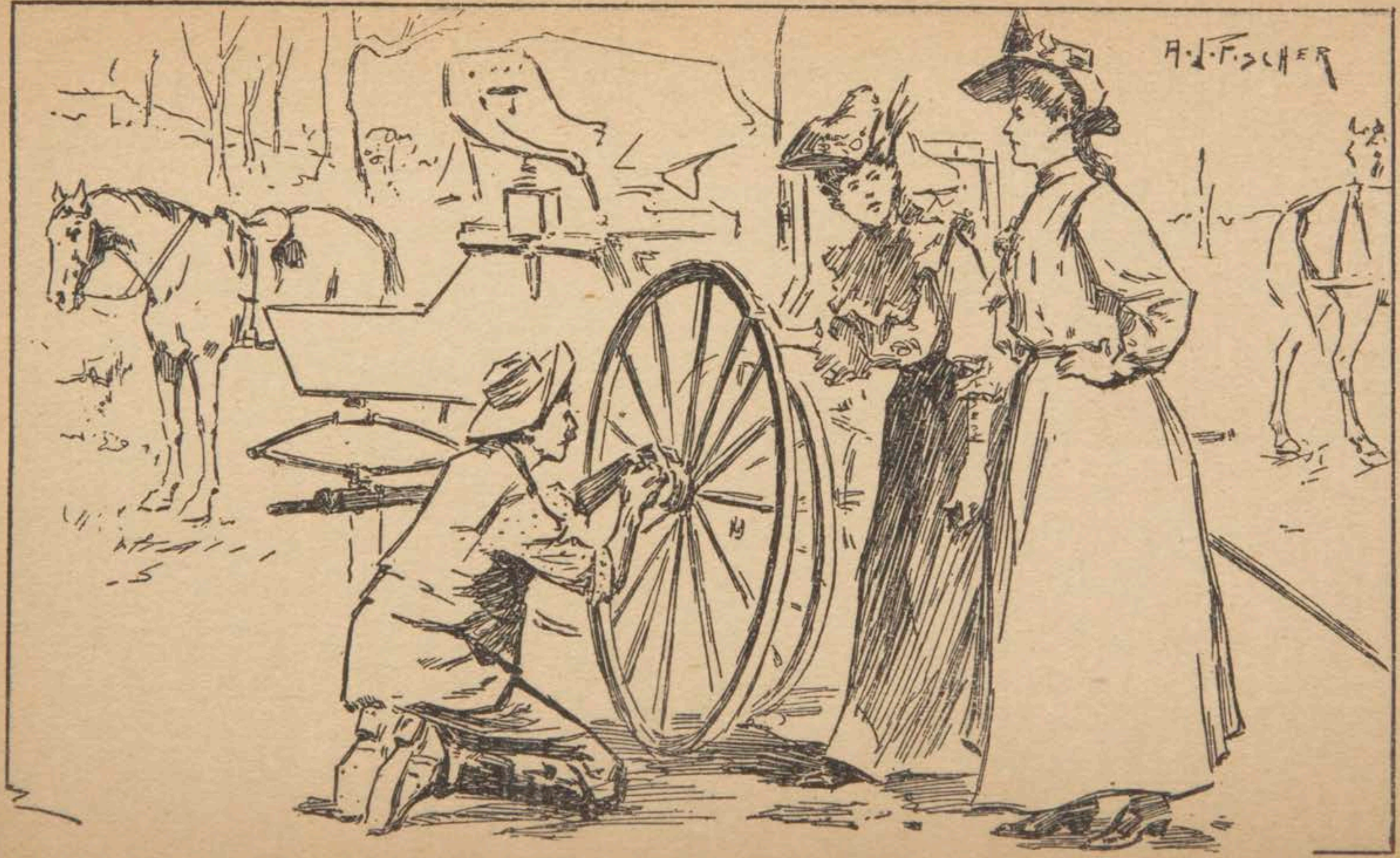
"Thank you very much," said Bessie.

"I am glad to help you," said Woolham.

"You don't oblige us in all our requests," said May. "We have asked you to come up to the Homestead on several occasions, and you have not responded."

"Believe me it is not through any lack of appreciation of your kindness in giving the invitation," replied the young man. "And now," he continued, "as I have to go over to the river, if you don't mind, I'll accompany you and open the gates."

"That will be splendid," replied May.



HE SUCCEEDED IN CUTTING THE TROUBLESOME WASHER OUT. [*Page* 24.

CHAPTER V.

ABOUT SOME SQUATTERS AND SOME SELECTORS.

ONE of the most inconvenient things about travelling in the bush is the number of gates you have to open and shut. The road is seldom fenced off. It would entail great expense to do this, and often lead to the employment of extra labour to take the cattle out of various paddocks to water.

No doubt, however, gates are often a sign of the selfishness of the wealthy squatter.

Rather than go to the expense of getting water in the various paddocks by making dams or digging wells, with windmills to feed the troughs, they put the travelling public to the great inconvenience of finding their way through paddocks miles in extent, the road going through innumerable gates. It is the easiest thing in the world to get on the wrong track in these big paddocks, which are formed with the sole object of including a road to a natural water supply.

There is another object attained by this unprogressive and selfish policy, and John Stuart pursued this object persistently.

"We don't want the Government to make roads though Ringari," said Stuart to his sons.

"The less we see of travellers the better. If we had conspicuous-looking gates entering into our property and good roads going through it, what would be the result? Why, we should have book agents, machinery men, bush missionaries, and, worst of all, 'cockies' coming in upon us.'' It must be explained the ''cocky'' is the free selector—the little man who comes and selects a part of the big man's leasehold estate. The squatters often hate the settlers, because there have been men who made a business of ''picking the eyes'' out of the squatter's run.

These men were not bona-fide settlers, their only object being to seize on the vital parts of the run, and ultimately compel the squatter to buy him out at an exorbitant price. But, although these men have been the exception, the genuine settler has suffered for their sins. To defeat the law of free-selection the squatters have found many expedients.

The most successful one was *dummying.* This was the practice of putting in *straw men* themselves as selectors.

These men were practically workers on the estate. The squatter would advance them enough money to put what improvements were necessary on the property to comply with the law. On the completion of the residential conditions of the Act, the *dummy* would make a *sale* to the squatter, get his cheque, the reward of his chicanery, and most likely proceed to the nearest bush public house and have a good time, then return and report himself to the ''boss'' for more work.

There were few big stations in the old days in New South Wales which were not more or less got together by dummying. Belated legislation has made it now more difficult and risky, but you can drive through the country and mark the deserted and disused selectors' huts everywhere.

John Stuart shared all the prejudices of his class against selectors.

He had fought them or bought them out when compelled, and his property now was arranged so that few travellers went that way.

For instance, no one would guess that the creaky broken-down gate on the Munilla Road led to Rangari Homestead.

Going through the gate you had to turn at a right angle, and, travelling along a bush track, you had to zig-zag for unnecessary miles, from paddock to paddock, before you caught a sight of the corrugated iron roof of the long rambling house in the distance.

With a perverseness which was as stupid as it was selfish, the squatter still opposed the application of the settlers at Gum Flat to get a direct road through his property.

That the difficulty of getting their wheat and wool to the railway was a great handicap on their industry, was a thought that never seemed to enter his fossilised brain.

After this long and dry digression we must return to our driving party.

You may be sure that there were not too many gates for Woolham on that bright spring morning.

To canter from closing one gate to opening another was to him a privilege.

The thanks spoken and looked by the girls was a sufficient recompense to him.

The fact is, our usually level-headed jackeroo had surrendered unconditionally to the charms of Bessie.

He had had many opportunities of seeing her. In the little Union Church where they worshipped on Sunday afternoons, his heart had begun to sing to the praises of Bessie.

In his long rides around the fences his memory painted beautiful pictures of Bessie upon the canvas of imagination.

Sometimes it was Bessie in white dress, the rebellious brown hair escaping from all restraint and dancing golden in the sun as she tended the flowers in the garden.

Sometimes it was Bessie in smart riding habit dashing through the bush on her favourite horse. Sometimes it was Bessie with the reins in her firm little hands guiding the chestnuts along the bush track, as she was doing this morning. The pictures were various, but Bessie was always the centre.

Had she been a saint with a nimbus of glory radiating from her golden tresses, he could not have worshipped her more.

That Bessie obtained some satisfaction from the sight, as she saw him sitting so gracefully the strong bay he had bought for himself, as he opened the gates for them we may take for granted.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TAMING OF VIXEN.

IT is said that "love is blind," but it is not blind to the progress that "the other fellow" is making. This may account for the attitude which Arthur Yates assumed towards Woolham.

Yates was as much in love with Bessie as a man of his self-sufficient temperament could be in love with anyone, and he discerned that Woolham was very favourably regarded by the ladies of the Homestead.

It was galling to him that the "new-chum upstart," as he chose to think of Woolham should be treated with such favour, whilst he, the son and heir of one of the wealthiest squatters of the north-west should have to remain in the "court of the strangers," so far as the good graces of the two sisters, especially Bessie, were concerned.

The truth is that the girls had not taken to Yates, whom they persisted in judging on his own merits rather than in the light of his father's bank account.

Yates was not a nice man. He was not manly; he was overbearing in his demeanour to others, and had an absurd notion of his own importance; a notion which had been fostered in the home, where he was a spoilt child, at school and college, where he had been allowed to handle too much money, and on his father's station, where there were too many employees who had found that it paid to let young Yates have his own way.

At Ringari, however, it was different. Alick Stuart, the elder son, who was practically manager, cordially disliked him.

The men were not impressed by his great bulk, for they shrewdly guessed that his spirit was not as great as his frame, and Woolham soon saw that Yates was a "bounder" whom one might wisely ignore.

There had been some friction between the two jackaroos, and once Yates had even laid hands on Woolham, but the new-chum had held him with a Japanese grip which had surprised the bigger man.

So all that Yates could now do was to try and score off Woolham by showing up his inexperience when occasion offered. But it is not wise to assume that a new-chum is ignorant on every point, and as a matter of fact new-chums are not nearly so callow as they are painted by the popular stories and jokes which are told at their expense in the country.

It is usually believed of all new-chums that they cannot ride.

That art is understood to be a prerogative belonging only to Australians.

When, therefore, a day was given to the handling of young horses, Yates fully expected that he might assume a superiority over Woolham.

When any of the men had a bad time with a particularly wild horse, he would suggest that Woolham should show them how they handled young horses in the old country.

But the Englishman had a gift of self-restraint and silence which was not easily understood by Yates.

Our new-chum was quite willing to help in a minor way as one who was a learner, and he did not take the trouble to notice all Yates's silly innuendoes.

It is open to question whether the method of breaking in horses usually adopted on a big station is either sensible or profitable.

Some very valuable horses do not respond very well to mere brute force.

If horses in Australia were of more commercial value, perhaps breakers would use more patience with them, and strive to teach them as well as tame them.

Many a good horse is spoilt by what is called its breaking-in.

If thoughts like these passed through the mind of Woolham, he wisely kept them to himself, and observed the game from the standpoint of a looker-on.

The particular feature of the morning's work was to be the handling of ''Vixen,'' a spirited mare owned by Yates.

It was admitted that animals of the Boccacio blood were of the best sort if they could be broken in, but every now and again this stock showed an outlaw which could never be broken, and even among those who had been successfully handled very few became really quiet until they were aged. It was suspected that Vixen would prove the odd outlaw.

Previous attempts to handle the mare had given no promise of final success.

As she stood in the centre of the stockyard, Vixen extorted the admiration of all, even of those who had least faith in her temper. She was a golden chestnut with three white stockings and a star in her forehead. With a splendid wither and a well-ribbed-up level barrel, she possessed a small head with fiery eyes and curling sensitive nostrils.

"She is worth five pounds now, Yates," said Alick Stuart, as he coiled the rope up ready to lasso the mare; "but if we have luck this morning, she may be worth anything from thirty to fifty pounds before the day is out."

By this time the ground of the stockyard had been worked up very loose by previous handlings, but the mare waltzed round as if she were treading on air.

But ere long she was safely bridled, and "Corny," an aborigine* who seemed to be as unconscious of danger, where horses were concerned, as he was unconscious of obligation where other work was concerned, was ready to mount.

However skilfully Corny managed to approach, the mare seemed to divine his intention, and always sprang away, and it was not until she had been blindfolded that Corny managed to slide into the big stockman's saddle.

When the aborigine was firmly seated and ready, he gave the word, "Let her go," and the fun began. The horse reared and plunged and then bucked in every conceivable way, but the lithe native clung like a limpet to the saddle, amid cries from the stockmen, rouseabouts, and boundary-riders, who were seated on the top rail of the stockyard—"Stick to her, Corny!" "Hang on!"

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* I have preferred to use the word aborigi*ne* as the singular to aborigi*nes*, believing that the commonly accepted word aborigi*nal* would be more properly used only as an adjective.—AUTHOR.

Once or twice the rider was nearly thrown, but his pluck was as remarkable as his balance was graceful.

With the horse's heels in the air, sometimes Corny was almost parallel with the horse's back in his effort to keep the perpendicular; at another time the animal's head and the rider's were almost close together, when the excited mare was rearing on her hind legs as if she would throw herself over.

Then she bucked from side to side, but so far the intrepid darky stuck to his mount. His lithe limbs, clothed in tight-fitting moleskins, gripped the horse firmly.

Red shirt and light bluchers completed his raiment, and with his shock of rough hair he formed as wild a picture as can be imagined.

The mare was quietening down a bit, and it seemed as though, after all, Vixen was going to be quelled.

But it takes a lot of bucking, even in a sandy stockyard, to tire a horse like Vixen, and soon she began again.

Corny was not as fit now as he had been. He had had enough bucking even to make an aborigine dizzy, and when, after going once more through all the tricks she knew, the mare succeeded in getting her head right down between her legs and her body curved like an arch, it seemed, for a brief moment, as though the darky were poised on the edge of the world. Then the horse bucked, and Corny came off, and so did everything else, for the victorious mare had got rid of saddle, girth, and crupper, and not a strap was broken.

Spitting out sand and swear-words peculiar to the vocabulary of an aborigine, who always seems readiest to learn this sort of English, Corny picked himself up, and was understood to remark that he was satisfied.

Old Patrickson, a neighbouring cocky who had come over to see the fun, declared oracularly that in his opinion it was "a fair go," and he handed sixpence to Corny for a special drink. Alick Stuart said, "It was very good for a beginning."

"Lucky," one of the stockmen, managed to get the mare, and remarked to Woolham that he thought after all that the mare could be quietened.

"She's lively, but she ain't treacherous; she don't finish gettin' a fellow off by trying to kick him, and she ain't shown the white of her eye at all."

"That's a fact," said Wright, the boundary-rider, who seldom removed his cherry-wood pipe to say anything, and hardly ever seemed to be really smoking.

Even a cold and empty pipe seems to conduce to philosophy.

As for Yates, on the whole he was reassured; the mare, he thought, was no outlaw.

He had not hidden his purpose to ride her himself before the day was out, and though a big man he was really a good rider. The only thing now, he spitefully remarked, was for them "to put the Englishman up."

"The mare won't be much good to you unless you learn to ride her," remarked Woolham. The sting was in the word "learn," and Yates let out a fiery string of expletives designed to show that he knew all about riding long ago, when Wolham was "chawing bacon in the old country, where bucking horses were unknown." Woolham only smiled and shrugged his shoulders in a way which Yates never seemed to relish.

But by this time Lucky, the stockman, was up, and the spectators turned to see the next act. Lucky had gone one better than Corny in getting into the saddle without bother. He was a smart rider, who was popularly credited with being very good at "getting on and getting off." He never seemed to be bent on trying to see merely how long he could sit a horse, and used to reply to all chaff by laughingly remarking that "he did not go much on trying to quieten a horse at one sitting."

However, the horses that Lucky broke in were acknowledged to be invariably well trained. On this occasion he had seized the animal by the ear and vaulted quickly into the saddle, probably very much to Vixen's surprise, who had lost no time in getting to work.

After sticking a short time, Lucky managed to safely and gracefully come off, and, resuming his place on the top-rail, he explained to the mocking onlookers "that he had a sort of instinct which always seemed to tell him when he had had about enough."

Yates now cynically demanded of Woolham "whether he wanted his turn now."

"After you, thanks," was the reply.

This was really a sort of challenge, and Yates remarked:

"Your turn will be next, then, for I am going to ride the horse now."

"Yes, I expect it will be *soon*," Woolham replied.

Yates had allowed this little passage to get him angry, and he did not fare well on the back of the mare.

To ride a buckjumper, one must be cool in temper, in order to be wary of eye and judgment.

The mare after a while seemed to just double herself up and threw him out of the saddle as a stone is thrown out of a catapult.

"It's a bit suddent," remarked Patrickson.

But Yates's blood was up, and he mounted a second time, was thrown again, and then he declared to Stuart that he thought the mare was more likely to be worth five pounds than fifty. "I'd sell her for a tenner now," said he.

Very much to the surprise of everyone, Woolham quietly said:

"Here are your ten pounds now."

"I'm afraid she'll never be worth it to you, Woolham," said Stuart.

"You'd better ride her first," said Yates sarcastically. "You know it is your turn."

"I'll buy her first, then ride her," replied Woolham.

"It's a fair go," Patrickson exclaimed.

"Well, I'll give you my receipt for the amount and sell her to you," said Yates; "but I hope you will not rob us of an exhibition of your English horsemanship."

The deal was made, and then the new-chum proceeded to handle the horse, which was now in a most wicked temper.

Whilst Lucky held the mare, he removed the monkey straps, to which Yates had vainly attempted to cling, from the saddle, and readjusted the stirrups to his length.

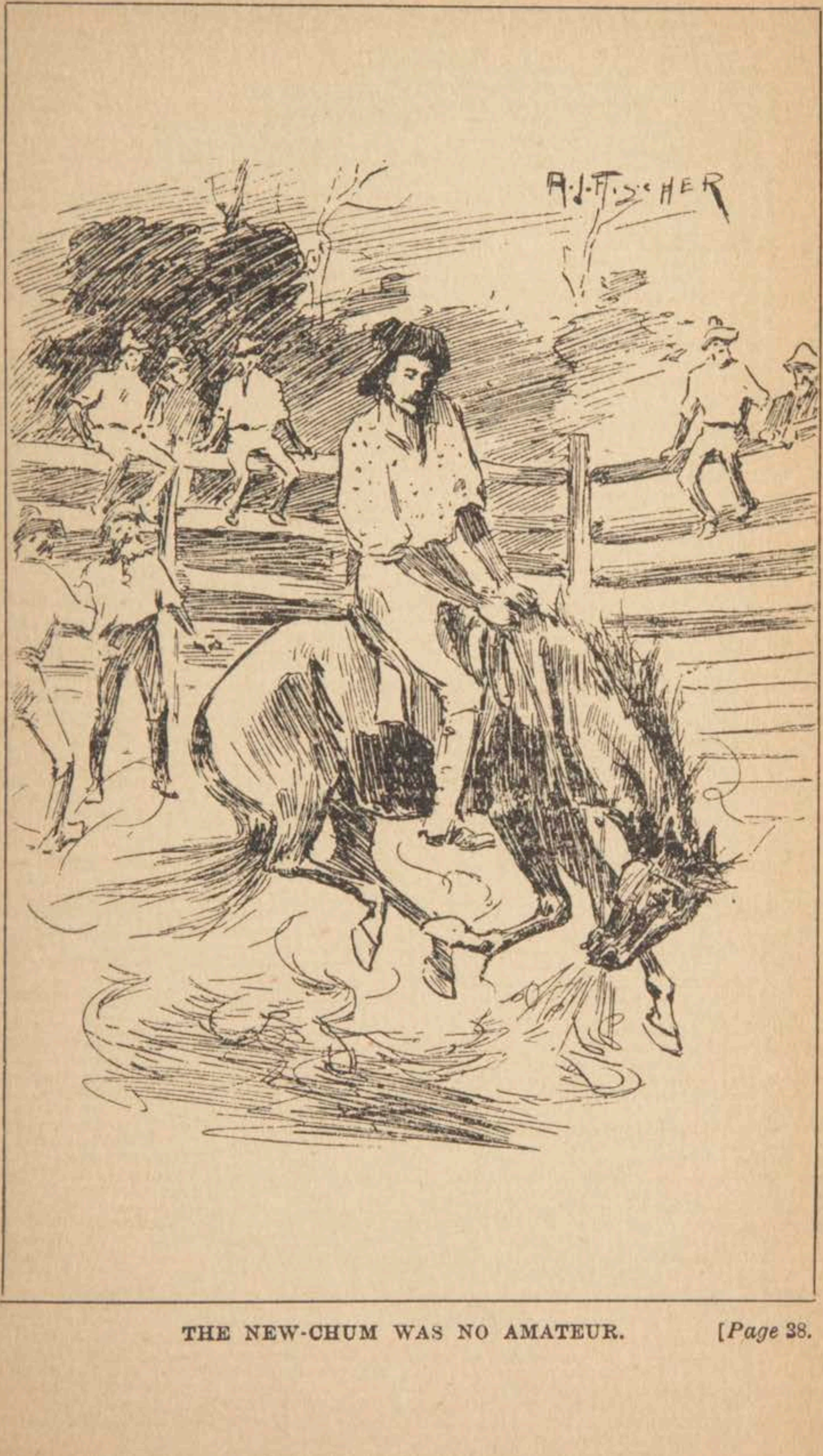
He began then to rub the horse's nose and forehead to soothe her.

"You should say a few kind words to her," said Yates mockingly.

Taking no notice of the remark, Woolham rubbed the horse down with a dry cloth, and the horse, which at first was restless, began to get used to the process, and evidently liked it. Then, tightening the girths and the surcingle, he quietly slid into the saddle, at the same time turning the horse's head away from the crowd. To the surprise of the onlookers, the mare moved forward quietly at first. Woolham spoke to her soothingly, and urged her gently on with knees and reins. But the new-chum was not to have an easy victory, although it was evident that the horse wanted to know what it was expected to do. Had it been spurred or struck, it would have bucked at once.

It walked round one side of the stockyard, snorting, but when it came to where the onlookers were seated on the rail, it refused to continue, and when urged began to buck. Then it was seen that the new-chum was no amateur, for, whilst clinging to the saddle with the skill of the practised rough rider, he kept the horse always moving in the desired direction, until the mare was plunging and rearing around the yard. It seemed as though the horse had accepted a new idea—that it was to move in a given direction.

By-and-bye Woolham said, "Let down the rails, Lucky," and then the mare went bucking and plunging out of the stockyard.



THE NEW-CHUM WAS NO AMATEUR. [*Page* 38.

Woolham turned the horse up the hill. Getting on to the road, the horse went into a bolt, and it appeared as though the rider was urging it on faster. When at last the will of the horse and the will of the rider coincided, the pace was terrific, and soon both were out of sight.

"She'll break his neck," said Yates, with a sort of grim satisfaction.

"It was a risky thing to do," said Alick Stuart.

Late in the afternoon, Woolham was seen riding the mare home at a smart walk.

Dismounting, he staggered with weakness and weariness.

"I feel," he said to Lucky, "as if I had not a bone in my body which has not been broken."

"Yes," said Lucky, "she keeps the flies off. She *is* a bit lively."

"Anyhow," replied the jackaroo, "I reckon I own that mare—not because I have paid ten pounds for her, you understand, but because she has learnt to know me and my ways."

"I understand," said Lucky, as he helped to rub Vixen down and give her a feed.

CHAPTER VII.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

IN real life, the phrase "When things are at their worst they usually take a turn" may be reversed, for when things are going well they often take a turn for the worse, and we are never left long without some difficulty to try us.

To say the least, Edward Woolham was contented and happy in his present life.

He was learning something every day of the vocation he had chosen.

He was on good terms with almost all on Ringari Station, and he felt that he was trusted by the Stuarts. His bay cob Buller had taken nicely to harness, and Vixen was so docile that she had even carried Bessie for a few rides, much to Yates's disgust.

When one morning he received his mail, among some eagerly-expected letters from home he noticed a big blue envelope, which he thought he would leave to the last, for it had a cold official look which did not recommend it.

Opening it, he discovered a letter from Mr. Scarsdale, the land agent, relating to some formal documents enclosed from the Lands Department.

"You will see by the enclosed communications from the Lands Department," wrote Scarsdale, "that your application to take up nine hundred acres in the parish of Ringari as a selection has been successful, and when you have complied with the requirements set forth therein you may enter into possession. Go on the land, young man! I hereby launch you on your career as a free-selector, and may God have mercy upon your soul! Do you wonder at my words?'' wrote the eccentric agent. ''I *know*, and I tell you that some have discovered that the life of a free-selector in New South Wales is anything but *free*. There are perils of floods, perils of bush-fires, perils of loneliness, perils of false neighbours—sometimes big squatters—then there are perils of droughts and perils of rabbits, and, perhaps as bad as any other, there are perils of Government red-tape.

''From all such I pray, 'Good Lord, deliver you.' Some in this country have been settled on the land under conditions which have certainly included fixity of tenure, for it has soon been their burial-place.

''Others have gone for a holiday to a lunatic asylum. There are several palatial ones provided by a paternal Government. However, I wish you luck.

''For your encouragement I may say that now and again the odd man wins.

''The odd man usually has pluck, common sense, and patience.

''I believe you have these three virtues, so I say, 'Go in and win.'

''Yours truly,
''MARK SCARSDALE.

''P.S.—Take a gun with you when you interview old Stuart. ''M. S.''

Woolham wondered at this strange letter. Why should he take a gun with him when he interviewed Mr. Stuart?

On the whole he was pleased. He would have to leave Ringari some day.

It was a comfort to know that he would not on this selection be far from Bessie.

He had not breathed a word of love to her, but he fancied sometimes that she had guessed his secret and was not displeased.

He wondered if she would be glad to know that he was not going far away.

In this spirit he went over to Mr. Stuart's office with the letter in his hand.

As soon as Mr. Stuart saw him, he got up angrily. The old man was white with rage. "It's you, is it? I've got a letter, too," he said.

"Is that what you came here for, to ferret out my land? And I, like a fool, had begun to trust you. But, by Heaven, I've not done with you yet! You'll curse the day you ever came selecting on Ringari!"

"I don't understand what you mean, sir, by this abuse," said the young man stiffly.

"I came to tell you that I have just received this letter to say that my application for land has been granted, and I shall have to leave your service as soon as it is convenient to you."

"Leave my service! I should think so, this very day, as soon as you can pack up."

"What crime have I committed? Is it not natural for a young man to seek to obtain land of his own?"

"But not on my run!" roared the old squatter.

"But, sir," replied Woolham, "it is not your land, and, what is more, you could never obtain it, for it is only available for selection.

"When I applied for it I had not seen it. I don't want in any way to injure you. When I received this I was only glad that I was to be your neighbour."

"My neighbour! Yes," said Stuart sarcastically, "you'll be my neighbour!

"Clear out of this, and at once. I'll give you your cheque now. If you are not out of this soon, I'll set my dogs on you as I would on a thief."

"You will be sorry for these words some day. I don't need to be told to go in this way twice." And the younger man, with his face burning with indignation, swung out of the room, leaving the irate squatter almost beside himself with rage.

The noise of the altercation was heard outside, and when Woolham left he met Bessie on the verandah.

"What is the matter, Mr. Woolham?" said she.

"Your father has insulted me," said the Englishman. "I went to tell him that my application for land had been granted, and that I should have to leave his service when convenient to him, and, because my selection has been part of his lease, he has ordered me to go at once."

"Surely, sir," said the girl, bridling, "you did not come here to select on our station? That would be most dishonourable."

"When I applied for this I did not know Mr. Stuart. It was the only avaialble land in the district. What is there dishonourable in that?"

Bessie looked steadily into the eyes of the young man. She was beginning to take in the situation.

"You have done nothing dishonourable," she said slowly and firmly. "I do not think you could do anything dishonourable. I can see that you don't quite understand how my father would regard this. When you do understand you will forgive him for what he has said. I can only say I am sorry for what has happened."

"Thank you for that assurance," said Woolham. "I hope that Mr. Stuart will also soon learn that I would not do anything dishonourable."

The rumour of what had happened soon spread among the men, and Yates was openly jubilant at the rupture.

As for Woolham, that very morning he packed up and left the station, with his kit in the sulky and Vixen trotting behind.

CHAPTER VIII.

A GOOD SAMARITAN.

IT seemed natural for Woolham to turn his horse's head in the direction of Patrickson's.

He and the old cocky had formed a friendship, and he felt sure that the old man would take him in.

Patrickson's place was on what was called Ti-tree Island. It was an island no longer, but the low-lying land adjoining the little hill where the cocky had built his home suggested that in some distant days the river had sent an arm around the hill, and thus cut it off from Ringari. Indeed, the aborigines had a legend to the effect that the river had once been twice as deep and wide and a broad arm had encircled the hill; hence the place was called Ti-tree Island.

The low-lying land was now a rich meadow, where Patrickson's prize herds, of which he was inordinately proud, were usually pastured.

Patrickson's was a bachelor home. He had a cottage built of dressed hardwood slabs. He had cut the timber, dressed it with the adze, and built the house himself. The architecture of "Eureka," as he called his homestead, was very simple, but it was very sensible.

A little wide hall flanked by two bedrooms opened into a big living-room, with an enormous open fireplace.

Above the mantel the farmer's guns and stockwhip were hung, while a fine saddle hung upon a rack upon the wall.

A housewife would not have permitted this, but the old fellow used to remark, "What is the good of being single if you cannot do as you like?"

There was no teapot in the house, for the cocky had a superstitious reverence for the "billy," and always thought that tea could not be brewed properly in any other sort of utensil. Pictures of prize horses and cattle (Patrickson's delight) adorned the walls of the long dining-room, and a complete library of Australian literature filled a bookcase which crowned a bureau.

It was the boast of the old man that there was not a book written by an Australian author, either story or poetry, he did not possess. The Bible and Shakespeare, with a few other standard works, completed his literary equipment, and when he was not discoursing on cattle and horses he loved to quote the jingle of the bush poets.

A wide verandah overgrown with grape and passion fruit vines ran round the house, and a covered way led to the kitchen and man's room. Stables and outbuildings, including great haystack yards, were built at a distance square with the house, and a good, though small, garden was fenced off from the paddocks.

"What!" sang out the cocky as he discerned his visitor. "On the wallaby?"

"Yes," said Woolham. "I've come to see if you can take me in. I am a wanderer on the face of the earth."

The young man told his story, and Patrickson listened sympathetically.

During the recital they had unharnessed Buller, and having put the sulky into the shed and the horses in the paddocks, the old man said, "Come in; you are welcome to Eureka. You have a rough row to hoe, but I'm your friend, and you can consider Eureka your home as long as you like."

Woolham warmly thanked him for his truly bush welcome.

After lunch Patrickson said, pointing to the hills opposite his front verandah:

"Yonder is your selection, not more than a mile away. You are just between me and Ringari. You'd better make Eureka your headquarters until you have a shanty of your own. I've been through the mill. Let me tell you I am the only selector that old Stuart could never shift, and he has tried all he knows.

"Your selection has been taken up before, and abandoned, and I happen to know that the old man had a game on by which he was going to secure it. You have spoilt his game; that's why he is so mad."

"But how could he secure the land when it is only open for selection?" said Woolham.

"My son, there are lots of by-ways in the Lands Department, and by getting the right scoundrel to work for you, and for a consideration, you can get land put under various forms, and as the land has been available for so long and no one took it up, an argument was accumulating for its being sold. But you have spoilt that argument. Mind you, I am not saying that the old man is either better or worse than others. I'd want that land if I were he, and if it had been sold I should have expected some of it.

"If Stuart had been less scrupulous he might have had it long ago. It is only lately that he put it into the hands of a *certain party.*

"I have thought lately that the old man was getting more civilised, for when I selected here he was a bit of a barbarian, and I expect that now that you have spilt his milk he and those who work for him will show you their roughest side.

"When I began I had no friend. I lived in a tent first, then in a bark hut.

"I am glad that you will not have to suffer quite as much as I had.

"When anything suddint happens, just come along here and have a smoke whilst we plan our moves."

It was under these circumstances that our new-chum received his promotion. First up-to-date swagman, then jackaroo, now selector.

He was getting on in the world, but at present he was no happier.

CHAPTER IX.

LUCKY FRIDAY.

WOOLHAM was more or less helpless by himself upon his selection.

Notwithstanding his colonial experience, he felt that his selection formed a hard and lonely task. Many a selector has spent the early years of residence on his selection amid conditions worse than a term of hard labour. The selector pays a big price for any success he may obtain. Fortunately Woolham could afford help, but it was important to get the right sort of companion to share his toils. His friend Patrickson never did him a better service than when he introduced Lucky Friday to him as his helper.

''Well,'' said he one evening when Woolham had gone over to Eureka to smoke the pipe of peace with him. ''Well, Robinson Crusoe, I have found the man Friday for you.''

''That is good news,'' said Woolham. ''Who is it?''

''Lucky Friday has taken a great fancy to you, and he would like to come.''

''I would rather have him than anyone,'' said the selector.

Lucky Friday was known to Woolham as an occasional worker on the Ringari Station. He could plough, shear, fence, break in horses—in fact, he was a handy man who could do anything upon a selection.

On the next day, sure enough a Friday, too, Lucky arrived on his flea-bitten grey mare.

All his kit was wrapped in a roll of American cloth and strapped on the front of the saddle, his fowling-piece in the middle of the roll.

In a leather case strapped at the back of the saddle was the indispensable billy.

The long stockman's whip was curled up in his hand, and his dog Bluenose followed.

"Mornin', Boss!" said Lucky.

"Good morning," said Woolham. "I am glad to see you, but I am not quite ready for you yet. Where shall I put you?"

A broad grin spread over Lucky's beaming face. The question was so superfluous to him that he had not a response ready.

He raised his slouch hat in a meditative sort of way. His curly hair surrounded his face as a frame does a picture; for Lucky was growing a beard; and his smile turned into a laugh as he said, "You bet, I'll find a place to put meself."

Having unsaddled and exhibited the good points of his mare, of which he was very proud, he turned the horse into a paddock which the selector had formed by building a rough temporary fence.

Next he made an ingenious contrivance within the bark stable to rest his saddle on, and put up pegs for his bridle and whip alongside Woolham's; then he turned to the selector and said:

"Well, Boss, what about a bit of tucker?"

"Can you cook?" said Woolham.

Once more Lucky smiled a reassuring smile, and already Woolham believed that Lucky was a capital cook.

This belief was soon confirmed by works. When Lucky saw the tinned food and biscuits in Woolham's storeroom he remarked:

"These are all right when you are in a hurry, but give me a bit of damper and corn-beef."

Soon the two sat before an excellent meal. The meal was better than the appointments. The table was an empty case; for chairs they had boxes. The sideboard was another case.

Woolham had fixed up a comfortable shanty, roofed with corrugated iron fastened on cypress pine saplings. Sheets of bark were fastened on rough posts cut in the bush for sides to the house.

He had even put a floor down in his little bedroom, where he had an iron camp bedstead and horse-hair mattress.

But this was a luxury for which Lucky had no desire. After lunch Lucky arranged his bedroom. It was a lean-to of bark fastened with the ubiquitous fencing wire, with which a true bushman can do anything, from mending his harness to building his house. His bed was an arrangement of saplings and bagging, with which he made a stretcher.

"We shall have a better home than this some day, Lucky, please God," said Woolham.

"This is good enough for me," said Lucky.

Thus began a comradeship between the two young men which was to last till death.

A comradeship never repented of on either side. Lucky was absolutely loyal, true as steel, and as dependable as the Bank of England. With the coming of Lucky Friday the selector did more for himself than he knew, for he was straightway adopted into Lucky's family, and Mrs. Lovell would have been sorely disappointed if ever the "Boss," as she called Woolham, had passed her door without calling.

Many a cup of tea had Woolham in the humble home of the Lovells.

Woolham knew that Mrs. Lovell was not really the mother of Lucky; that he was in fact an adopted son; but he also knew that an unusual affection existed between them—an affection far beyond the relation existing between Mrs. Lovell and her other sons, who were all from home, and for the most part married. They had their own selections and families to think about, and had tacitly left the care of the old couple to Lucky.

There was a story attached to Lucky and his strange name.

Woolham knew something of it, and once he ventured to say to Mrs. Lovell, as he sat drinking a cup of tea with the rough but kindly woman:

"How is it, Mrs. Lovell, that you came to adopt Lucky, when you had such a large family of your own, and how did he come by his curious name?"

"Well, sir, it's a long story, and I'll tell you just how it happened. Only I'll say this first—I've never been sorry for taking Lucky. He has been more comfort to me than all my own, and I've 'ad seven, five sons and two daughters."

CHAPTER X.

THE STORY OF LUCKY FRIDAY.

IT is twenty years ago, and I was living here,'' said Mrs. Lovell. ''My man Lovell was then a fencer and tank-sinker. Most of my family were too young to earn anything, and, with Lovell without any regular work, we had a hard time, and sometimes could hardly make ends meet.

''One day I was sitting outside sewing. I saw coming down the bush track a rough shearer. He was a big man with a long beard. He rode one horse and led another, a pack-horse. But the thing that struck me was, that he at the same time carried in his arms a bundle which looked to me as if it contained something very like a baby.

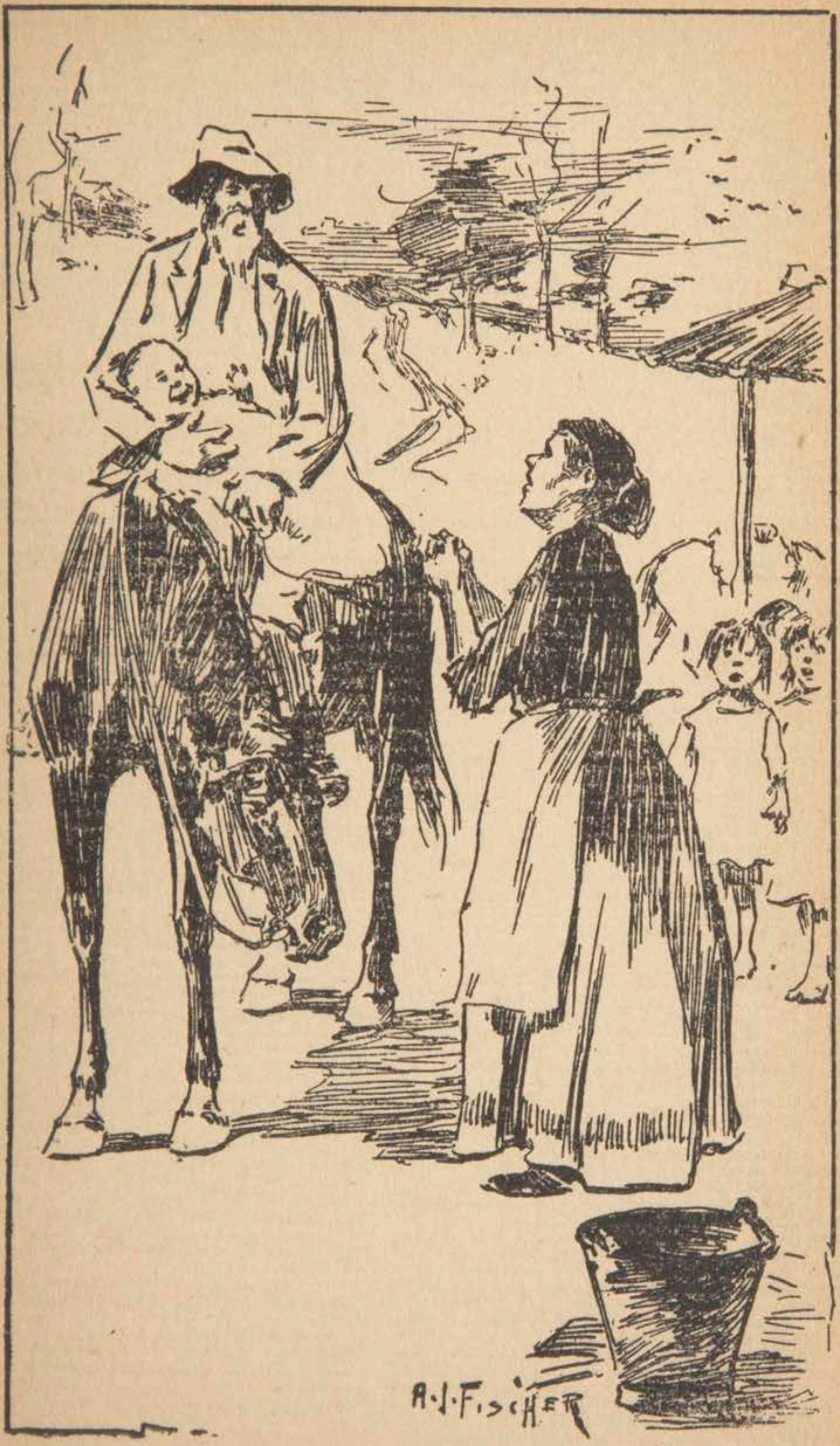
''Riding one horse and leading the other did not bother him very much, but carrying the bundle too was something of a handful.

''My interest was aroused, and before he reached the house I rose and asked him:

'' 'What have you got there, Mister?'

'' 'You may well ask that, Missus. Look at 'im,' said he, uncovering a baby's face. 'Isn't he a beauty? What do you think of 'im for a kid?'

''The little chap was fast asleep, and I tell you he *was* a beauty.



"LOOK AT 'IM. ISN'T HE A BEAUTY?" [*Page* 54.

"He had light curly hair and bright blue eyes. His fat little hands were twisted in the clothes, and he had a smile on his face." Here the old lady paused for breath, and then remarked, "Bless me, he has had that smile on his face ever since.

"As I was looking at him the baby waked up and laughed in my face. Then I said, 'Where did you get 'im, and what are ye going to do with 'im?'

" 'Well, Missus, that's soon told, and if you will take the kid I'll tell you.' With that he handed me the baby in the bundle and dismounted.

"Having tied his horses up, the shearer then sat down on the verandah and said:

" 'Well, Missus, you want to know where I got that kid. About fifteen miles down the track I saw a family camping by the creek. I boiled my billy on their fire. I couldn't see the husband, but there were kids — heaps of them — knocking around, and the woman seemed a poor delicate body with more on her hands than she could manage. I guess she 'ad a helpless sort of a ninny as a husband. I didn't see 'im. She said they were travelling, and her husband was doing some odd jobs at a neighbouring selector's place.

" 'This little chap was howling—very likely because he couldn't manage to get anything out of the empty bottle he was tugging at. I took a fancy to the kid from the start, and I arsked, "What's the name of that nipper?"

" ' "Oh," she said, "his name is 'One-Too-Many.' He was born on a Friday, and he has brought no luck to us. He did not even bring his food along with him."

" 'For answer to that and to cheer her up a bit, I sang a line or two of the comic song,

"Never be born on a Friday,
It's a most unlucky day."

" 'That didn't seem to bring 'er no comfort, and then a suddent thought came to me, and I said:

" ' "What are you agoing to do with 'im?" and she says, "Gawd knows—sell 'im or give 'im away."

" 'With that I took a sovereign out of my pocket, and, holding it to 'er, I says, "'Ere ye are; I'll give ye a quid for the kid."

" 'I didn't think she'd take it, but she did. Then I didn't think she'd let me take 'im. I filled 'is bottle up with warm tea with a lot of condensed milk in it, and I watched 'is nibs suck it all up. After that the kid was quite jolly; 'e larfed at me an' pulled my whiskers, an' when I cracked my fingers at 'im 'e larfed again.

" 'Howsomever, when I packed up I said to the woman, "Me an' the kid 'ad better be moving on. I'll call 'im 'Lucky Friday.' " She wrapped 'im up in these duds, an' filled 'is bottle with the larst of the condensed milk, an' when I was on the horse she put 'im in my arms, an' as I was agoing she said to the baby, "Gawd 'elp ye, I carn't!"

" 'Since then I 'ave wished I'd given 'er another quid to take 'im back.

" 'I thought several times when I 'eard a noise on the track it was the woman coming for 'im to take 'im back, but she hasn't come yet.'

"Whilst the shearer was talking I fed the baby on warm cow's milk, and the more I looked at his pretty face the more I loved it. I was angry at the woman; I could have screwed her neck for an unfeeling mother, and I was angry with the man.

" 'Ye're a bad man,' I said, 'a cruel man. What can you do with the child?'

" 'Ye're right there,' he said. 'It was a bad thing to do, but it's done. She's got my quid an' I've got 'er kid, an' what the devil to do with it, I don't know.' And he scratched his head puzzled like.

"At last he said, 'Look 'ere, Missus, I'll give 'im to you.'

" 'I've seven of my own,' I said, 'and hard work to do for them. If my man comes home and finds a strange child here, he'll not be pleased.'

" 'It does not matter 'ow many ye've got; any man is bound to be pleased to 'ave a kid like that in the house,' said the shearer.

" 'Look,' said he, 'I'll leave another quid with you to 'elp buy 'im milk. If the mother does not come to claim 'im in a month, you write a letter to me and say you still 'ave 'im. Write to

James Edwards,
Shearer,
Post Office, Coonamble.

That address will find me. You promise that you will 'ave 'im christened by the parson after me. James—that is to be 'is name.

" 'If I 'ave luck I'll send 'im a quid along once in a while.'

"So I promised, and we kept him. The mother never came for him. If she had I wouldn't have given him back. And the shearer was right about my man Lovell, for he took to the child from the first, and wouldn't have parted with him for anything.

"You see, Lucky had such a taking way with him and such a bright smile."

"And do you ever hear from James Edwards?" asked Woolham.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lovell. "Every year on the anniversary of the day when he gave him to me we have a short letter from James Edwards. He never puts any address on his letters, and he always sends a sovereign in a registered envelope. He always writes the same—

'For Lucky Friday.
From James Edwards.'

"I have often sent him a line to tell him how Lucky is getting on. I write to the Post Office, Coonamble, but I never know whether he gets them or not, for he never replies. I always call the lad 'Lucky,' because I have a 'James' of my own.

"But Lucky always says that his name is James Edwards Lovell. That was the name he put in his school books when he went to school. He uses that name himself always, but everybody calls him 'Lucky Friday' for all that.

"I never used the sovereigns, but saved them up, and when he was twenty-one I gave him them all, and the letters too.

"He thinks a lot of them, too. He never puts them in the bank with his other money; he wouldn't part with them. He has twenty-three now."

That was the strange history of Lucky Friday then. How it will end no one knows. It ought to end well, for Lucky still has the taking way with him and the same bright smile.

CHAPTER XI.

BEARDING THE LION IN HIS DEN.

WOOLHAM was despondent. There was no doubt of that. His sky was grey, if not black. There was no silver lining to the dark clouds. The sun would not rise, there were no birds singing in the trees, and generally speaking life was not worth living.

Old Mick Patrickson took in the situation at a glance. "Feeling bad, eh? Free-selectin' ain't the game it's cracked up to be."

"No," said the young man blankly, "it's not much of a game."

"No, it ain't," said the old cocky, "when the 'ero is in love with the daughter of the bloated capitalist, who wants to clear 'im out of the district. When the squatocrat forgits to rebuke his minions—that's the word, 'is grovelling minions—who add their part to the game by leaving the 'ero's gates open, breaking down 'is fences, forgitting to put up 'is sliprails, lettin' of the dawgs in among 'is lambs, and playin' old 'Arry in general.

"Selectin' is slow, dead slow, but when you mix it up with a amateur Romeo and Juliet play, it is a sort of tangled-up game.

"It was as much as I could without the Romeo and Juliet business, but, Lor' bless me, the young and rising generation is enterprising; *they* can play two games at oncet.''

Woolham knew his friend's ways, and so he let him talk on. Besides, he knew the old man was nearer the mark than perhaps he thought, and very often there was the true gold of comfort and wisdom hidden among the dross of his half-humorous sallies.

The fact was, Woolham had not had a sight of Bessie for a month—not since Curlybobs had been lost and found—and so the petty worries of his lot had got him under the weather.

All human life needs a bit of romance to light it up.

''Now what I say is this,'' continued the old wiseacre. ''When life gits dull, carry the war into the enemy's country. Create what the soldiers call a diversion.

''If it does not divert them it will divert you, and that's what ye want—a little bit of diversion. Why cannot Romeo pay a visit to Juliet? Let 'im take 'is rope ladder in 'is westgit pocket and clim up the winder and kiss 'er lily-white 'and, as they used to do in the brave days of old. That's what I call creating a diversion.''

''By Jove,'' said Woolham, ''not half a bad idea—not half bad. But no rope ladders for me, old chap; no, we'll draw the line at rope ladders.''

The old fellow watched the selector stride away, and then entered his cottage chuckling.

''I wonder what he will do,'' thought the old man, for he had not an idea of how the young man was going to work out his fanciful suggestion.

But when he saw the selector ride away in the afternoon on his well-groomed mare Vixen, he understood and admired.

The young man was going openly to call on Bessie, to "beard the lion in his den" was Patrickson's picturesque way of describing it to himself.

"This sitiwation admits, as the newspapers say, of two or three solutions," said the farmer to himself, sitting down in a meditative way, and arguing it out to himself aloud, as was his way, checking off his propositions on his fingers as he proceeded.

"Firstly," said he, "is there anybody over there big enough to kick him out?

"No, there ain't. Young Alick won't, 'cos he likes 'im. Yates won't, 'cos, though 'e's big enough, 'e ain't game. There's the old man—well 'e may be too surprised to make up 'is mind.

"Secondly, 'ow will Juliet receive 'im? That's the rub. Will she rise to the occasion. If she does it's all right. She'll freeze 'em all, an' treat 'im like a duke.

"It may do, yes, it may do. There's no mistake it's a frontal attack. It ain't strategy, but it's war; and often straight-out war is the best strategy."

Riding up to the front gate of the homestead, Woolham dismounted, and, making his way to the verandah, rang the bell. Yates, over by the stables, saw him, and said to one of the men, "There's the new-chum come after the old man with a complaint. The old chap will give him a telling off."

At the door, Woolham sent in his card "to Miss Bessie" by the half-caste servant.

Returning, the girl asked him to take a seat in the drawing-room.

He was followed in almost at once by Bessie, who received him graciously.

Bowing over her extended hand, Woolham said:

''Remembering a former invitation, Miss Bessie, of which I hope you have not repented, I ventured to call upon you.''

''You have been a long time in making up your mind,'' said Bessie, with a reassuring smile.

''You may be sure that it was no doubt on my part as to my desire to come that restrained me.''

''But rather,'' continued Bessie, finishing the sentence for him, ''a doubt as to the nature of your reception.''

''Not quite a doubt as to you,'' stammered Woolham.

''Certainly not,'' said Bessie. ''I meant all I said; but even now I am uncertain as to the reception others may be inclined to give you. So let me say at once that I do not associate myself with any—what shall I say?—business difficulties which may have arisen between you and others. For my part, I can only say I have always respected you, Mr. Woolham, and I shall personally be always glad to see you. I hope you will understand me in the matter.''

''Yes,'' said the young man eagerly; ''I shall dare to read into your words the very fullest meaning.''

It was the elder sister who introduced discord.

''To what may we owe the honour of this visit?'' said May contemptuously, as she stood at the door.

Before he could reply, Bessie stood up and, looking May squarely in the face, said: ''Please understand, May, that Mr. Woolham's visit is to me, in the first place, though I suppose he would be glad if others here were as friendly to him as they might be. I have received him, and that is enough explanation of his presence here and now. I am of age, and that being so, I surely may receive my own friends here. No place can be called a home where one cannot do that.''

The girls looked at each other, but it was evident that, in the battle of wills, Bessie was not likely to give in, and the elder girl, with a toss of her head, swept out of the room.

Later, when Mr. Stuart came in, May said to him wickedly, ''There's a visitor in the drawing-room, father. Perhaps he would be glad to see you.''

When the old man entered the room, he was amazed to see Bessie pouring out tea for Woolham, who seemed quite at home.

Bessie, with her sweetest smile, said: ''Mr. Woolham has been months and months in accepting my invitation to call on us, father, and I am returning good for evil by giving him tea and cake.''

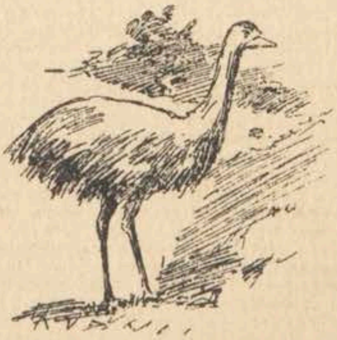
''God bless my soul!'' muttered the squatter in surprise; and then, looking as disagreeable as his surprise would enable him to do, he said: ''The young man might be more welcome if he came from a greater distance.''

''Oh, well, he might manage that some day,'' said Bessie, ''and when he is further away we may see him oftener.''

Bessie was the favourite daughter, and the old man was no match for her; for she was armed with a sweet smile which rarely failed to carry any defence he reared against her. But he would not take the tea she was pressing upon him, and he managed to back out of the room, muttering, "God bless my soul."

This adventure restored Woolham's spirits wonderfully. He knew now that, however others misunderstood him, or misrepresented him, he had a friend in Bessie; she, at any rate, was not carried away by prejudice. She had not said much to him, beyond the friendly assurances common to neighbours, and she had not permitted him to say much, either. Woolham recognised that clearly. Until the feud was over, he felt that Bessie meant that he would have to keep his distance; but still it was heartening to know that she had not permitted prejudice to blind her vision.

She still respected him, believed in him, and so the sun rose for him again, and the birds sang joyously amid the blossoms. The darkness had gone and it was day.



CHAPTER XII.

THE INVASION.

A COUNCIL of war had been called. Lucky Friday, Woolham, and Patrickson formed the council.

The tobacco-smoke which filled the dining-room of Eureka could not hide the portentous seriousness of the situation, which was reflected in the faces of the old farmer and the usually-smiling Lucky. Strange to say, the selector, who was principally interested, seemed the least perturbed.

This may have moved Lucky to blurt out the dismal truth, much as he was accustomed to look at the bright side of things.

"It's no good running the show any longer," said Lucky. "The game's up, and the best thing the Boss can do is to arrange with old Stuart."

"It looks as if it had come to that, I admit," said Patrickson.

"I don't see it yet," said the selector.

"No," said the farmer; "because you don't understand. You don't understand what this rabbit curse is. If it pulls you down it pulls me too. I am next.

"I remember Edwardes Brothers, over Bourke way. They paid £80,000 for their two stations there. When the rabbits got a holt they sold for £2,000. They—I mean the Edwardes—are droving now.''

''Yes,'' said Lucky; ''over at Scott's place the rabbits are coming on thick and fast—fifty and sixty in a hole—and old Stuart's doing nothing at all. He has got a lot of land, and he is understocked. He'll have plenty of grass for a long time to come; besides, he can move his stock on to his other stations across the Queensland border. His sons Jim and Bob are managing there, and so, you see, it don't mean much to him yet. But you, Boss, you need all the grass ye can git, and with the rabbits coming on thick you can grow neither wheat nor wool. They are eating the wheat down now.''

''That's all right,'' said the selector; ''but I have an idea.''

''It will have to be a champion idea if it's going to stop the rabbits. Remember, you can't git the Board to make Stuart fight the rabbits. He can point to his rabbit-proof fencing and his poison-carts, and they cannot prove that he is not doing all he can.''

''If my idea won't work, I know I am done,'' said the selector; ''but I think I'll try it first. I propose to farm the rabbits. I cannot stop them, but I think I can use them. You know, some Victorians have started freezing works at Gunnedah. They are sending consignments of frozen rabbits away every week. My idea is to put rabbit fencing between me and Ringari, except at the wheat paddocks. I'll let 'em come in there, and close up the fence, say once a week, and get them. We can take a big load into Gunnedah once a week, and we might keep them down a bit, get our regular cheque, and perhaps when Stuart sees that he is not smothering us with rabbits he'll close up his fences and set his poison-carts to work again.''

''I don't think it will do,'' said Patrickson, ''but you can try it. It will mean money for rabbit-proof wire, but I'm willing to come in, on condition that if it fails you won't hang on till I am down too. If it fails, you'll give in straight away?''

''Yes, I am willing to do that,'' said Woolham.

As for Lucky, as soon as there was a bright side, he was the first to see it and rejoice. So he declared ''that it was a blamed good idea, and it might do.''

Thereupon a partnership of three was formed, and the wire was put up within a short time. It succeeded beyond the anticipations of the partners, and the regular cheques for the rabbits were very acceptable.

Once a week Lucky drove a two-horse waggonette full of rabbits into Gunnedah, and the invasion was stayed.

But the success was never so great as Lucky, who had a royal gift of exaggeration sometimes, made it out to be.

To the hands of Ringari he declared that ''the rabbit business was just setting the Boss up; it was better than wheat and wool, because it was constant.'' It was Yates who persuaded Mr. Stuart to close up his fences and set the poison carts to work, and soon old Patrickson had the satisfaction of seeing that all Ringari, as well as Gilga and Eureka, had declared war on the invaders.

Chapter XIII.

LUCKY'S FORTUNE.

WOOLHAM was now in his second year of residence at Gilga, and things were beginning to settle down into place.

His selection was fenced and divided into convenient paddocks. The grass was too coarse and the country too rough as yet for well-bred sheep, but he had a few hundred cross-breds, which were doing well.

His wheat was a failure owing to the rabbits, but it had served to provide some feed for the sheep, which had been turned into it after the rabbits had spoilt the chance of a crop.

The rabbits had paid for their own destruction, for the rabbit cheques had paid for the rabbit-proof fencing, which was now all round the selection.

When the selector received his first cheque for wool, he began to feel that he was somebody. In another year or two, with luck, he might hope to have something like a regular income.

Meanwhile he was turning all his resources into the gradual erection of headquarters.

The homestead he was to build was now his thought by day and his dream by night, but you may be sure that he had dreams also in regard to the fair lady who he hoped would preside there some day as the lady of the house.

All he could do as yet, however, was to build the stables, stockyards, and sheds.

These he built in the order of their necessity, and on a scale which extorted the admiration of Lucky and Patrickson. They were built in convenient lines with the proposed new house, the site of which was planned. Both Lucky and he were immensely proud of the gable-roofed building, which was divided into four stalls for horses, a cow-shed, forage-store, and coach-house, which as yet only contained the selector's sulky and the useful waggonette.

A machinery-shed was planned and partly built, to cover the plough, harrow, blacksmith's forge, and workshop which Gilga already possessed. What could Lucky not do? He was blacksmith, wheelwright, and saddler, and he was specially ambitious about the workshop, which, in its completed state, he declared, was to be a model.

Lucky had been home for the week-end, and he brought back with him on Monday a very acceptable shower of rain.

Woolham was at the task which he reserved for rainy days. He was working out his plans for the ideal homestead of the future.

"Well, what news, Lucky?" he exclaimed in greeting, as the young man appeared. "How does the outside world wag?"

A glance at Lucky's face showed that he was indeed big with news of some sort.

"News?" said he; "news enough. It's better to be born lucky than rich. I've come into a fortune.

"Straight wire!" he answered the selector, who had looked up in surprise and inquiry. "There's the letter; it came on Saturday."

Woolham took the letter held out to him. It was addressed—

"James Edwards Lovell, Esq.,
Gum Flat,
Ringari,
Via Munilla,"

and read—

"*Re* James Edwards, deceased.

"Dear Sir,—I beg to inform you that my late client, Mr. James Edwards, who died a week ago, has left his property to you. About a year ago I made his will, under his instructions, in which he appoints me as his executor and you as his sole legatee. As far as can be ascertained at present, when all duties and expenses are paid, there will be about £500 to hand over to you. I have taken the necessary steps to secure the money, which is on bank deposit, for you, and at an early date I shall communicate again with you.

"Mr. Edwards wrote a letter before he died, and, according to his desire, I send it herewith.

"I have the honour to be,
Yours obediently,
FRANCIS BROWNE."

James Edwards' letter read as follows:—

"Coonamble, 1905.

"Dear Lucky,—I always think of you as Lucky, and so I say dear Lucky, although let me tell you I am very proud of you being named after me, and I expect the day will come when you will be James Edwards Lovell, ESQUIRE, and no end of a toff. Don't you ever forgit to write Edwards in your name when your day comes. Mrs. Lovell has kindly writ to me regular to tell me how you was, and I am obliged to her. I ain't much of a writer, and so I did not send you any letters —only a sov. to keep up your birthdays; but I was very pleased to hear as how you was playin' the game all right according to the proper rules. Sometimes I had a notion of coming over to see you, but I was feared of having any other pictur' of you in my mind than the one I first liked, when you was a kid wrapped up in the blanket in my arms.

"I am a rough stick, and I never 'ad a kid of my own, so I took to you.

"It helped to keep me straight, thinking of you and how you was stickin' to the old folks as took you in. So I said, 'That's the horse for my money.' I never speckilated, but I have 'ad plenty of graft, and saved up a bit.

"I reckon if you cannot make much out of life yourself, the next best thing is to give some other cove a charnst.

"I know you will not give my money to the pubs, so I leave it to you with my love.

"When I peg out, Mr. Browne, the lawyer, will send this to you.

"Give my respects to Mrs. Lovell.

"Yours truly,
JAMES EDWARDS."

"Well, Lucky," said Woolham, shaking his comrade by the hand, "I am sure I congratulate you with all my heart. You deserve your good luck, and I am certain you will use the money well.

Tears were in Lucky's eyes when he said, "Thank you, Boss."

"James Edwards," Lucky continued, "was a white man, sir."

"Yes," said the selector; "you cannot say more than that, or less—he was a white man."

"I don't think there is any harm in making a move with that money, Boss," said Lucky. "I have been thinking a long time of a scheme I want your opinion of. The old folks cannot do much with the place they have got, and for some time they have been wanting to make it over to me. It is a very poor place, only good enough for cattle. They are fixing it up in my name this week. It will always be a home for them, and with this money I can use it. Your place here is wasting too without cattle, and so I was thinking, if I could strike up a partnership with you, Boss, we could do a bit of cattle-raising.

"Down Maitland and Singleton way there is a drought. I was thinking that, if we could arrange it, although £500 won't go very far, we could bring up some young beasts and put them on Gilga and The Flat, and if we have luck we can soon double our money."

The two thrashed the matter out thoroughly, and the result was that Lucky drove in with Woolham to the bank, where an equitable and satisfactory arrangement was made, and the firm of "Woolham, Edwards and Lovell" was founded.

People often wondered who Edwards was, but Lucky always insisted that he was a very real member of the firm.

"It reminds me," he said to the selector, "that I owe a duty to Edwards, who has done so much for me. I must handle his money well; it took a lot of saving."

The cattle deals of the two men turned out well, and brought Woolham's dream of the ideal homestead nearer.

As for Lucky, he had his ambition too, and the old couple were surprised and delighted at the new and comfortable cottage which soon replaced the old shanty in which they had spent most of their hard life.

CHAPTER XIV.

YATES LOSES CASTE.

BUSHRANGERS in the twentieth century may seem an anomaly, but they were a disagreeable fact nevertheless, and the whole State was excited at the news of their doings. The district of Munilla was really in a state of panic, for the two desperadoes, headed off by various parties of civilians and police searching in different districts, were known to be travelling in the direction of Ringari district. It was hardly likely that they would venture through the Moonbi Ranges and get into New England district, for they would know that the hiding-places of previous bushrangers, such as Thunderbolt, in that district had become well known, and there were parties there who knew the country who would be glad to earn the £500 offered as a reward for their capture. On the other side they would avoid the towns, for they were half-caste aborigines, and, as their photographs had been in nearly all the papers, they would be easily recognised by the police, or even by the public.

But they had to travel, for special parties of police were after them.

The two Gaynors were no kid-gloved bushrangers, respecting the weak and poor, and only levying black-mail upon the rich; but they were hardened criminals with the brand of Cain upon them. Murder, outrage, and robbery marked their track. They were outlaws now, fleeing for their lives; every man's hand was raised against them, and they were against all, sworn to vengeance against society, which had driven them forth into the wilderness. A mad ferocity characterised all their actions, and whole districts were seized with panic on the rumour of their approach.

Women and children waked in the night possessed by fevered dreams—the result of the stories of their depredations; and men seriously discussed what steps should be taken to capture them.

In a crisis like this, even the differences which divided Ringari from its smaller neighbours were forgotten, and Alick Stuart rode over to discuss the situation with Patrickson, whose knowledge of the country through which the outlaws must pass was vast and exact.

"So far as I can see, Patrickson," remarked Alick Stuart, "these fellows must come over the Ringari Pass. They are not likely to cross the Namoi and get among the farms, and they will not cross the Moonbi Mountain at that point. They would gain nothing if they did, and, besides, it is almost inaccessible."

"You are right, I am sure," said Patrickson. "If the police were worth their salt they would have a party posted there; but they don't seem to know anything of that trap. I have been thinking about it, and I don't see how they can avoid coming over the Pass, and I reckon a few men who know the country could get them there."

"I think we ought to have a try," said Stuart. "For the protection of our women and homes we ought to be on the alert, and, incidentally, we have as much right to that £500 as anybody."

"I am with you," said Patrickson. "What do you propose?"

"Well, I thought, if you would lead a party—say, of five of us—we might camp on the Pass and lay up for them."

"Five seems to be rather too many, but perhaps it would be better to be sure than sorry," said Patrickson.

"Well, if you agree, Yates and I will go, and you can take Woolham and Lucky with you.

"Four of us could camp out, and Lucky, who knows the bush almost as well as you, could ride out to us when they are reported in the district of Nundle. Besides the news he could bring fresh supplies of food. But lest they should come on quicker than we expect, we should get into position as soon as possible. We should start to-morrow, although they may not really arrive at the Pass for about a week yet.

"I fancy, however, they may be there on Wednesday or Thursday, and it is Monday now."

Stuart and Patrickson rode over to Gilga, and put the matter before Woolham and Lucky. The selector readily agreed to the project, but Lucky said:

"Can't you take somebody else instead of Yates, Mr. Stuart? You can't reckon on him. You'll see, he'll spill the milk for you."

"No fear, Lucky; you are prejudiced against him. He is a dead shot, and if it comes to grips, he is big enough, isn't he?" said Stuart.

"Yes," answered Woolham. "I don't think we need trouble to improve the party.'' The selector's innate spirit of justice led him to sink his prejudice against the big jackaroo.

So it was settled, and early the next morning, without noising the object of their trip abroad, Stuart and Yates, armed, left the homestead, and joined Woolham and Patrickson at Eureka. They were all well-mounted—Woolham on Vixen, and Patrickson on his favourite hack, a good hill-climber. Meanwhile, Lucky, who had packed his saddlebags over-night, and put Woolham's cob in a handy little paddock, to be ready, rode over to Ringari, where he was to do some saddlery repairs invented for the purpose. Whilst there he was to get the latest news of the bushrangers through the telephone from Munilla. Bessie, who had been entrusted with the secret, promised to get all the news possible. Lucky was to leave for the Pass on Wednesday morning, news or no news, and Patrickson had carefully explained what road he was to take.

Travelling the greater part of the day, Patrickson led the party by an unfrequented and roundabout way to Ringara Pass, by nightfall. They had carefully avoided the ordinary roads, in order to leave no tracks likely to arouse the suspicions of the outlaws.

Examining the bush carefully, Patrickson assured himself that there were no tracks which might indicate that the bushrangers had already passed.

''We are in time, I think, lads,'' he remarked to the others.

A rough but strong yard of saplings had been made at the bottom of a gully some distance from the Pass, for the horses. The nose-bags were put on them, and the saddles were left handy.

The old farmer then made his dispositions for the night.

At the head of the Pass there were two tracks separated by a dense forest of scrub.

''Now,'' said Patrickson, ''they must take either of these two tracks, and we must watch them both.

''There must be no fires and no noise. Suppose, Alick, you and Yates take the lower track. We can watch the track higher up.''

This was agreed to, and the men separated, on the understanding that the watch was to begin at once.

''I'll take the first watch,'' said Alick to Yates. So they planted themselves behind a great log, with their rifles, screened by bushes, pointing towards the track along which the outlaws might come.

Lying there, they partook of the food they had brought with them; their tucker-bags and water-bags lay on the ground between them, and they conversed in whispers whilst they finished the meal. Yates then made himself as comfortable a couch as he could among the leaves, and prepared to sleep until his watch began, or he was called.

All through the cold moonlit night Stuart watched the track along the barrel of his rifle. Meanwhile, the other two observed a similar mode of operations in sight of the upper track, Woolham taking the first watch.

During the night, the old man, ever a light sleeper, crept round to the lower track, to assure himself that his instructions were being observed. All was well.

Yates was sleeping soundly like Rip Van Winkle, and Stuart, on the *qui vive*, lay alongside his rifle, looking along the track.

After a whispered exchange of reports the old man left Stuart, to return to his post. According to arrangement, Stuart waked Yates in the early dawn, to exchange places with him, and soon Stuart was enjoying his well-earned repose, whilst the great bulk of the jackaroo, stretched alongside the rifle, faced the bush track.

The morning broke damp and misty; great banks of fog rolled up from the river, and climbed over the Moonbi Mountain like ordered squadrons advancing against an enemy.

So thick were these fog-banks that sometimes Yates could hardly see the track at all.

All was silence; not a leaf rustled among the trees, and the birds as yet had not waked up to greet the rising sun, which so far had only sent out a soft pink fringe of light to herald his approach.

The raw cold of the morning penetrated the very bones of the watcher, and he shivered as his hand grasped the cold metal of the rifle. Suddenly a few twigs crackled, and Yates heard the soft regular pad of bare feet crushing the leaves and grass upon the bush track. He gazed along the rifle-barrel at the path without moving a muscle; not an eyelash twitched. He stared before him like a man frozen rigid in his intentness.

Then the bushes parted, and the half-clothed form of an aborigine came into view.

He was leaning forward eagerly as he jogged along.

His rifle was poised ready in his right hand, and his wild eyes roved about with a hunted look, as he searched the track before him. Following him closely was another man, apparently the double of the first, so like were they. They came nearer and nearer, and Yates stared along his gun, with his lip dropping more and more, and his eyes enlarging as though he saw a ghostly apparition. The outlaws passed him so near that he might have thrown a bit of branch and hit them, yet his finger never pressed the trigger; the rifle remained cold in his hand, frozen with him into living statuary.

A stone accidentally dislodged by the foot of the first outlaw, as they disappeared among the great rocks, rolled down the side of the mountain with an echoing noise, and Patrickson, closely followed by Woolham, came swiftly down the hill.

"Have you seen anything?" hissed the old man through his teeth. "We thought we heard someone moving along the lower track."

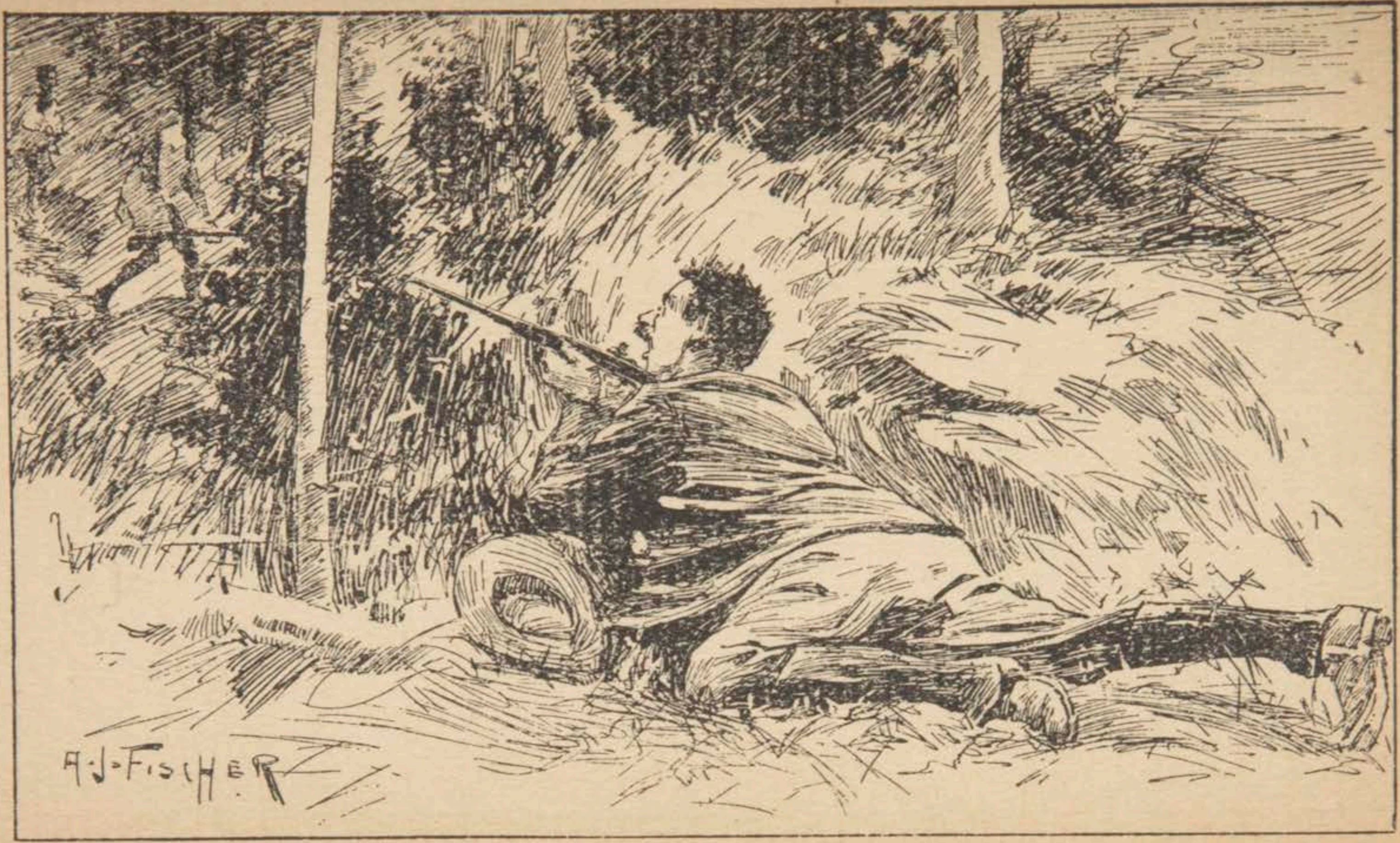
By this time Stuart also was wide awake, and the three hurried to Yates's side.

His drawn white face told its own tale. His rifle was now pointed down the path along which the outlaws had gone.

His flaccid lips hung loose, and his strained eyes were set as one hypnotised.

"Well," said Patrickson, sarcastically, "that's a bit suddint; there goes a hundred quid apiece, and be blowed to you!" he hissed, glaring at the jackaroo.

It was out of the question following the bushrangers, who were now amongst the great rocks, amongst which,



YATES STARED ALONG HIS GUN, WITH HIS LIPS DROPPING. [*Page* 82.

even if they were discovered, they could only be taken at the loss of life.

The milk was surely spilt, and it was no good going hungry over it; so the men quickly lit a fire and boiled the billy, after which they ate a hurried breakfast, during which the jackaroo sat silent and moody.

Chapter XV.

A FIGHT TO THE DEATH.

"AND now for our horses," said Woolham; "for we must remember that Lucky is leaving Gilga this morning to join us. Although we know that he will not take the beaten track, he might meet the aborigines, and though he would give a good account of himself, they are desperate characters."

"Yes," said Patrickson. "It is no good beating about the bush now; we'll ride hard along the track, and pick up Lucky before he gets into the scrub, if we can. We are not likely to see the darkies—they are too good bushmen for that. If we do, then so much the worse for somebody."

By Tuesday night there was no news of the outlaws, so Lucky rode back to Gilga, and early in the morning started out on Woolham's cob, Buller, for the Pass, with his capacious saddle-bags stuffed with extra food supplies.

Reaching the "turn-off" at the foot of the ranges, he turned into the scrub, in obedience to Patrickson's directions to avoid the beaten track.

It was Patrickson's hope that they would meet Lucky before he entered the scrub, but, reaching the turn-off, they saw that they were too late, for his tracks were plainly seen in the soft earth.

They dismounted here, to rest their horses and discuss the situation.

First, however, the old man turned to Yates, and, pointing down the track for Ringari, he uttered the one word—"Git!"

Woolham was really sorry for Yates, but Patrickson was in command, and he and Stuart could only busy themselves with their saddle-straps, and look the other way.

Yates, with a muttered curse, mounted his horse, and obeyed the expressive colonial word "Git!"

"It's not a matter of the reward now," said the leader, "or even of taking the outlaws with as little risk as possible. It's a question whether we are to be laughed at for the rest of our lives. It is certain to get out that we've been after the outlaws, and might have taken them."

Strategy was cast to the winds, and the men determined to overtake Lucky by the most direct way, and then follow the bushrangers.

So the men rode smartly on, following the tracks of Lucky.

Suddenly rifle fire broke in upon the stillness of the morning.

"He has stuck them up," said Patrickson.

"Or they have stuck him up," rejoined Woolham, who feared for Lucky.

Spurring their horses, they plunged madly on in the direction of the sounds, for quite a fusilade of shots had continued.

In his eagerness, which seemed to communicate itself to Vixen, Woolham had got a long away ahead, when Patrickson gave the word "Halt!"

"Fasten your horses up to saplings, so that they cannot break away in the noise of the firing. Get them as much under cover as you can. We must finish this work on foot," said the old man.

Woolham was rather too far forward to get the benefit of this advice, but he dismounted when he saw the others dismounting.

Now the three men began to work their way cautiously through the scrub, rifle in hand, towards the rifle fire, until at last they knew that they were in the zone of operations, though they could as yet see no one. Evidently the combatants were fighting under cover.

Woolham was very anxious to know whether Lucky was safe. All depended on whether he had discerned the outlaws first.

But Patrickson impressed upon the two that they must now play the game of patience; so the three, keeping separate and moving as much as possible under cover, advanced cautiously. Then a shot flashed out, and, following the course of the fire, they guessed that it was Lucky who had fired, for there was a noise among the bushes, and they caught a fleeting glimpse of the two outlaws seeking fresh cover.

They had evidently noted the arrival of reinforcements, and were intent on retiring in such a way as to keep the parties separate, for the three newcomers were at right angles to Lucky's hiding-place.

Too impetuous, in his desire to get near Lucky, Woolham now exposed himself for a moment, and shots from the outlaws rang out, coming pretty close.

Patrickson and Stuart replied, but they could see no one, and their object was more to disconcert the outlaws, and prevent them taking good aim again.

"They will get away if we are not careful," whispered Patrickson to Stuart.

"Look here; we must draw their fire." Patrickson then put his hat upon a bough which was screened by a big bush.

To the bush he tied the end of a ball of string, and the two men, crawling through the bush, unrolled the string. When at some distance, Patrickson said: "Now, when I pull the bush, they'll fire; spot them, and get a good shot in."

At the pulling of the string the bushes moved as though a man were advancing, and, seeing the top of the hat, both the outlaws fired, exposing themselves in doing so sufficiently to make a target.

At that moment Stuart fired, and a sharp cry of pain, accompanied by a muttered curse, suggested that the shot had got home.

Both the men now fired as fast as they could, and Lucky joined in the attack, but the outlaws remained hidden.

The game of patience might have continued for a long time, only that Vixen, alarmed at the noise of firing, broke away from the dead tree to which Woolham had unwisely fastened her. A sapling would have yielded to the movements of the horse, but no halter or reins will hold an excited horse, if it can get a fair strain upon it.

With neck arched and nostrils dilated, the beautiful animal pranced right into view among the men, snorting in its excitement, and looking round, probably for her master.

The vindictive spirit of the bushrangers yielded to the temptation, and a shot rang out, and with a cry of pain the horse jumped forward.

Blood ran down the neck of the mare where she had been hit.

Maddened by the sight, Woolham cast all precautions away, and dashed forwards towards the outlaws, who fired at him again and again.

One shot carried away his hat and grazed his forehead, but he dashed on.

Stuart and Patrickson had now perforce to follow his example, and so the three charged the aborigines. Well was it now for the three that one of the outlaws was *hors-de-combat.* The men came on so fast that soon they were in close contact with the aborigines, and Patrickson, clubbing his rifle, managed to strike the outlaw, who was in the act of bringing his gun to the aim again. In another second Woolham had him by the throat. Rapidly disarming the man, Patrickson strapped his arms behind his back.

The other bushranger lay dead. He had been first hit by Stuart, and in the fusillade which had followed that ruse he had been hit a second time.

Lucky had taken no part in the charge, and the men were anxious about him.

Calling out, they received no answer, but at last they found him lying on the ground in a swoon. He had been hit in the shoulder, and, after continuing the combat as long as he was able, he had fainted from loss of blood.

They bandaged him and bound up his arm to close up the wound, and by and bye he revived.

Their next thought was Vixen. Securing the excited mare, it was found that the wound was not serious. Whilst Woolham held her, Patrickson, with the rude surgery of the bush, pinned up the gash, and fastened the ends of the pin with horse-hair.

It appeared that the outlaws had seen Lucky first, and saluted him with the bullet which struck him in the shoulder.

Lucky, dismounting, had had the ready wit to strike the horse a blow to drive it away into the bush; then, seeking cover, he had defended himself till, just as his strength gave out, the three men opportunely arrived. Leaving the dead outlaw lying where he fell, the men mounted the other aborigine, with his hands tied still, on Stuart's horse, which was led. Lucky, in spite of his remonstrances, was hoisted on Vixen, which Woolham led.

Patrickson rode ahead, keeping a lookout for the bay cob, which was soon found quietly grazing by the side of the track.

At the foot of the hills the party met Wright, the boundary rider, in a sulky. To this the outlaw was transferred, and the men, riding, wended their way to Ringari homestead. It was quite a warlike cavalcade which entered the gates of Ringari. Patrickson, with a look of satisfaction upon his weather-beaten face, headed the party, and Lucky, kept up by his indomitable spirit, Stuart, and the selector, with a handkerchief fastened round his forehead, rode on either side of the sulky.

Vixen, in spite of her blood-marked neck, carried herself proudly, and even the ever-silent boundary rider in the sulky wore a look of proud elation, which suggested to the assembled station hands that he alone had wrought the notable victory, and that the famous outlaw was the captive of his bow and spear.

It appeared that Yates had that day ended his novitiate at Ringari, and packed for home.

It only remained to report the matter by telephone to the disgusted police, who, mourning sadly the loss of the reward and kudos which might have been theirs, came out to take charge of the prisoner, and bring in the body of the dead outlaw from the bush.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BUILDING OF THE WHITE HOUSE.

AFTER the capture of the bushrangers there might have been a more friendly relation between the selector and the Stuarts, but for the fact that Woolham had associated himself with the objects which the settlers of Gum Flat had in view. He could hardly do otherwise, for the ends they sought were vital to him.

It was necessary that the settlers should have a direct road to Munilla for the transport of their produce.

No feudal baron could have less regard for the serfs surrounding his castle than the old squatter seemed to have for the farmers. This was all the more strange, seeing that it was well known that the old Scotchman himself had begun at the lowest rung of the ladder.

He had come into the district as a carrier, his waggon and horses being all that he possessed in the world. He had begun as a selector, and gradually accumulated land and wealth.

The mere possession of land seems to tend in a very subtle way, with some people, towards selfish conservatism, and so without rhyme or reason, beyond the idea of making it difficult for people to settle in the district, Mr. Stuart used his financial and political influence to stay the progressive policy of the selectors.

On one pretext or another, his solicitor opposed their application for roads, and Mr. Scarsdale, the democratic land agent, whom the settlers employed, laboured for them in vain. What did the squatter care if their teams were bogged on the tortuous mud roads, or if they had to take half loads up the hills, which might by a direct road be avoided?

Instinctively the settlers had perceived in the young educated immigrant a natural leader. They had elected him as the president of the Gum Flat Progress Committee, and under his guidance the programme of the settlers was securing some official recognition. Nothing less than a direct road and a post and telephone office would satisfy the ambition of Gum Flat, which was even beginning to be ashamed of its bush name, though as yet the settlers had not fixed upon a new name for their prospective township.

The selector now interspersed his public labours with the building of his house.

As the house slowly rose upon the hill, it was an object of much interest to the surrounding farmers, who were content with very inferior shanties.

A broad verandah surrounded the house, and a wide hall divided its suites of big and lofty rooms. The two wings of the house enclosed a nice quadrangle, which was well grassed, and in the centre of the level lawn grew a Kurrijong tree, which Woolham had planted when he first took up the selection. Looking along the hall, a pleasant vista met the gaze of the visitor. A cosy den served as a study and a smoking-room combined for the selector, where he expected to spend many a bright evening with his friends. So much of the interior as the selector did not as yet need was left unfinished, but all the exterior of the house completed and painted in light stone colour. With its white roof the house formed an imposing crown to the hill, and came to be known among the settlers as "The White House."

As the house was being built it became a rendezvous for the neighbouring farmers, who often lent willing hands in the work.

There was always work for the swagmen who passed, if they sought work during the building. The selector, in his ignorance, even put old O'Neill on to paint the picket fence, much to the amusement of the settlers, who had never known the old dead-beat to work. Slowly and deliberately the old loafer plied the brush, putting as much paint on the ground as on the wood.

After two hours he presented himself to the Boss for his money.

"And how much do you think you have earned?" said Woolham.

"I'll leave it to your honour," said the old man.

"Well, we'll compromise on 2s., which is good pay," said the selector, anxious to get rid of him.

On receiving the money, the old man, with much touching of his hat and many compliments to the *boss*, suggested that, if he received a *character*, it might get him another job of painting.

With a very grave face the selector proceeded to write a *character*, amid the quiet amusement of the onlookers.

This is what he wrote:—

"The bearer of this has worked for me for two hours —painting fences—and I am satisfied."

The old man, who could not read, received the character with great satisfaction and many thanks. He afterwards exhibited it throughout the district, but it never procured him another job of painting, though it caused many a laugh.

Chapter XVII.

SOCIALISM AT GUM FLAT.

MR. TERENCE VINDIN, M.P., the Labourite, was advertised to speak to his electors at Gum Flat on the great subject of socialism, and the little settlement was alive with excitement. This was the first visit of the new member since by a narrow majority he had managed to oust old Wheeler, the "roads and bridges" member, who had been a squatters' man. The progress committee had the function in hand, and Woolham was to take the chair. It was also the first time a sitting member had thought it worth while to give an account of his stewardship at Gum Flat, and the Gum Flattites felt honoured. Smythe, an irrepressible talker, declared at the committee meeting, "If this sort of thing goes on, we shall have to see about building a public hall soon."

"It would do for a Union Church, too," said another.

"Yes," continued young Smart, "and we could have a dance there now and again."

Things were getting mixed, and reached their climax when Patrickson rose, and, looking gravely round, asked, "Why cannot we asked the Government to build a Court-house here; and can't we do with a light railway?"

"And a racecourse, too," chimed in Smart, who was above everything a sportsman.

At this the selector, with a smile and wink to Patrickson, called the meeting to order, and arrangements were made for the suitable reception and entertainment of the new member.

The great event, Gum Flat's first public meeting, at last arrived, and a good gathering of sunburnt and weather-beaten settlers faced the labour member, who with the chairman, was accommodated with a seat on the broad verandah of Smythe's.

The chairman, having introduced the member in a non-committal speech, the politician, after speaking of the work done at the House, waded into the usual anti-capitalistic arguments, then proceeded to paint a glowing picture, by way of contrast of the socialistic Utopia.

"Let me paint you a picture," said he, "of life in sunny New South Wales under the benign reign of socialism. First we should have a Cabinet of working men, and why not?"

"Hear, hear! Why not?" vociferated the enthusiastic settlers.

"Would your affairs suffer under the Premiership of Peter Collona because he happens to be a practical shearer?"

"No, no!" cried the Flattites.

"Would the great mining industries of this glorious country suffer under the administration of Tom Short, who is a practical miner himself?"

"Hear, hear!" bawled the settlers, who hardly knew Tom Short from Adam. Then the labour member became confidential, and lowering his voice he asked:

"And would the interests of the great body of settlers in this free country be neglected if your humble servant was Minister for Lands?"

"No, no!" cried the farmers, but Patrickson interjected:

"That's the best billet of the lot. You keep your eye on that, old chap."

"He wants to get his hand on it, too!" cried young Smart inopportunely, and at that they all laughed, and proceded to relight their pipes whilst they waited for more.

"Under the democratic rule of a socialistic government, strikes and lock-outs would be no more," cried the enthusiastic speaker. "Why? Because the mines would be nationalised, and all the other means of production, and the workers would all be on union hours and union rates of wages.

"There would be no blacklegs working on the face of the coal then. Our railways and tramways would be worked for the people and by the people, with eight hours for the day's work and double pay for overtime. We should have cheap fares, cheap freight, and plenty of excursions. And there would be no more big estates."

"Hear, hear!" cried the settlers, more enthusiastic than ever.

"We should resume every big estate and open it to selection. We should have a Land Bank, where the settlers could borrow money at a cheap rate of interest. Under such a glorious regime," continued the speaker, "What would be the great future of Gum Flat?"

A hush of expectancy pervaded the meeting. Everybody wanted to know of the great future of their own Gum Flat.

"A little city would rise here; we should have our own railway station, our public school, our Court-house——"

"And a public-house, too," put in Smythe.

"Of course," said Patrickson. "How else would you keep the police-court going?"

"Beautiful homesteads would grace the landscape from here to Munilla," continued the member, undaunted.

"There would be work for our boys and homes for our girls. There would be no unemployed, no under-paid; then sunny New South Wales would rise to be what it ought to be—the paradise of the world."

Then the speaker sat down amid the long-continued applause of the audience.

The chairman now announced that Mr. Vindin would be glad to answer any questions which might be put to him.

At that Patrickson arose and said:

"Mr. Chairman,—I want to say socialism is all right. I like it. But there's one question I want to ask. When we get socialism, who's going to do the washing up?"

Patrickson was a popular though brief speaker in the Progress Committee, and his query was greeted with cheers, but the member looked nonplussed.

"I should be glad to answer that question, Mr. Chairman," said he, "if I understood it. Will Mr. Patrickson explain it?"

The farmer rose, and, holding his pipe by the bowl,

EX DONO
THOMAS
FISHER

with its stem pointing to Mr. Vindin as if it were a revolver, he said:

"I am not good at explaining, Mr. Chairman; but I'll begin by saying that I am a socialist, but not one of the same brand as our member, Mr. Vindin.

"Everybody here will know what I mean when I say that when we have a tea-meeting at the church at Ringari, the young ladies and gentlemen of the coming city of Gum Flat roll up in great force, and they have a good time; but it sometimes happens that the next day their old fathers and mothers, and even such an old bachelor as I am, have to wash up the tea things and scrub out the building." Laughter greeted this sally, and the old bachelor continued: "Socialism of the labour brand professes, at election times at least, to turn life into a time of cake and buns, but it ignores the washing-up. Talk about nationalising the means of production! We know that the principal means of production—the land—was almost entirely in the hands of Government in the past, and even to-day it is still largely in the hands of Government. How have they administered their trust? Not well enough to encourage us to hand over to them any more of the means of production, sir!

"I like Mr. Vindin's railway policy so far as cheap fares and freight and plenty of excursions are concerned, *if* it can be carried out, and I am quite willing that the Government should hold the railway and tramway systems, but not on the understanding that they are going to hand them over to a trades union or unions! That ain't socialism—that is unionism. Unionism is a good thing—in its place; but its place is not on the box seat of government. Then about breaking up big estates. I have no fault to find with the man who has a big estate, so long as he is a good neighbour. Although we are only humble people at Gum Flat, our ambitions soar a great deal higher than three acres and a cow. What good would it do if all the big estates were broken up? Likely as not, Government would pay a big price for some of them, and lose money in selling them again, and then we, the taxpayers, would have to pay the difference; in other words, we would have to do the washing up. Let the Government break its own big estate up properly, and, if there is any special case of a trust retarding the growth of a town, it can be dealt with.

"Then, where are you going to draw the line? However you level things down, there is always the man underneath—the under-dog—and he is underneath because he ain't got it in him to come out on top. We want a Government that will legislate for the enterprising go-ahead citizen who works all he knows all the time—not a Government which is always going into socialistic fits on behalf of the 'open your mouth and shut your eyes and see what God will send you' sort of people."

"Hear, hear!" cried the farmers, now thoroughly captured by Patrickson's brand of socialism.

"Sometimes we get a visitation of these Domain socialists up the country—at harvest time, for instance. They come up on free passes, and go back when ordered away by the police. These chaps drink and gamble, and they go on strike in the middle of the harvest, and all the time they growl at us because we have a bit of land and some money in the bank.''

The men would have applauded, but Patrickson's rush of excited and now angry oratory left them no chance.

Advancing to the table, he shouted, ''Tell me this—Who cleared the scrub and fenced in the land?

''Everybody here knows that I carried every fencing post and rail on my shoulder up the rough mountain sides on my place, and other men here have done the same.

''With little sleep and not too much tucker, we have carved our land out of the wild bush. We have fought the droughts and survived the floods, and all the time we are the men that have to do the washing up.

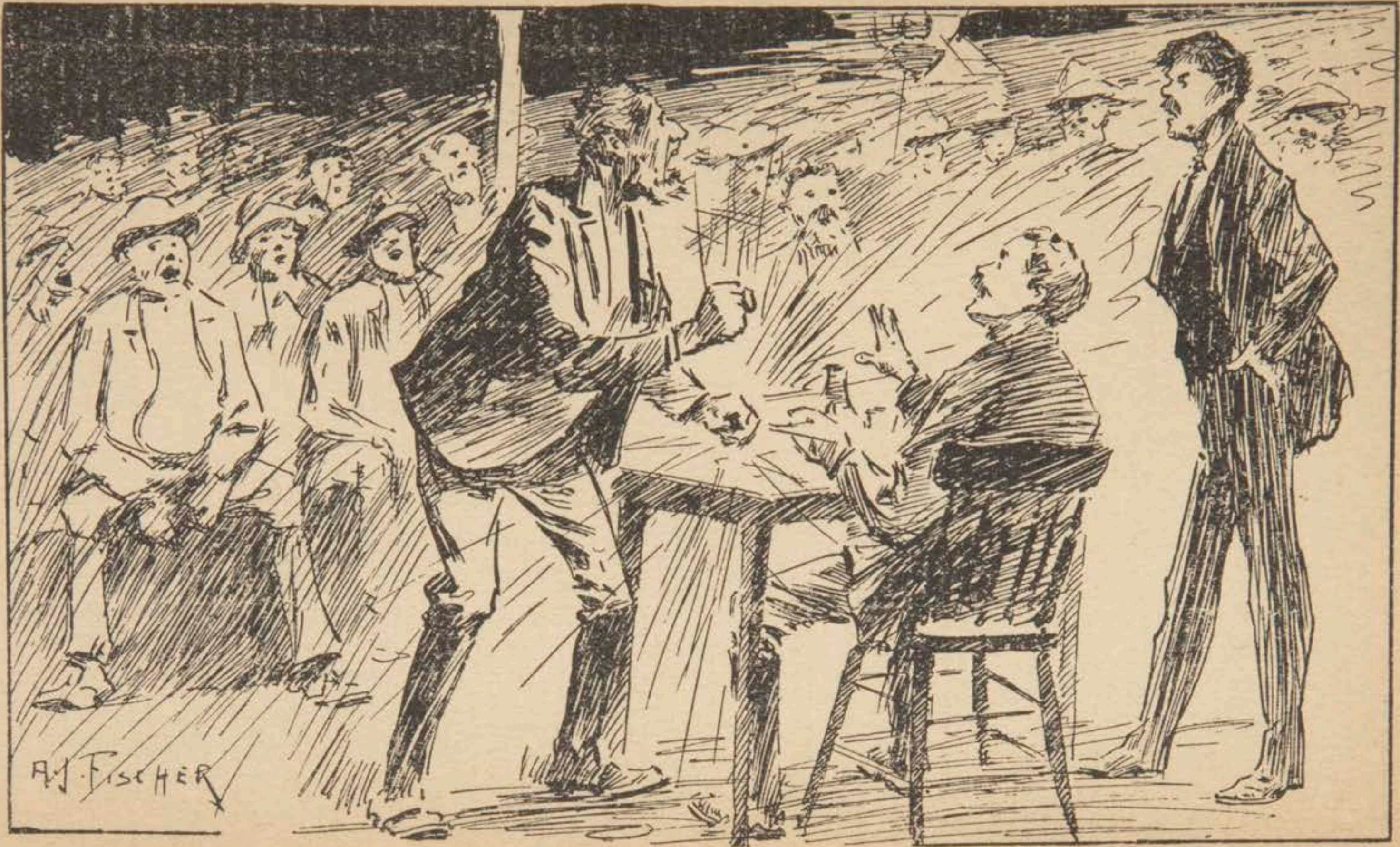
''We back all your bills, pay for all your picnics, cover up all your mistakes with our hard-won gold; and now, in the name of socialism, you want us, while we are working sixteen hours a day, to help you to turn the country into a great big trades union, including everybody but us.

''We don't want that sort of socialism, Mr. Vindin,'' roared the old man, striking the table with a mighty thud. ''We want the socialism of the Square Deal.''

After the long-continued cheers had subsided, Mr. Vindin arose with placid smile upon his face and remarked:

''I quite agree with the remarks of our friend Mr. Patrickson, Mr. Chairman.

''The only difference between us is that Mr. Patrickson does not go far enough; he is a little inclined to



“WE WANT THE SOCIALISM OF THE SQUARE DEAL.” [*Page* 102.

keep in the old ruts, whilst my party is for radical—yes, sir! radical changes."

"Yes," growled the farmer; "I am for keeping to the old ruts, and you are for leaving the old ruts and taking us into the ditch."

CHAPTER XVIII.

COLOURS OF GOLD.

FOR some days Lucky had been aware of a cloud of seriousness which had cast itself over the selector —a seriousness which Lucky knew from experience to be significant of change. A problem was to be solved, a difficulty overcome or a new departure made, when the selector lapsed into a brooding reverie like this. Lucky did not know of anything that had gone wrong on the selection or in the business, and he puzzled his head to discover the cause of this mood. He himself made his decisions quickly, but the selector seldom took an important step in life without dreaming about it for awhile, or, as Lucky phrased it, "mooning over it." In imagination Woolham would present to his own mind's eye the various alternatives of the situation, and, after pondering over the situation in this way, he would come down from the clouds and take his predetermined way. It was, however, wonderful with what firm steps the selector would advance when he had decided upon the course to be pursued. Lucky would be the first to admit, too, that the selector had an admirable way of anticipating the future and preparing for every contingency; so Lucky, still mystified, could only wait the inevitable call of the selector to share his confidence.

It was after breakfast that the selector drew up an extra chair on which to stretch his legs, and invited Lucky to fill up his pipe—a sure sign that he had come down from the clouds of doubt to the solid ground of decision.

"Well, Lucky," said Woolham, "you will be surprised to hear that I have discovered colours of gold on the selection."

"I am surprised, and I shall be a great deal more surprised when I see the gold."

"Yes, I know your ideas," said the selector. "You have done a bit of prospecting in your time, and you hold the idea that no gold can possibly be found on this side of the river."

"Yes," said Lucky, "and I can prove it to you."

With that he drew from the fire a burnt stick, and rapidly drew a sketch on the white hearth of the geological formation of the district.

"The watershed runs thus. Gold has been discovered here at Swamp Oak, there at Gibb's Crossing. This is the way it is running," he said, pointing from place to place; "but not a trace has ever been seen on this side of the river.

"As every practical miner knows, it couldn't be found on this side—it is a geological impossibility. It must occur only on the other side of the river, and I doubt," said Lucky, bringing the long train of his technicalities to a triumphant conclusion, "if it is payable even on the other side."

When he looked up, the selector was smilingly filling his pipe. Lucky thought that his oft-repeated argument had failed to make its usual impression.

Woolham, however, rejoined: "Yes, old man, I agree with every word you have said. I expect we shall never take an ounce of gold out of Gilga without putting its equivalent into Gilga in the form of hard work and common-sense planning. Nevertheless, I repeat that I have discovered colours of gold on the selection, and I can prove it."

The selector rose from his seat, went to the corner of the room, and picked up a round parcel wrapped in cloth, which he unfolded before the astonished Lucky, for the cloth contained a ghastly, blood-stained sheep's head!

"I want to find the dentist who put that gold-filling in the sheep's teeth," said the selector, as he pointed to the gold which linked them together.

Lucky, who had recovered from his surprise, exclaimed: "You've got more than colour; you've got the stuff itself; but the sheep did not pick that gold up on this selection."

"That is quite true," replied Woolham.

"I discovered the gold on this selection, but where the gold originally came from is the problem we have to solve.

"Now, you follow me and check my argument.

"First, the gold in that sheep's skull proves that the animal has been grazing in country where there is alluvial gold."

"That's so," said Lucky, nodding.

"Second, that gold is likely to be payable, and probably easily obtained, or it would not be so thickly studding the sheep's teeth."

"I think so," said Lucky, nodding with less emphasis.

"Thirdly," continued Woolham, "that animal does not belong to the Gilga flock; for, according to the highest geological authority, Professor James Edward Lovell, sometimes called Lucky, there is no alluvial on Gilga."

"That's certain," said Lucky, nodding decisively. "The professor is quite right."

"Happily," continued Woolham, "I can agree with the professor; for I was on the spot shortly after the beast was killed, and I observed the gold and kicked the head aside until the butcher had gone. The sheep belonged to the score or so which we bought a few weeks ago on the road.

"The drovers, you remember, were taking a mixed lot to truck. Some of the sheep were about done up, and the drovers, who had the use of our paddocks, offered them to us.

"Now, I had the sense to put the skin aside. I'll show it you by-and-bye. The ear-mark is a T and the brand is the outline of a top-hat," said Woolham, sketching the brand on the hearth.

"But the question remains whose brands these are. By searching in the *Gazette* we may discover that. Then remains the further question, What paddock did this particular sheep graze in, for the squatter may be a big owner and possess miles and miles of country; indeed, that is more than probable if the sheep came from Queensland."

"Now I've done," said the selector. "I'll pass the problem on to you—only saying this much: I've made up my mind to follow the clue.''

''Perhaps it is an easier clue than you think,'' said Lucky. ''I know the brand and the earmark well. I have worked on the station. It is forty miles from here away up the New England Range. The station is called Tilga, and is owned by the New England Pastoral and Finance Company. They have a good bit of freehold, but alluvial is more likely to be obtained on some of their leased country.

''Why, Lucky,'' said the selector, slapping him on the back heartily, ''don't you see that you have almost solved the problem? The country you describe is just the sort of country where alluvial would be likely to occur.''

''Yes,'' said Lucky, who on this occasion was less enthusiastic than Woolham. ''Other people have thought so, too, and it has been a hunting-ground for prospectors for years; and, I ask, are we likely to find gold where practical miners have for so long failed?''

''I don't base any hope of success on our superior knowledge of mining, for I have practically none, though you have some experience, Lucky. My only argument is this—that sheep has been where there is gold. Let us find where the sheep grazed. When we have done our best, we should be satisfied whether we succeed or not.''

''I am with you there,'' said Lucky.

It only remained now for the two men to plan the expedition, for there were many things to arrange, and much depended upon suitable equipment.

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE TRACK OF FORTUNE.

WHEN the project was put before Patrickson, he at once offered to look after Gilga during the absence of the selector and Lucky.

"I am too old for gold-seeking," said the farmer; "but if you are very lucky I will come and help you gather up the stuff."

Meanwhile, he was able to give them a good many useful hints, for, like most bushmen, he had at one time or another done a little prospecting. On the farmer's advice, they turned their prospecting tour, apparently at least, into a hunting and trapping expedition.

"You are going into a district which has cast a spell upon many gold-diggers, and many eyes will be upon you," he said.

"You will most likely find some parties under canvas making a precarious living, but under cover of trapping 'possums you will have more liberty, and you will be free all the time to make your observations."

Then, of course, their turn-out had to harmonise with the part which they had undertaken to play. It would not do to journey amongst the fossickers and prospectors with the well-groomed cob in a smart sulky. They would be taken for speculators who had "a good thing on" somewhere, and their advent would make inquiry and lead to espionage. At the cottage of the Lovells there was an old sulky which had been abandoned to a bark shed. This Lucky managed to repair with wire and leather straps so that it would do a little more work. To match this, Patrickson managed to produce an old horse which was not deficient in "points."

"Now, I want to tell you," he said to Woolham, "that I know this old mare, and, though she has lost her beauty, I can assure you that she has not lost her strength and speed. Put a bit of feed into her when you can; when you can't get corn she'll do pretty well on grass, but treat her as well as you can; and, should the time come when you have to make a call on her, she'll repay you for all your attention."

"Well," said Lucky, looking the angular beast up and down. "I reckon that if we ever have to make a call on that nag it will be a last resource."

"What do you call her?" said Woolham to the farmer.

"Perhaps you could not do better than use the name Lucky has just suggested," replied Patrickson. "Call her 'Last Resource.' "

"All right," said Lucky, laughing. " 'Last Resource,' let her name be; but I am a bit relieved that you did not call her 'Forlorn Hope.' "

"Both names may fit her yet," said the selector.

Everything in the way of equipment having been completed overnight, the two adventurers made an early morning start.

Tools for mining, their guns, and other impedimenta were packed up in front of them, and on the iron frame underneath and behind the seat of the sulky.

The two men were dressed as became their new calling, and they would have easily passed for two prospectors of rather broken-down fortunes when Patrickson bade them good-bye and good-luck at the Gilga gate.

"It is to be hoped, Lucky, that we do not meet any of the neighbours on the road, for this outfit will stimulate their inquisitiveness, and we shall have to answer all sorts of inconvenient questions."

"Well, here are some of our neighbours, but I don't think they will stop to ask any questions," said Lucky, with a grin, as he stared down the road towards an approaching vision of loveliness which would have been more than welcome to the selector at another time. Much as Woolham would have liked to see Bessie Stuart, her appearance now was somewhat inopportune. She and her sister May were evidently out for an early morning ride. What a contrast to the two men they were. Well mounted and habited, they formed a picture of graceful beauty as they cantered past, which struck an impression of distance on Woolham's mind, as well as admiration.

How could he aspire to that glorious creature with the bright eyes and coronet of golden hair, clinging to the saddle with such easy gracefulness, and riding with such fairy abandon? Reason seemed to say to him, "It is only a vain dream," but his loving heart replied, "Let me dream on."

May curled her lip disdainfully as they passed, but

Bessie had a bright smile and a cheerful good-morning for the men.

Woolham realised that he did not look quite his best in the ramshackle sulky, with the old mare ''Last Resource'' between the wire-repaired shafts.

The slouch hats and the rough clothes gave them both a sort of sundowner appearance, and the selector saw a twinkle in Bessie's eye, and he wondered a little whether it represented sarcastic contempt or pure fun.

As a matter of fact, Bessie could not quite hide her merriment at the strange sight of the prospectors. She guessed that the two young men were on some quest which necessitated the unusual appearance.

After an uneventful drive, the selector and Lucky camped at midday alongside the bush track for lunch. They had left the little townships behind them, and they were climbing up the foothills of the New England Range.

They made their first camp in a clump of apple trees. These trees grow best near water, very often close to creeks. Within a few paces of the men a beautiful creek moved steadily down-hill. On its margins grew wattle trees covered with masses of yellow blossoms. They realised the charm of the vagabond life.

''I don't wonder much,'' said Lucky, ''that so many men forsake the battle of life in the crowded cities and go 'on the wallaby,' for in a mild climate such as ours, and amongst the hospitable people of the bush, it is not a very hard life.''

''I don't think that such cowardly souls can possibly get the joy and satisfaction out of nature that we get,'' said the selector; ''for there must be some connection between achievement and imagination. Man appears to be a two-storeyed creature. There is the physical first floor and the mental second floor. I think they live on the lower physical plane.''

''That's so,'' said Lucky. ''The dead-beats of the road, humping their 'bluey,' don't live upstairs, but I reckon they get a great deal more physical satisfaction out of life than the cooped-up toilers of the city, with their indigestion and biliousness. Why, there is many a man in town who hasn't known what it is to be healthily hungry since he was a lad.''

''Perhaps you are right,'' said the selector; ''but I imagine that the intellectual out-of-door life is the best, where one has room to live and room to aspire. No doubt it is the love of open air and healthy sport which makes the Anglo-Saxon the best man.''

''Last Resource'' had done surprisingly well on the trip thus far, and now stood contentedly by the sulky enjoying the contents of her nose-bag.

Another ten miles brought them to a good camp near water. Here they built a gunyah of bushes for their shelter during the cool night.

They boiled the billy for the evening meal, fed ''Last Resource,'' and, having hobbled her, lay down in sight of the fire, to sleep and dream of gold mines whose wealth rivalled Golconda.

To-morrow they expected to be very near the place where, as the selector said, ''the wonderful dentist lived who put the gold filling in the sheep's teeth.''

CHAPTER XX.

GOLDEN GULLY.

GREAT banks of clouds driven by erratic winds obscured the dawning light, and gave the landscape a broken and sombre appearance, as the two prospectors renewed their journey at daybreak the following morning. The road now became difficult, and even dangerous in places.

Now they were following the narrow winding road around the side of a hill whose sides were precipitous, or they were descending the steep road down into a boggy valley, where the mountain streams joined together in confusion before discovering the way out into the lower flats.

With unerring instinct "Last Resource" chose the better way, where each was somewhat bad, and Lucky soon learnt that it was best to give the old mare her head.

They were now skirting the fences of Tilga, but they had determined to make Golden Gully their base; as Lucky declared, it was the only place where they might expect to find alluvial.

Now the country became poorer, so far as the soil and grass were concerned, but evidently more highly mineralised.

A great rock-strewn mountain was before them, and the little streams ran green with the deposits from the copper ore and its allied minerals which the mountain contained.

"On the other side of that mountain," said Lucky, "we shall see the abandoned workings of the Golden Gully Copper Mine."

Debouching from a cutting which severed the side of the hill, they suddenly saw at their feet the Golden Gully, and they began the difficult descent. At the foot of the hill there were numerous holes, showing where the diggers had once toiled. An old water-race ran among the cracked timbers alongside the batteries, which had been abandoned to rust and ruin. Here and there were a few shanties constructed of mixed materials—a few sheets of corrugated iron, a bark roof, chimneys built of rough rubble, with the interstices filled with clay. Choosing one of the cleanest spots alongside a little creek, they camped, boiled the billy, and fed the valiant "Last Resource."

"Well, this is a weird place, as ugly and unpromising a place as one could imagine," said the selector.

"Many a digger and speculator has thought it a promising place," replied Lucky; "but its performances have never equalled its promises."

"Let us hope it may change its character, and reward us for our faith," said Woolham.

"I am afraid I have not much faith," replied Lucky. "Anyway, if we do not get much gold we may get some experience."

"I suppose some of the gentry residing hereabouts will soon leave their cards at our front door," said the selector. "I wonder what class they are."

They had not long to wait. Whilst they smoked, a grizzled old digger of sinister countenance, followed evidently by his two sons, sauntered towards their camp.

"Good-day," said the digger, taking out his pipe and mechanically holding out his hand for tobacco.

Then, lighting his pipe with a borrowed match, he sat on his heels and smoked.

The two younger men drew their supplies of tobacco and matches from the same source and followed his example.

"Travelling?" said the miner laconically.

Lucky replied by asking a question: "Any wallabies or 'possums?"

"A few," said one of the younger men.

"Getting any stuff?" asked Woolham.

"Ain't getting tucker," replied the digger.

"I suppose gold has been got here?"

"Once."

"Have a drink of tea," said Lucky, handing a hot steaming pannikin of it to the older man.

Taking it, he looked at them in expressive inquiry, and ejaculated, "Anything stronger?"

"No," said the selector; "we are teetotalers."

"Hell!" blurted out the indignant miner, lifting the pannikin to his lips.

As they drank the tea the three diggers became loquacious.

"Old Simpkins took more gold from Golden Gully than any other man. He was getting free gold—making about £30 or £40 a week for six or seven months," said the grizzly digger.

"What became of him?" said Woolham after a long pause.

"Went home to get in his harvest on a tin-pot selection he had over Gunnedah way. His wheat was rusty, and when he sold it didn't bring more than £30 or so."

"Did he come back?" said Lucky.

"Yes, but he done no good after that, and 'e went back and spent 'is money on 'is farm."

After they had returned to work a couple of Chinamen, fossickers, paid their respects.

The cold rain by this time was drizzling in a disagreeable fashion, and the two prospectors were digging a trench around their tent when the celestials arrived.

"Welly nice day, Boss," said the first, with an expansive grin and a bright smile.

"Do you think so?" said Woolham. "I call it a very nasty day."

"Welly nice day, welly nice day," replied both the celestials in chorus.

"Getting plenty of gold here?" said Lucky.

"Plenty welly nice gold by-'n'-bye," said the Celestials with a grin; and they fell into a jumble of Chinese talk, which appeared to be as satisfactory to them as it was quite unintelligible to the two prospectors.

"Any sheep here?" said the selector, 'baa-ing' slightly to make himself understood.

He was understood, but in a way which was not complimentary either to himself or Lucky.

"Plenty welly nice sheep come along," said one of the Chinese; "but," he continued with a laugh, "boundley-lider he come along ev-ly day."

Obtaining some tobacco and matches from the new arrivals, the Celestials, too, took their departure.

"I don't like our first visitors," said Lucky. "I know them too well. I have seen them around Gum Flat. Their appearance is usually marked by the disappearance of fowls and even sheep. They are men whom boundary-riders dislike. When I was at Ringari I used to shadow them till they left."

"Indeed?" said the selector. "They did not recognise you, and you gave no sign that you knew them."

"Oh, it wasn't their game to recognise me; as for my recognising them, you know knowledge is only power when you keep it to yourself. I sha'n't mind if they think I do not know them."

Meanwhile, in the seclusion of their shanty the three diggers were expressing their opinions about the newcomers.

"There's something in it," said old Devlin to his sons.

"I want to know what them blank swells have come here for. You know one's Lucky, who used to fox round us night and day when he was at Ringari."

"If they want shooting and trapping, couldn't they get it nearer home?" said Pat Devlin.

"And what do they want with that old sulky and mare? They have better turnouts than that," said Terence, the younger son.

"I seen that old sulky in Lovell's shed two years since," said old Devlin. "I'll tell what I think. Somebody's given them a tip, and they've come here thinking they've got something good on. Perhaps they 'ave and perhaps they 'aven't. Anyways, I say this—if so be there is no gold in Golden Gully, there may be gold in these two blighters.

"We'll stick to them. If they put in a peg anywheres, I put in another. If they get anything, they will have to let me come in, or buy me out—that's what I say."

"Just as well," growled Pat; "for while they are sniffing round here we shall not be able to get a bit of tucker. It will be like having three blooming boundary riders watching us."

The selector and Lucky now began their quest. In order to keep up appearances they did a little shooting, but they did a good bit of prospecting here and there, with indifferent results.

Lucky was frankly anxious to get home again, but the selector was still keen on gathering experience. He had a few books on gold and prospecting, which he continually read at nights, and during the day he pumped Lucky dry of all his local knowledge, and persistently tried all the places Lucky took him to.

Lucky had more than once hinted that "At the beginning of this business there was one sheep's head, but now there seems to be three"; and he reckoned there was not "much gold in the other two."

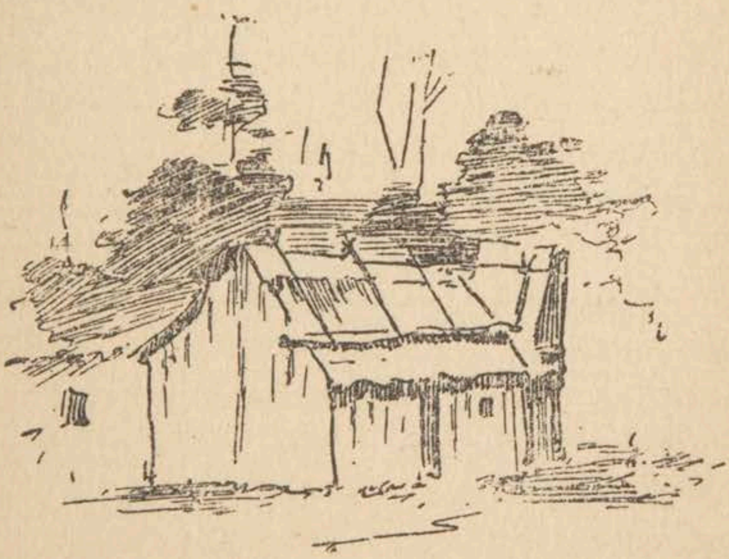
The Devlins had a disagreeable habit of turning up when they were least wanted, but the two men had grown almost indifferent to their appearances, as their hopes of gold turned dim.

It was refreshing to receive a letter from Patrickson reporting "all well."

The old man said: "I saw Miss Bessie out riding the other day. She asked after you both. I said that you had both gone to see the dentist. You were gone to see about some gold filling. She smiled sceptically. Isn't it strange that people find it hard to believe the truth? I was offended, and told her that I would ask you to write, and then she would see that I was telling the truth.

" 'Very well; I'll not judge you till I get the letter,' she said, with another of her merry smiles."

Woolham made a mental resolve that he would send that letter at the first opportunity.



CHAPTER XXI.

THE LETTER.

BESSIE STUART had her own difficult row to hoe at home, for her people offered a quiet but firm resistance to her friendship with Woolham.

The situation was the more difficult because it was so ill-defined.

In her heart Bessie felt sure that the selector loved her, but she had imposed a reserve upon him which he was too proud to break.

Strange as it may seem, her love grew with his reserve. She would have loved him less if he had broken through all bounds.

But the vagueness of the situation made it the more difficult at home.

She gave no sign, but her people felt that an impenetrable veil had been interposed between her and them.

There was also the tangible evidence that she quietly put all other suitors aside.

Could she have boldly taken sides with the selector as his affianced wife, she would have gloried in the allegiance, but her loyalty and love to her own people had set a bound to his budding affection, and now she was sometimes fearful that pride might have taken the place of affection in his heart, and that the selector was lost to her.

No one, however, could have guessed her state of mind, except her quiet mother.

Mothers have a strange intuition—a second sight to which the hearts of loved ones are open books.

. . . . .

It was Bessie's custom to ride to meet the mail-man. She enjoyed these daily canters, and "Ginger," the popular young man who carried the mails, seeing the vision of golden hair riding down the road, or waiting by the gate, had his budget of news ready to retail for her delectation; for Bessie had the gift of drawing people out; they instinctively tried to be at their best in her presence.

"Well, Bob," she said, calling him by his right name, which was not very familiar to his ears. "I hope you have a lot of letters for me."

"Yes, Miss, a great lot; but have you heard the news?" said His Majesty's mail-carrier.

"No," said Bessie. "What is it?"

"Well, Miss, they do say in town that Mr. Woolham and Lucky 'ave gone prospecting."

"Indeed!" said Bessie. "That is great news."

"Yes," said Ginger. "The driver of the Bingera coach saw them in the Warden's office there, getting miners' rights."

"But you must know, Bob," said Bessie, "that it is one thing to go prospecting and quite another to get gold."

"Yes, that's true," replied Ginger. "That's just what Mulga Bill, the driver, said. He has seen many a cove go out to Golden Gully and the other fields, expecting big things, but they have been jolly glad to get a lift back along the road in any sort of trap, and they didn't have much swag to carry back, either."

"I suppose you think that is what is going to happen to these two, then, Bob?" remarked Bessie.

"No fear!" said Ginger. "That's where I differed from Mulga Bill. 'They'll strike it all right,' sez I. 'They've got the luck.'

" 'They cannot strike it if it ain't there,' sez he.

" 'That's all right,' sez I. 'But if it's there they'll get it.' "

"Let us hope they may," responded Bessie.

"Yes, I wish 'em luck, an' I 'ope they'll strike it rich," said Ginger, as he turned to the track once more.

Bessie began now to understand dimly Patrickson's allusion to the "gold fillings"; but she turned to her letters.

There are some epistles which declare themselves to be unimportant, and even unwelcome, by their very wrappings.

Mere business letters advertise themselves by all sorts of self-assertions visible upon their envelopes. Circulars also seem to openly say, "Put us aside; we can wait."

You cannot hope for much out of the flimsy narrow envelope, almost transparent in its thinness, the sign of cheapness.

No lover would trust his heart's outpourings to such an inadequate medium.

The hot ardour of young love would scorn such frailty, and the airy coquettish nothings of the fair lady "in reply to yours" would add such lightness to the already too light weight and texture of such envelopes that there would be danger of them flying away altogether. Advice of "returned empties" would best suit such wrappings.

Epistles of this sort Bessie quickly laid aside, and there was left one stout envelope, addressed to her, which had an individuality all its own.

Thick, opaque, and bulky, it promised interesting contents, and the bold writing was characteristic. It was from the selector.

Bessie decided that she would read it here, among the gum trees, where there were none to trace the responsive emotions which passed across her face.

Woolham told the story of the gold in the sheep's head in that letter. He had evidently set out to amuse and interest Bessie; it was a breezy yarn such as one writes to a chum.

Bessie liked the tone of it. She was proud of being treated like a comrade, and pleased that her sympathy and friendship were taken for granted. This is the position the best women aspire to. They would like men to regard them as comrades, companions—real friends to whom one would tell the worst as well as the best, and tell it, too, with the assurance that whatever happened they might be relied on to stand true.

It is the superficial and empty chit of society and millinery who expects a man to treat her as a pretty doll, or, at least, as a favoured child, to be pleased, to be shut away from stern reality, and only regarded as an ornament to be admired—a beautiful possession to be exhibited with pride because such exhibition attests one's own importance.

And so Bessie was glad to read of the selector's hopes and ambitions. She followed him in his doing, dreaming, and thinking.

His life, his success, was her romance.

''Lucky only half believes in my theory,'' wrote the selector. ''But that fact does not take away his interest. If it is nothing else it is an adventure, and the maxim 'Nothing venture nothing win' is almost a beatitude to fellows like us.''

Then the letter went on to hint that there were other ventures which the selector hoped to win. He was only waiting, ''as we all have to do at times in our lives, 'till the clouds roll by,' or to change the figure,'' he said, ''till the tide comes which, 'taken at the flood leads on to fortune.' ''

Neither Bessie nor Woolham knew how prophetic Shakespeare's lines were quoted in this connection.

They were to learn that together later!

Bessie read this, the first letter of the selector to her, again and again, as she sat upon her horse beneath the gum trees, the horse meanwhile cropping the long grass growing in the shade. She was reassured by the letter, for it lifted her into a comradeship which was none the less real because it was unpledged.

She was grateful for the hint that he was waiting for her—waiting patiently, but in faith.

His delicate respect for her loyalty to her own people, which prevented him writing a love-letter, won her admiration.

Half hoping that he would go on and speak clearly the thing that was in his heart, she was yet wholly glad that he respected her pride, which would accept his love only when he could come into her home and family with the deference and regard of her people.

The blessing of a father and mother is worth waiting for, and marriage is twice blest when it means, not only that the daughter finds a husband, but that parents greet a new son, and the family circle is not broken, but enlarged, enriched, and strengthened.

Bessie was happy that Woolham had patience. She admired restraint, which is often the visible sign and token of strong purpose and faith.

. . . . .

"Pooh! It is all stuff and nonsense!" I fancy I hear some gentle reader say.

"It is all sentiment, and what has sentiment to do with the soil, and settlement?

"Are not farmers and selectors the most soulless of mortals—of the earth, earthy?

"Is not life in the bush all drought and dulness? What is there in the bush but monotony and melancholy?

"I tell you," continues the gentle reader, now become an ungentle critic, "that the only bit of colour you get in the bush is in the wayside public-houses, or on the country racecourses, or in listening to stories of the old bushrangers."

. . . . .

All I can say is that this story is called a romance, not because it is not true, but because it *is* true—true to life as it is seen in the homes of the people who do the real work of the country. Those who, with splendid hopefulness and rare courage, are taming the wilds, building our townships, and rearing for themselves ever more beautiful homes in the heart of plains and valleys where the day dawns and dies amid glorious skies and ever calls men to an increasing purpose.

Gentle Reader, go anywhere in New South Wales, talk and live with the settlers, compare the humble and rough beginnings with the life of to-day, listen to their aspirations for the future, and you will learn that there is both progress and poetry in the bush.

. . . . .

"The machinery, a little of it, is housed over yonder in the first rough shanty we built. That other cottage over there covered with passion flowers is our second home. It is used for shearers now. This is our third home," the farmer will say to you, "and I am not satisfied yet. After next harvest I intend to have a brick house with all conveniences."

The vines grow around the old homes, transforming their decay into a new beauty and poetry.

If walls had tongues as well as ears, these old timbers could tell many a story of love and fortitude.

Gentle Reader, this story does not portray country life from the standpoint of the "wallaby-track" or the bush-bar—it is the story of the pioneer, who does not necessarily spend his time amid drink and profanity.

No doubt there are dead-beats and wastrels in the bush, as there are in the city, but we do not glean the history of a country from its gutters, but from its homes.

. . . . .

Now, our trio of heroes, the selector, Patrickson, and Lucky, represent a class who, whilst they do not ignore the material, refuse to be pinned down to a mere material outlook. As we have seen, Woolham was something of a dreamer, and Patrickson, with his modest library and multitudinous journals, was alive at many points.

These two men had unconsciously initiated Lucky into the magic brotherhood of souls, and together on many a night they voyaged amid the blessed isles of poetry and imagination. If they did not quite live with the immortals they remained within call.

They lived upon the earth, but they claimed a little bit of the sky too.

Patrickson gloried in what he called his superstitions. "When I grew up a bit," he said, "I was sorry to give up fairies and ghosts, and I am afraid I have almost lost hold of the blessed saints, but by me soul, I'll never give up the poets and the prophets."

With a healthy regard for the actuality of a growing banking account, which makes some ideals possible, they strove to live fully as they journeyed on. Of the three—and, when Mr. Donald could be with them, of the four—was formed a guarded circle into which none could enter whose lips had not been purged of guile, as with the touch of a live coal from off an altar, and whose hearts had not been cleansed of sordidness.

Into this circle came Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Ruskin, Macaulay, and other seers.

Rudyard Kipling or Henley came with the music of a patriotism of imperial breadth, and Wilkie Collins or Conan Doyle carried them into tangled mazes of plot and counterplot.

The bush poets entered, and sang of a wilder life further out-back, or Mark Twain commanded laughter.

There were others who came into the magic circle and, like Henry Drummond, carried them higher still.

But a welcome voice had already sounded in Woolham's ear, declaring that there was a candidate without the sacred portal who demanded admission to the magic circle.

It was a golden-haired vestal who waited without—it was Bessie.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CONSPIRACY.

OUR prospectors soon found that there were difficulties in their quest other than those offered by Mother Nature. They had human nature to contend with in its most virulent form—in the persons of the Devlins.

They were of the worst class of colonials, a sort of survival of the lawless convict days. Heredity sometimes "throws back," and gives in the third or fourth generation a reversion to savage Cain-like types of manhood, whose hand is against every man. Robbery and bloodshed were shot through and through the web of the Devlins' characters, like the red strand in a rope or the colours in an Eastern carpet.

If half the energy and resource which these three men threw into their wild devilry had been turned into legitimate channels, the Devlins, without doubt, would have made names for themselves. But they were by nature lawless and treacherous, with a constant trend towards the animal and tigerish nature.

They were human birds of prey whose claws always sought other people's meat. Such men are black spots on the surface of white Australia. Their history was a blend of violence and trickery—their upbringing a strange mesh of vicious influences which would have furnished much scope for the analysis of the scientific criminologist, and would have been the despair of the philanthropist and the social reformer. Their favourite hunting ground had been the country racecourse, where they acted in various capacities. Sometimes Pat and Terence, who were masters of the bucolic manner, got up as country farmers, would allure the unwary up to old Devlin's stand, where, to the discomfiture of the gullible toilers of the bush, the old hand would do the three-card trick or other thimble-rigging. At other times, done up in the fashion of the turf, they would make a book, and whoever else lost they would manage to come out on top.

They had had their days of prosperity when they had lived as swells on pony racing—even keeping up a suburban establishment, and appearing in all the loud dressing so favoured of horsey men. But days of racing and nights of gambling in the city had for the present faded from their view, for barefaced welshing had made them alike unwelcome and unpopular with their own clique, as they were sought after by the police. That beat had become too warm for them, so they had reverted to the country and to their old practices of cattle duffing and horse faking, varied occasionally by running a boxing saloon at a country show, when Pat or Terence, under long-sounding names, would put up fictitious contests with old Devlin, for the delectation of Australians of the rising generation, which claims to be athletic on the slender ground of being willing to witness in others the athletic qualities which they loudly profess for themselves. The Devlins had got so low down on their luck in the city that they had even joined the ranks of the professionally unemployed. They had prated politics, and even joined deputations to Cabinet Ministers, demanding work. But their career in this direction had been brought to an untimely end by the offer of Government work, which their burly strength gave them no excuse for refusing.

They had availed themselves, however, of the kindness of a paternal Government to the extent of travelling on free railway passes to the interior, where some hundreds of ne'er-do-wells were cutting down scrub on the butty-gang system under the eye of a Government official. Here they had prospered amazingly for a time by taking down their more or less innocent comrades in nightly gambling. But at last there was no gang willing to include them in its contract, and so they were again in close contact with nature, which yields nothing except to labour, in a decayed goldfield, where they were on the look-out on the one hand against boundary riders, and on the other for the arrival of horny-handed sons of toil upon whom they might prey.

. . . . .

The Rev. D. Donald's circuit was a very extensive one. It involved some very long drives, but the more distant places were only visited at infrequent intervals. He was due to pay his quarterly visit to Tilga. Two circumstances rendered his proposed visit of more than ordinary interest.

First, it was shearing time, and Mr. Donald purposed attempting some work amongst the shearers, for Tilga was a big station and the shearers' camp was a large one.

That this work was very difficult rendered it the more fascinating to Mr. Donald, who had the heroic spirit of the true missionary.

Moreover, Golden Gully was just outside the boundary of Tilba, and Mr. Donald promised himself the pleasure of visiting his friends Woolham and Lucky.

He arrived at the homestead at nightfall, and was cordially received by Mr. Thurles, the manager, and his wife. The parson was always a welcome guest. He brought the sunshine with him, and Mr. Thurles always looked forward to the long evening talks with Mr. Donald, whose conversation was always fresh and inspiring.

Let nobody imagine that life in the squatter's homestead is dull and dreary.

There are usually plenty of books and magazines on hand, and what with tennis occasionally in the afternoons and music of an evening, life goes on merrily.

But congenial company is welcomed, though there are exceptions, of course, to these rules.

Seated at the dinner table, conversation turned to current topics, and in the midst of interesting table-talk one of the maids announced that Perkins, the boundary rider, wanted to see the manager on important business.

"Show him in," said Mr. Thurles. "I expect he has to report more sheep missing." Mr. Thurles had been a good deal worried recently by the loss of sheep, in spite of the keenest oversight.

The manager, however, was mistaken. Perkins had called to report a different sort of discovery.

"I thought you would like to know, sir," he said, "that I have found the mutton cask of the sheep-stealers, whoever they are."

"Ah, that is good news, Perkins. Tell us about it," replied the manager.

"Well, sir, it was a very ingenious affair," said the boundary-rider.

"No wonder we could find no evidence of a brawn-tub amongst the tents of the suspected miners. You know the old cemetery on the bank of the creek? Well, the fence has been broken down for some time, and I was repairing it to-day, and I sat down for a smoke behind one of the old head-stones.

"I was pulling up a long blade of grass to clean my pipe with it, when to my surprise a sod came up with it. Then I noticed a circular patch of grass rather drier than that surrounding it.

"Said I to myself, 'This looks as if somebody had cut up this turf and replaced it.' So I pulled some turfs up, and sure enough I found a wooden lid, and, lifting it, there I saw a cask full of salt mutton."

"Capital!" said the manager. "No doubt they have chosen the place because they knew that few people disturb an old, disused bush cemetery. What did you do, Perkins?"

"Well, sir," responded the boundary rider, "I thought it was a good idea to empty the cask, and when Sam, the bullock-driver, came with the fencing posts and rails, we filled a bag with the mutton, and I sent some to the shearers' camp and told him to keep some for himself. I covered the turf over the cask again, and I told the bullock-driver to say nothing about the plant."

"Quite right," said the manager. "Now we must redouble our vigilance, for they will soon want a fresh supply."

"Yes, I expect they will soon get to work again," replied the boundary rider.

The sheep-stealers got to work sooner even than the manager expected, for next day the boundary rider appeared at lunch time to say that he was certain that another sheep had been stolen from the paddock near the Golden Gully.

"Well," said the manager angrily, "we must ring up the police, and get them to send a trooper out. We must try and find the sheep-skin and some of the mutton. There must be a good deal of fresh mutton in some of the tents, and we can get the police to ascertain what meat, if any, the butchers have brought to Golden Gully from town."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"A SOWER WENT FORTH TO SOW."

THE evening of the day when Perkins discovered the renewed theft of sheep was a most eventful day to Mr. Donald. First, there was the service amongst the shearers.

"I don't think they'll hear you," said Mr. Thurles. "They are a rough lot, and Tim Dyer, the man to whom they all look up, is a bully who is death on all parsons."

TO-NIGHT at 7.15 p.m.

The Rev. D. DONALD, of Munilla,

WILL CONDUCT

A SERVICE

IN THE LONG SHED.

He will give an Address on

"Things You will Never be Sorry For."

All are Invited. **Sankey's Hymns Used.**

NO COLLECTION.

So ran the notice which one of the lads posted up in the shearing-shed during the afternoon. When

Dyer saw it, he swore vigorously, and then wrote underneath:

"We don't want any *blank* black-coated sharks in our quarters."

"What is more," he said to the assembled shearers, "I won't have any preaching here. If the *blank* sky-pilot opens his mouth in our shed, I'll mark him."

"That's right," chimed in his followers, for a bully is never without admirers; they stick to him as the pilot fish stick to the shark.

Everything therefore promised a hot time in the evening.

The evening meal was cleared away, and the men sat round the table, smoking, reading and playing cards in groups, when Mr. Donald, with Mr. Thurles and a few of the station hands arrived for the service.

The men hardly responded to the cheery "Good-night, men!" of Mr. Thurles, but continued to deal their cards. Only Dyer began to fume. Addressing an imaginary audience, he demanded angrily "What business a blank sky-pilot had to come there; he wasn't invited. They would send for him when they wanted him."

Some of the station-hands distributed the hymn-books, and Mr. Donald, with a smile, took his place at the head of the room and opened his Bible.

With face red and swollen with anger, Tim Dyer strode towards him threateningly.

Then a strange thing occurred.

All at once the preacher looked at Tim—apparently for the first time. He looked at the great head of the bully intently and with obvious admiration. Then, advancing with hand outstretched, he said to Dyer:

"Excuse me, sir, but do you know you have a most remarkable head. Gentlemen," he said to the surrounding shearers, who surveyed the scene with awakened interest, "I am a student of phrenology, and I would esteem it a great privilege to examine your comrade's head. A most remarkable head!—a most remarkable head!"

Then, putting his hand lightly on the cranium of the astonished Dyer, he said to the company: "This is the head of a man whom I would like to have for a friend. He would never go back on a pal. He would fight to the death for a weaker comrade, and never allow others to maltreat him. He is the sort of man I would like to stand in with if it came to a scrimmage.

"He would give and take hard knocks, and you would have to lasso him with a wire rope to hold him if there was a fight on."

"You bet!" said the still astonished Dyer, evidently somewhat gratified by the parson's description of him.

"Now," continued the sky-pilot, turning to Dyer, "if you will be good enough, my dear sir, to sit upon this box, I will give a delineation of your character from the conformation of your truly remarkable head; then afterwards I will read the heads of any others who desire it."

Dyer sat down meekly, and, as he gazed around, a seraphic and self-sufficient smile suffused his brick-red face.

The preacher went on to read the bully's head. He found many faculties imprinted there—firmness (well developed), hopefulness, concentration—"in fact," said he, "this gentleman has great executive power. He is a natural leader of men. But, to be candid," he continued "(and I should be no use to you if I were not candid), I must say that there are important faculties not much more than latent in his head. There are ideality, benevolence, spirituality, for instance—they all need greater attention. I hope I may be able later on to give him some hints as to how to develop these powers, and thus make his character a well-balanced one."

Then others followed, taking their places on the box, and the parson discoursed wittily and wisely to a thoroughly interested audience.

But when was the service to begin?

"I see a concertina on the table; cannot we have some music?" said Mr. Donald.

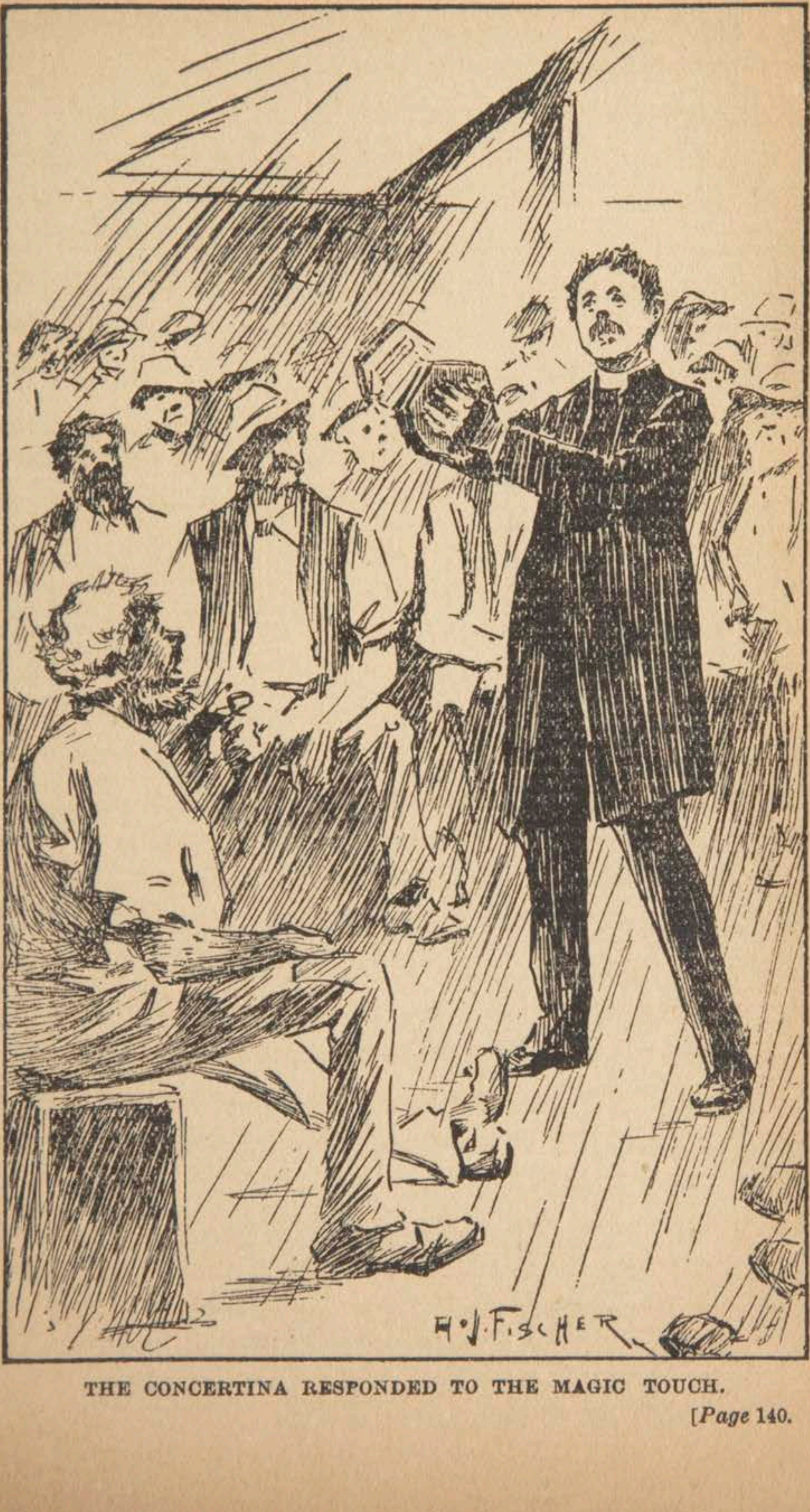
But they were all suddenly afflicted with modesty, though several present were able to manipulate the "bush piano"—an instrument as popular in shearers' camps as the banjo is in the camps of soldiers.

"Perhaps yer Riverence could give us a bit of a tune yourself," said Tim.

"Well," said the parson, "I can play a bit. I'll tell you what I will do. I will sing you a bit of a song I once heard in another shearers' camp."

It is not every player who can shake the music out of a concertina. But the concertina has a soul to respond to the magic touch.

Imprisoned in the little bellows there is the music of the spheres. The winds that move among the tree-tops, making night vocal—the breezes that blend in



THE CONCERTINA RESPONDED TO THE MAGIC TOUCH.

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fairy duet with the rippling waters of the creek, have a subtle kinship to the same element gathered up in that frail instrument, and the preacher had the power which joins the little world of notes contained there to the greater world of notes in nature outside.

As he swung the instrument from side to side, it sobbed and sighed its soul out, then laughed and danced, and the men knew that it was in the hands of a master.

"Now, boys, you must learn the chorus," said the preacher, as he began the song.

Out on a western ranch, one night, there met a reckless crew
When one said to another, "Jack, this letter came for you."
"I suppose it's from a sweetheart, boys," said one among the crowd.
With laugh and jest they gathered round, and Jack replied aloud:

Chorus—

It's only a message from Home, Sweet Home,
From loved ones down on the farm.
Fond wife and mother, sister and brother,
Praying to guard me from harm.
And baby is lisping a prayer to-night,
To bless me where'er I roam.
"We'll welcome you, Jack, if you'll only come back,"
Was the message from Home, Sweet Home.

And now the men took up the chorus, and as the preacher repeated it a great burst of song swept out from lusty throats.

It's only a message from Home, Sweet Home,
From loved ones down on the farm.

Then they waited for the next verse.

"I'm going, boys; good-night," said Jack. "I know you'll understand."
Then one by one his comrades came and shook him by the hand.
Said one, "If we had homes like that, we'd all be better men;
And now, before you go, just read that letter once again."

Chorus—

It's only a message from Home, Sweet Home,
From loved ones down on the farm.
Fond wife and mother, sister and brother,
Praying to guard me from harm.
And baby is lisping a prayer to-night,
To bless me where'er I roam.
"We'll welcome you, Jack, if you'll only come back,"
Was the message from Home, Sweet Home.

Tim Dyer was the only one who sat silent and moody whilst the song echoed among the rafters.

"And now, boys," said Mr. Donald, "I must not forget that I have undertaken to say a few words to you on 'Things you will never be sorry for.'"

The preacher was getting on. He began by addressing them "Sirs" and "Gentlemen"; now he was calling them "Boys." Ere they knew it he was preaching.

"I'll begin by saying that you will never be sorry for helping a fellow when he is down on his luck. You may not get thanks for it. But you will always have the approval of a good conscience, and you will have the satisfaction of acting like a white man. A good many people go on the rule of 'Every man for himself,' but I ask you, How would that work out on a big steamer which had struck a rock and very soon would sink? It would be worse for everybody, and there would be fewer saved than if discipline and chivalrous consideration had been shown.

"But even if it were not the wisest and the safest, it would be the most manly thing for the women and the children to be looked to first; the weakest and the most helpless must be first put in the lifeboats, and those who could most easily secure their own safety—that is, the crew, the officers, and the commander—must leave the ship last and think of others first. That is the British way, that is the manly way, the right rule of the sea.

"What is the world but a great ship sailing on through time to eternity? We who are on it only for a time must love ourselves last. Yes, I tell you, you you will never be sorry for helping a fellow when he is down on his luck. Now hang on to that!

"Here is another tip!

"You will never be sorry for remembering the Old Folks at Home. How much affection has been bestowed on you. Fond mothers have bent over your cradles, proud fathers have tossed you in their arms. They gave you the best time they could. Perhaps their only fault was they were too kind—not strict enough with you. Well, pay it back now. Give them a good time as far as you can. Don't neglect to write to them, if it's only a post-card. Cheer them up. Play your part in life so that they may be proud of you.

"Don't forget the old folks at home.

"But perhaps some of you may not have had a very good chance in your young days; perhaps your parents did not do much for you.

"Well, all I can say is, that most fellows have had a good deal more love and care invested in them one way and another than they have returned interest on."

"That's so!" "Hear, hear!" said some of the men.

"And as to the odd man," resumed the preacher, "if he happens to be here, who has not had much of a chance himself, will it not be a grander thing if, in spite of everything against him, he plays the game pretty well, helping the fellow who is down and remembering the old folks at home? We shall be old ourselves some day, and we shall be glad to be loved and thought of kindly.

"Here is another thing you will never be sorry for:

"Think the best of other folks. You must not judge the other fellow too hardly. You don't know what the other chap has to put up with. Perhaps he is handicapped in the race. When you judge, always put yourself in the other fellow's place. And now, this pushes me up against my text. You did not know I had one, but I have, and it's to be found in here," said the preacher, tapping his Bible, "here in God's book, I tell you. You will never be sorry for practising the golden rule, 'Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you.' The best man that ever lived gave us that rule, and he practised it, too! That man was Jesus Christ, and he is the best friend a man can have. That man Jesus is God."

"That's where you're wrong!" a deep voice rang out. "There ain't no God!" It was the voice of Tim Dyer.

"Are you sure of that, Dyer?" said Mr. Donald quietly.

"I don't know anything of a God above us," said Dyer.

"But isn't there a God within us, Tim?" said the preacher. "How do you account for the wonderful faculties which we have been talking about? You know that man is more than a beast. He has will, memory, and the power of being kind and brave. Are not these divine qualities?

"These things, I say, show that man is akin to God. If you cannot believe in a God above, begin by believing in the God-like in man, evident in those around us. There is goodness in the world—more of it than some suppose. Believe in that, aspire to that. Live up to the best you know, and you will soon understand that all these fragments of the ideal—hints of the perfect good—are like the broken beams of light which all come from the sun. So all this goodness, which makes this old world fit to live in, comes from God, who is the perfect, the absolute good."

"It's very pretty," said Tim, "but I have no use for it."

"That is the point, Dyer," replied the preacher. "Didn't I tell you at the beginning that there were faculties in your make-up which you had never developed? Tim, it is the best part of you which you have never developed—the soul side of your character. Waken up your spiritual powers—faith, hope, love, hunger after righteousness—and you will be like a new man. You'll begin to live all round."

"It's good enough for women and children," said Tim. "You can get them to your churches."

"There you are again, Tim," responded the sky-pilot. "You don't see how you give your case away. All honour to the women and the children. The world would be a poor place without them. You know that you men have allowed the best side of your nature to get hardened and callous. You would not like your women and children to be as you are to-night, would you? They have kept their hearts sensitive. They have retained faith and hope. Can you say to-night that you are as good as your women and children? You know that you are not!"

"That's so," said one of the men.

"I would like it to be true," said Tim.

The parson was evidently gratified to hear that much. He said: "Well, boys, think it over, will you? That is about all I can do for you to-night. I shall be glad to come again if you will let me."

"You will be welcome, sir," replied several voices.

"Thank you. Now what shall we sing?" said Mr. Donald.

"In the Sweet By and Bye," suggested a man at the end of the room.

They all stood up, and, the concertina leading, they sang together:

> There's a land that is fairer than day,
> And by faith we can see it afar.

When the song was finished, the parson pronounced a blessing, and, after talking with some of the men, he bade the shearers good-night, and he and his little company went out into the moonlight.

Some of the men resumed their play, others prepared for sleep, but Tim Dyer sat moodily with his face between his hands.

Later, one of his satellites, a dapper little fellow whose chief object in life was to bask in the favour of the bigger man, sat down opposite him, and began.

"I reckon," said he, "that that *blank* parson is a daisy. He would do *blank* well on the boards—he'd be a *blank* good corner-man."

But he did not proceed very far, for Dyer stopped him with a look, and burst out, as his big fist came down like a sledge-hammer on the box in front of him,

"I tell you what it is. I reckon that there is a damned sight too much swearing in this camp for me. Stop it! Yer think yer pretty smart with yer tongue. Now drop it. I've had enough."

The weak young man was amazed. His *language* had always been the admiration of Tim before, and he prided himself on the fact that he could pour it out for a good space without repeating himself. But all he could utter now, as he saw the look on Tim's face, and the big hands doubling up, was a startled "Crikey!" with which he hastily retired. Tim sat on, thinking and thinking hard. Perhaps he was thinking of a little submissive wife and some pretty "youngsters," as he called them, whom he had left behind in Sydney. He had not sent any money to them for a long time. It had gone in cards and beer. The preacher would have been pleased to know that by the next mail the neglected family was agreeably surprised by the arrival of a much-needed postal-note.

The preacher did not know that, but he knew that good words were like seeds that spring up in unlikely places, and he hoped that some seeds might have fallen on good soil.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE AMBUSCADE.

MR. THURLES returned from the shearers' service alone, for Mr. Donald had determined to walk over to Golden Gully and hunt out his friends Woolham and Lucky, intending to give them a surprise.

He was excited by the meeting in the shearers' quarters. It was useless retiring, for he would not sleep for awhile, and however late he might be he could easily let himself into his room—the prophet's chamber built on to the side verandah. The manager was full of the strange service, and told his wife how the parson had given a phrenological lecturette with living illustrations.

"But," said Mrs. Thurles, "I understood that he did not believe altogether in phrenology. Didn't he say to you last night that phrenology had not yet proved itself to be an exact science?"

"That's so," said Mr. Thurles, "but he is a wonder. It served his turn, and he only professed to be a student of phrenology. He is a student of everything, but he is a pastmaster in human nature."

Mr. Donald enjoyed his walk in the moonlight. He knew the place fairly well, for it was not his first visit to Golden Gully. Perkins, the boundary rider, had explained to him the situation of a new tent standing by itself on the flat.

That was probably the tent of the new-comers. He found it without much difficulty, and, standing at the entrance, he called out, but there was no answer. Untying the cords, he entered the tent and struck a match. He was right; there were books on the boxes which were familiar to him.

Closing the tent again, he wondered what he would do. He would wait awhile. It was a lovely, cool night, and the moon was sinking, but he could find his way in the dark.

He lay down among some wattle bushes and gave himself up to his meditations.

He had waited now till it was quite dark. But he enjoyed his vigil. Man needs solitude.

There are ''still small voices'' which speak to the soul amid the solemn silences, and the preacher felt that he was not without company. Perhaps his friends had gone to the township, and would not return until the morning. He was getting tired, and thought of returning to the homestead, when he heard stealthy footsteps and whispering voices.

He would remain still. Who was it? Surely his friends would not return to their own camp so cautiously!

''We must be smart about it,'' said a husky voice. ''We could not well do it until it was dark, but they may come back soon.''

''That's all right,'' whispered a deep bass voice. ''Terence is by the road, and if he sees them he will wail like a curlew.''

Then the parson saw two shadowy forms approach, one bearing a bundle and the other carrying a long-handled shovel.

"This will give the two swells away. They'll be sorry they ever came to Golden Gully," said the deep bass voice.

Then one of the vague forms began carefully to cut the turf at the back of the tent outside. Each sod was lifted gently aside; a hole was dug, the bundle was buried in it, the soil filled in, and the sods replaced.

It takes skill to get nearly the same amount of soil into a hole which came out, but the ground was well tramped and the spare soil was taken away to a good distance.

"That job's done, and it will put them in gaol," said the husky voice.

"Now for the meat—put that under the bed as far as you can," said the deep bass voice.

Somebody entered the tent and came out again.

"That's all right," whispered the husky voice. "Now we'll git; we'll bring Terence up as we go."

Lying there among the bushes, the parson hardly breathed. He did not understand what was going on, and he could not distinguish faces or forms, but there were the voices. He had an accurate memory for sounds. Now the last rustle of the parting leaves and the faint thud of the feet of the departing men had died down, and the bush was silent again, save for the sound of a frog by the creek or the movement of the wind in the trees; but the parson waited on.

Evidently the selector and Lucky were going to be very late.

Mr. Donald determined to return to the homestead.

After a long walk he reached his quarters safely and lay down to sleep, tired out after a long and exciting night—too tired to allow even mystery to keep him awake; for he knew that what was done in the dark would be revealed in the light.

But ere he slept he went over the scene at the tent again, and reconstructed it in his memory.

He repeated the tones of the two voices within his consciousness.

It was a way that he had, perhaps begotten of early elocutionary studies.

. . . . .

When Mr. Donald appeared next morning at the breakfast table he was introduced to a mounted trooper sitting there.

"Smart has come out to inquire into the sheep stealing," said Mr. Thurles to the cleric.

"I am afraid he will find it a bit late to do much good," said Mr. Donald.

"Yes," said Trooper Smart. "When your message came yesterday I was out in the opposite direction on my rounds; but I got away this morning at daybreak, to reach here as early as possible."

"Well, we can only do our best," said the manager.

"If we do not discover anything, we may frighten the thieves away."

"We'll get down among the diggers after breakfast," said Smart.

"Will you come with us, Mr. Donald?" said Mr. Thurles.

"I should like to go," said the parson.

"It will be the Law and the Gospel associated together," said the trooper.

"I fear that you people who represent the Law don't put much value on the influence of the Gospel," replied Mr. Donald.

"Well, I am afraid it does not count for much in the bush," responded the trooper.

"I will admit," said the cleric, "that we have not solved the problem of the Gospel for the bush yet. The bush missionary, with his van full of literature, still seeks the townships, and besides there are so few of them—one at present for all New South Wales. Tent missions necessarily work in the big towns. The best method so far is the country parson, with his centre where he lives and the big circuit over which he itinerates.

"The failure is that we have neither the men nor the money to go further back where population is sparse, distances great, and conditions of life wild and rough. We must get our rich city people to realise the obligation of sending the preacher with the pioneer."

After breakfast was over, the manager, with the boundary rider, Perkins, accompanied by the trooper and the parson, all mounted, set off for Golden Gully.

"There is a family here called the Devlins, three men, I have never liked the look of," said Perkins.

"I know them," said Smart. "We'll visit them first. We hoped that they would be less trouble here than anywhere."

As they were riding down the hill Mr. Donald took occasion to ride over to the tent of the selector.

The men, who were clearing away a late breakfast, received the preacher cordially.

He only lingered a moment, however, and as he cantered away he said with significant emphasis. "I am probably coming back again to your tent before long with the party yonder," pointing his hand towards the trooper. "Now, don't be surprised at anything you see or hear, and don't recognise me."

The three Devlins were sitting at the front of their tent smoking. They received the visitors respectfully with nods and "good mornings."

Without preface the trooper began.

"There have been sheep stolen from time to time out of Tilga paddocks."

"Have you come here because you suspect us?" broke in Devlin senior.

"We suspect everybody in Golden Gully because it is not likely it would be anybody else," said Trooper Smart. "People who live in town would not be likely to have a plant for salt mutton on Tilga and come regularly for it."

"We object to you visiting us and fixing suspicion upon us among our neighbours," replied Devlin senior indignantly.

"That's all right," said the trooper. "We shall leave a card on every one of the residents of this beautiful gully, and I hope they will appreciate our calling."

"It's not fair coming to us first," growled the digger.

"Well, we must honour somebody with the first call, and why not you?" And with this the trooper dismounted.

"But you came to us first, though you passed quite near to that tent on your way here," said Devlin, pointing to the tent of Woolham and Lucky.

"That's so," said the man in uniform, looking round, "but we shall honour them with the second call."

What satisfaction the Devlins felt at this news they managed to conceal.

The old man remarked, "We are not thieves, and we don't mind what you do. You can look around, but it's only fair for you to treat everybody the same."

The trooper and the boundary rider made a thorough search of the tent, ransacking possible hiding places, and one of the Devlin boys showed them the meat safe, which contained no mutton.

Then the party, leading their horses, walked towards the selectors' hut. The Devlins took the liberty of accompanying them. Here the trooper, after greetings were passed, stated the situation.

"Well," said the selector, "I suppose you won't mind my saying that we don't steal sheep. You will probably do what you consider your duty, and I can assure you we don't mind."

"We went to town yesterday for stores," said Lucky, "and we brought out that meat under the mosquito net."

"Very good," said the trooper. "We shall have a look round."

Trooper Smart, being a sensible fellow, soon concluded that this was not the tent of men likely to steal sheep. The air of comfort, the few books scattered about, did not suggest that sort of character; but, coming out of the tent, he noticed Devlin and the boundary rider walking round the outside, and such is the force of unconscious suggestion that he joined them.

Arriving at the back of the tent, he happened to notice the elder Devlin looking hard at the ground. Suspicion that the ground had been broken at once took possession of his mind when he saw the fragments of loose soil.

Calling to Woolham and Lucky, he said, "Would you mind lending me a spade or a shovel?"

"Certainly," replied the selector, and he and Lucky joined the party, Lucky bringing a shovel.

Handing the shovel to Devlin, the trooper said, "You know more about this than I. Do you mind digging up the ground there?"

Whilst the digger was taking off his coat, the trooper turned to Mr. Donald with a smile and said, quoting a coster song:

"Fur I likes to look on while other men work,
And me mother were just the sime."

"So do I," said the parson, who was looking on intently, and he noticed that Devlin did not fossick about where the earth was hard, but, as if by chance managed to put his shovel straight into the soil which had been removed before.

Woolham and Lucky saw the turfs piling up with surprise, and the trooper emitted a long whistle when the soil was removed and a sheep skin was disclosed to view.

"This looks bad," said Smart, turning to Woolham and Lucky.

A low husky voice, which sounded just over the head of the younger Devlin, said:

"We must be smart about it. We could not well do it until it was dark, but they may come back soon."

Old Devlin turned to his son with a surprised and scared look, whilst the rest of the party looked on in wonder.

Immediately another voice—a deep bass voice—almost in a whisper responded:

"That's all right. Terence is by the road, and if he sees them he will wail like a curlew."

With a terrified look Pat Devlin stared at his father.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the trooper sternly.

"This will give the two swells away. They'll be sorry they ever came to Golden Gully," said the deep bass voice in low accents.

Everybody was mystified, and looked towards the two Devlins, who stared at each other angrily and afraid.

"This is a strange business," said Mr. Thurles, looking from the Devlins to Woolham and Lucky.

"That job's done, and it will put them in gaol," said the husky voice.

"But *who* will it put in gaol?" demanded the trooper.

All the men, including the parson, were now looking hard at the Devlins, who were facing each other, staring and white to the lips.

Then it came almost as a shock to them all when the deep bass voice said hurriedly:

"Now for the meat; put that under the bed as far as you can."

Instinctively Mr. Thurles, the two prospectors, Mr. Donald, the trooper, and Perkins entered the tent, and the boundary rider, diving under one of the beds, emerged bringing with him a parcel of salted mutton.

Then a voice seemed to speak outside the tent, a husky voice:

"That's all right. Now we'll git. We'll bring Terence up as we go."

Leaving the tent, the party saw that the two Devlins were stalking towards their tent hurriedly and limply. With a smile the selector turned to the parson, but Mr. Donald was gazing intently at the two retreating men. Suddenly he let out a long wail like a curlew, and the others saw the two Devlins start nervously. Then the older Devlin turned and shouted out in a voice which by now was husky as well as bass:

"We'll have to go back to work."

"This is your doing, Donald," said Mr. Thurles, looking at the parson inquiringly.

"Well, I don't mind confessing," said Trooper Smart, "that it is quite beyond me."

"Sit down and I'll tell you about it," said Mr. Donald. They sat down upon the grass.

"To begin with, let me introduce my two friends, Mr. Woolham and Mr. Edwards Lovell. These are the friends I told you of, Mr. Thurles, whom I tried to see last night," said Mr. Donald. "When I reached the tent they were absent, and, as I thought they might return soon, I waited. I lay down there among the bushes, and when the moon had gone down and it was quite dark, I heard footsteps and voices, and I thought my friends might be returning, but instead it was the gentlemen who own the two voices you have heard.''

''Could you swear to them, Mr. Donald?'' asked the trooper eagerly.

''Unfortunately I couldn't,'' replied the preacher. ''I only identified the voices. I could not distinguish either face or form in the dark, and even now I don't know that these men are those whom I heard last night. You know I have not heard the younger man's voice yet. The elder man has done the talking this morning.''

''Oh, it's him all right,'' said Lucky. ''You have got his voice exactly.''

To this Perkins agreed.

''Well, you can guess the rest. I overheard the conversation which I repeated this morning. I did not know what they buried. I only guessed there was some foul play afoot, and I impressed the tones of the voices upon my memory. I have always been a bit of a ventriloquist. I do it sometimes to amuse children. It would have been an easy thing for them to deny anything I said; indeed, I could not well accuse them of anything on the strength of hearing only one voice. I did not know what might happen, but I determined not to be surprised at anything, and I called at the tent here this morning, as you saw, and managed to give my friends a hint that they were not to be surprised either.''

''If it had not been for that,'' said the selector, "knowing your trick of imitating voices, I would have turned to you when I heard the voices. As it was I recognised that it was Devlin and his son Pat, and I looked steadily towards them."

"So did I," said Lucky.

"It is a lucky thing for you that Mr. Donald came here last night," said the trooper to the prospectors. "It would have been hard for you to explain things."

"Yes, we are thankful," said the selector.

"I wish we could lay these villains by the heels," exclaimed Mr. Thurles.

"We can't very well do that, but we can give them a fright and a very useful warning," replied the trooper.

Mr. Donald remained with his friends, and the rest now rode over to the tent of the Devlins.

The three sheep-stealing diggers had evidently talked things over, and they had somewhat regained their composure.

"Where were you last night?" demanded Trooper Smart of Terence.

"Never stirred out of the tent after nine o'clock," said the man.

"It's all a monkey trick of that parson's," said Devlin, "and you've no right to come accusing us because he has been imitating our voices and inventing things we are supposed to have said. You saw the stuff, and you know where you saw it. Can't you believe your eyes?"

Evidently the Devlins had tumbled to the parson's art.

"That won't do, Devlin. Where could the parson have heard your voices? Pat has never spoken this morning in the parson's hearing. I can believe my eyes too as well as my ears. You knew a good deal about that hole. You didn't waste much time this morning digging in the wrong place after I gave you the shovel," said Smart.

"Well, put a hand upon us, and you'll be sorry for it. I know the law," replied Devlin defiantly.

"I am not going to tell you all I know," said the trooper. "But I'll say this much—if Mr. Thurles misses any more sheep, the three of you will be jugged before you know where you are. The rest I'll have to put before my superiors, and they will decide what is to be done."

. . . . .

No more sheep were missing from Tilga, but the incident did not make things easier for the two prospectors.

The Devlins knew how to make things disagreeable, and the two men were subjected to an espionage which was very galling.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RIVAL PEGS.

LUCKY had been away to the nearest township for a new store of provisions.

As he was unharnessing "Last Resource," the selector arrived in camp, and soon they sat down together to their alfresco meal.

"I'll tell you what it is, Lucky," said the selector, "we have been on the wrong track."

"I've known that for some time," said Lucky; "the right track is the homeward track."

Lucky was beginning to realise that the selector was really a very obstinate man.

"No," said Woolham decisively, "I don't mean that. We came out here with a certain object, did we not? Now I have been brooding over it, and I see clearly that we have neglected our true object."

"That's news," said Lucky. "We came out here for gold, and haven't we tried every likely place and stuck to it for weeks?"

"You are wrong, Lucky," rejoined Woolham. "We found a certain sheep's head with gold in the teeth. We set out to discover where that animal picked up the gold. Well, this is the station and place where that sheep probably came from; but, instead of trying to discover the exact spot where the sheep grazed, we have gone in the tracks of unsuccessful miners, and tried places which we thought were likely places. You have gone on the lines of your mining experience and I have been reading up text books, and all the time we should have been observing the sheep.''

Lucky stared hard at the selector. He was beginning to lose confidence in his leader.

''Well,'' he cogitated, ''all men are foolish in some spot, and this is evidently the Boss's weak spot.''

''Now I have noticed,'' continued Woolham, ''although there are sheep about they never come down here where we have been trying; they stay right up among the hills. Now I propose to try a few places up there where the sheep always stay. If we don't find anything in a few days we'll go home.''

Lucky assented submissively. At any rate he thought the end of the folly was in sight.

The next day the selector took the lead, and they trudged up the rough hills to which the sheep always clung.

They had left the sulky at the foot of the hills, ''Last Resource'' hobbled and feeding.

At last the selector stopped and said, ''I propose we try here.''

''What, here?'' said Lucky. ''There's good grass for sheep, but not a sign of gold. I never heard of gold being found in a place like this.''

''Neither have I,'' said the selector; ''but the sheep must have got the gold where there was good grass, and this is the best place for sheep—the place which they all make for.''

''Very well,'' said Lucky meekly.

They got to work with shovel and mattock, and Lucky was throwing the turf aside to get the dirt underneath, when Woolham said: "That's not the idea, Lucky. A sheep couldn't do that, could it? It would not dig the turf up; it would only take the grass. If there is gold here, it will be on the surface. We must take grass and everything."

"Very well," said Lucky in sad submission. So they carried turfs in the dishes to a creek near by, and Lucky filled his pipe and proceeded philosophically to smoke whilst Woolham washed the first dish. He couldn't help smiling sarcastically as he saw the selector turn the sods upside down and shake the roots into the dish and then proceed to wash the dirt. By and bye his reverie was disturbed by hearing the selector say, with suppressed excitement, "Here it is, Lucky; come and see."

Bending over the dish, Lucky eagerly scanned the result of Woolham's labour, and sure enough there lay before him in the dish pure gold; it was unmistakable.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated excitedly, "you've found the dentist."

They continued their labours, and found that all they had to do was to shake the grass roots into the dish and wash the dirt, and they never failed to get free gold in a good proportion.

After continuing for some hours, they sat down to discuss the situation.

"Well," said Lucky, "I am satisfied that we have found the spot. Now we must take all proper precautions. My idea is that we should camp up here as soon as possible. Then we must put up a date peg at a convenient spot, notifying that we claim it. We ought then to make an application for the claim.''

The thing to be decided was at what point to put the peg in order to locate the fullest extent of the alluvial, which might be expected to cover a good area, as the gold was on the surface.

''There is nothing to cause suspicion that we have found anything here, so we may both go and bring up our camp,'' said Woolham.

That afternoon the men shifted their camp to the hill side, above the very spot where they first found the gold. They spent the remainder of the afternoon in trying various places, and before the darkness set in they had put up the necessary date peg setting out their claim. That night they were too excited to sleep for some time. They lay opposite each other in the blankets talking things over.

''It is just as well to make assurance doubly sure,'' said Woolham, ''and one of us should go in the next coach to Bingera and put in the application.'' The next coach was due to pass through the gully after breakfast, and before they bade each other good night it was resolved that Lucky was to proceed by coach next day to Bingera, make the application, and then go on to Munilla, thence home to Gilga to bring Patrickson, if possible, for the friends felt that he would be invaluable to them in connection with their discovery.

''And,'' said the selector, half asleep and half awake, ''get him to take out a miner's right too; he may be able to help us best by coming in with us.''

At daybreak the young men were awakened by the rough voice of old Devlin calling at the tent door. Lucky sprang up angrily and demanded "What business have you coming to our tent and waking us up like this?"

"Business!" roared the digger. "I've come to warn you off my claim. You did not know when you pitched your shooting and trapping camp here that I had found gold here, did you? I'm a prospector, I am, and I've got a good thing on here, and just to save any bother I want you to move off my claim."

"Indeed," said the selector coolly, as he dressed. "Would you mind telling us when you found gold here and when you claimed it?"

"I've knowed it a long time, and I put my peg in yesterday."

"But," said Woolham, "you know it's illegal to put a peg in where other miners are at work on their own claim, don't you?"

"You're not miners."

"Yes we are," said the selector, exhibiting a miner's right, "and this is our claim."

"Where is your peg?" said Devlin.

"Where is yours?" replied Woolham, and the two men, passing out of the tent, observed that their peg had been removed. Examining Devlin's peg, they discovered it to be a replica of their own, put in the ground ten or fifteen feet away.

"Now where is your peg?" said Devlin.

"Come and I'll show you it," said the selector.

Lucky did not quite know what the next move was to be, but he was beginning to lean on the resource of the selector.

Leading the digger into the tent, Woolham pointed down to a peg driven in the ground by his bunk. Lucky remembered now that this peg had been made first. The second and better peg had been driven into the ground within the tent without any object at the time, but now the selector saw that it might be used to some purpose.

Turning to Devlin, he said, "We put two pegs down. This peg was first. You trespassed on our claim and removed one of our pegs—a crime, as you very well know, and I'll make you pay for it, too. Now I'll thank you to get out of my tent."

Devlin quailed before the selector's eye, and moved out of the tent. Standing in the opening, however, he put on an insinuating smile and said, "Look 'ere, Boss; I ain't a bad sort of a chap to deal with. You got gold an' I got gold at the same place; can't we come in together and share and share alike? I see you are going to say No. Well, then, I'll tell you what I'll do—I don't want to be 'ard on you. You give me a cheque and I'll pull up the sticks; then I'll leave the whole blooming show to you. Now what do you say to a cheque for £100? That ain't much when you are on gold."

"Go," said the selector, pointing to where the sons were cooking breakfast in the camp which they had hurriedly got together over night.

"Well, by God, if you won't speak me fair I'll make it hot for you—that I will!" said the digger, as he stalked off to his sons.

The selector and Lucky discussed the new situation as they prepared breakfast.

"I don't think they know anything about the gold," said the selector. "Did you notice the deep hole the boys have got dug down by the creek? I don't think there is gold in it. They want to get something out of us by bluff. But I'll tell you what I'll do. You go to the coach. We don't know what might happen, and that coach gets stuck up sometimes. I'll go on to Bingera with 'Last Resource' as soon as the coach leaves. If I get in first I'll leave a note at the Post Office, and you can go straight on to Munilla. If you get in first you leave a note for me. As you go to the coach, send Ah Toy up to the camp, and I'll pay him to stay here and keep a watch over these Devlins."

After breakfast Lucky went to wait for the coach, calling at Ah Toy's on the way. As he expected, old Devlin was waiting too, and they drove together towards Bingera.

Chapter XXVI.

"LAST RESOURCE" GOES ON A FORLORN HOPE.

"YOU wantee me, Boss?" said Ah Toy at the door of the tent.

"Yes," said Woolham. "I go to Bingera. I don't know when I shall be back. I want you to stay here. You see the Devlins over by the creek? I don't want them to come here. You stay here and look see. Savee? I pay you."

"All lite," said the cheerful Ah Toy.

"Now, then, 'Last Resource,'" said the selector, as he proceeded to harness the mare. "We shall see what you can do."

"Last Resource" had improved in condition wonderfully, though far from beautiful still.

Mindful of Patrickson's words, the two prospectors had seized every opportunity of getting forage for her, and she had repaid their care.

Shaking the reins out, the selector let her go, and she proceeded warily to find her way in and out among the trees down the hills to the road.

Before reaching Bingera the coach would change horses twice, but "Last Resource" would have to do the whole distance. But fortune favours the brave, and the wise, so Woolham took the mare quietly.

At midday he took her out of the shafts, and after a feed of corn, a roll and a drink, she was fit again. At night they reached Gibb's Crossing just after the coach had gone on. Woolham stayed there, fed and rubbed the horse down, and started again before daybreak.

What chance had he? There was the chance that the heavy coach might be delayed by the mud roads, where a light sulky might pass. Then, if he did not get to Bingera first, he could trust Lucky to leave no stone unturned. They had two chances. He would take for his motto, "Go softly."

Meanwhile, Lucky and Devlin rode together in the coach, a state of armed neutrality declared between them. But the ice melted, and Lucky did not resist the advances of Devlin.

He listened to his diplomatic speeches—listened hard, smiled, but gave no information in return.

They had meals together, and Lucky delayed him listening to pleasant yarns. There was no hurry. But the roads were getting heavier and heavier; it was certain that they could not run to time.

"What did it matter?" said Lucky. "Better be late than break the horses down."

"What did it matter?" echoed Devlin. "He was in no hurry."

"If we both travel together he cannot get to the Mining Warden first," thought Devlin. He knew nothing of "Last Resource" pacing gamely behind, and the man with the reins driving with the light sulky wisely and warily, walking when the horse had to climb the hills, considering the horse all the time, but gain-ing on the coach, too—all to the watchword "Go softly."

At Midhurst's Creek Lucky's hope of the selector passing them sank low, as he saw the groom leading out a particularly good change of horses.

"What have you got there?" said the driver, pointing with his whip to a fine spirited chestnut horse, which was hopping about as if it were on hot ashes.

"A real good bit of blood," said the groom. "Midhurst wants us to quieten him down a little."

"Oh, we'll quieten him, sure enough," said the driver, with satisfaction. It may be remarked here, that in many parts of New South Wales, horses are so cheap and horse-owners so foolish, that young half-broken horses are lent to the mail contractors to quieten.

What sort of schooling do these young, nervous horses get? Harnessed alongside old stagers, they drag the heavy coach over the awful roads, and, in their excitement, they often hurt themselves. With insufficient fodder—for it demands a state of grace that petty mail contractors who get their contracts by competitive tender do not always attain to, to feed another man's horse as well as they do their own—and more than sufficient whip, these young horses are *quietened.* Usually this means that in about a month the horse is returned to its owner bruised all over, and with its proud spirit broken for ever.

Off they went at a spanking pace, for all the three horses were good and the young horse was wild to go.

Within six miles of Bingera, when they were skirting the edge of a creek, along a sloppy muddy road, they came to a small landslip.

A culvert lay in front of them, and, at the other side of it, a great river-oak had fallen upon the road. The chestnut was needlessly pulling ahead of the other pole-horse in its dread of the biting lash of the driver, when it suddenly saw the great tree, which filled it with fear. When they were on the culvert, the frightened horse shrank back upon the swingle bar. It was an occasion for persuasive patience. The driver had no patience, however, but he had plenty of whip-lash and a choice vocabulary of expletives, and with a generous measure of both he struck the terror-stricken horse a cutting blow. In desperate madness the nervous horse made a great leap sideways, and in a second the coach had slipped over the culvert.

There it sank, hopelessly bogged and jammed among the fallen trees, whilst the maddened horse struggled to free itself, until it was hopelessly entangled among the harness, and stood still, with sides heaving until Lucky and Devlin released it from its plight.

Lucky threw no enthusiasm into the task of clearing away the fallen trees and making a slope up which the coach would have to be hauled.

The driver, whose ardour was now cooled, remarked that it was a good job that he had not any commercial travellers with him.

"They kick up an awful shindy if anything goes wrong."

It was whilst Lucky sauntered round, doing the wrong thing, that he noticed with satisfaction an old horse and a slender sulky, containing only the driver, winding in and out among the trees just on the skyline.

Lucky remarked, *sotto voce*, "Two to one on 'Last Resource,'" which appeared quite irrelevant and foolish to Devlin.

After a considerable delay the coach was drawn up on the road again, and with a chastened spirit the driver started his team, remarking as he did so, "I don't know what they give a chap these senseless colts for."

Considerably behind scheduled time the mail coach drew up at Bingera Post Office. Entering the building, Lucky received the expected note left by the selector, and, sauntering out again, he remarked to Devlin,

"This little accident is rather rough on me. It means that I shall have barely time to get a decent meal and a bath, and no chance of a sleep before going on again in the coach."

"Going on where?" said the mystified Devlin.

"Why, right on to Munilla; where else would you think?" said Lucky innocently.

The perplexed digger had only one word ready to express the situation, and he uttered it emphatically, though beneath his breath—"Euchred!"

As Lucky started off for the hotel, Devlin mentally resolved that the money he meant to lodge with his application at the Warden's office might be as well spent in a good long drink.

As yet the digger knew nothing about the old horse and the sulky which had passed the coach, but he had the wit to perceive that Lucky would not be leaving in the Munilla coach unless he knew that Devlin's game was up.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A LESSON IN TACTICS.

DEVLIN and Lucky proceeded together to the hotel, and there the mystery of his defeat was made plain to Devlin, for the first sight they saw was the groom of the hotel hosing the selector's sulky, whilst "Last Resource" was quietly feeding near by. Woolham himself was not in sight. At this revelation all the tiger in Devlin's nature was roused. His face was drawn with passion; he clenched his fists, and glared at Lucky with eyes full of hatred, and swore in many strange and fearful oaths that he would have to "pay for this."

Then he dived quickly into the hotel by the back door and called for brandy. Drinking it off neat and tossing the money on the counter, he left again to rejoin Lucky, who was patting "Last Resource."

"Now," he said, as he faced Lucky and stripped off his coat. "It's you and me for it."

The groom, a hard-faced individual with close-cropped bristling hair, stood between the men. A look of pleasant anticipation suffused his face. He was evidently willing and eager to assist at a function which was one after his own heart.

He wrung out his horse cloths in the water trough and spread them out on the fence, and plainly indicated by his look that he was ready to see fair play, to act as picker-up to the fallen, and afterwards assist in celebrating the victory with the conqueror at the bar, and, later, act as comforter to the vanquished at the same place. To him there was the promise of a "high old time." His experience probably told him that it meant fun and drinks.

"Yes," said the groom, "this is a quiet place. There is only one policeman here, and he is out of town, so you won't be disturbed."

What was Lucky to do? There was Devlin prancing in approved pugilistic fashion in front of him, and the miner, though an older man, was bigger than Lucky.

Moreover, Devlin was an ex-prize-fighter, whose constant conversation and boast was of the fights he had "put up" at various places and against various champions.

Devlin, stripped for the fight, was a picture of brutal efficiency. His great muscles stood out like steel rope. His sinews were like whipcord. Physically he was a colossal man, and he was active and lithe with it, as anyone could see as he stood before Lucky and "put up his hands" in the manner approved of the fancy.

As for Lucky, like Wellington at Waterloo, he looked at the enemy and longed for Blucher. Yes! we may guess that something like a momentary spasm of fear assailed his heart. The presence even of the selector would have been sustaining, but he was nowhere in sight.

But if Lucky was somewhat fearful he did not show it. His association with Woolham had confirmed him in the habit of coolness and nerve, and he looked Devlin up and down nonchalently and said to himself, "I'm not going to let this great beast and his prize-fighter antics get me flurried."

"Look here, Devlin," he said, "you know very well I am no pugilist."

"You're no man, either!" roared the miner. "Neither is your blank partner. Come on, you blank cow."

"Well," said Lucky innocently, "I warn you that I can't box, and you must not complain afterwards if I do not put up a fight according to the proper rules."

This was such a curious thing to say that even Devlin paused in his oaths to smile sardonically.

"Come on!" he roared again. "Stand up to it."

"Very well, fire away," said Lucky, putting his hat on the fence, but not even troubling to take his coat off.

So ignorant was Lucky of the science of boxing that he did not even know how "to shape." He just stood quite still opposite Devlin with his fists held in front of him. Devlin was not long in getting to work. With gracefulness and dexterity he began to make feints and lunges at the apparently helpless Lucky, who was forced to retreat slowly towards a stony rise in the stable-yard, the very place, probably, where Devlin wanted to get him before he delivered the knock-out blow on the point of the jaw. And a blow from that great fist was to be feared.

Devlin had touched him once or twice already, and a red bruise on Lucky's forehead showed where Devlin's fist had glanced off.

But a certain train of thought was crystallising in Lucky's mind. He was using his brains; his eye was focussed to its lightning keenness, and to say the least he was getting very angry. He was beginning to feel that he would like to kill the monster who sparred to get an opening in his imperfect defence, and in whose eye he could see the red purpose of the savage.

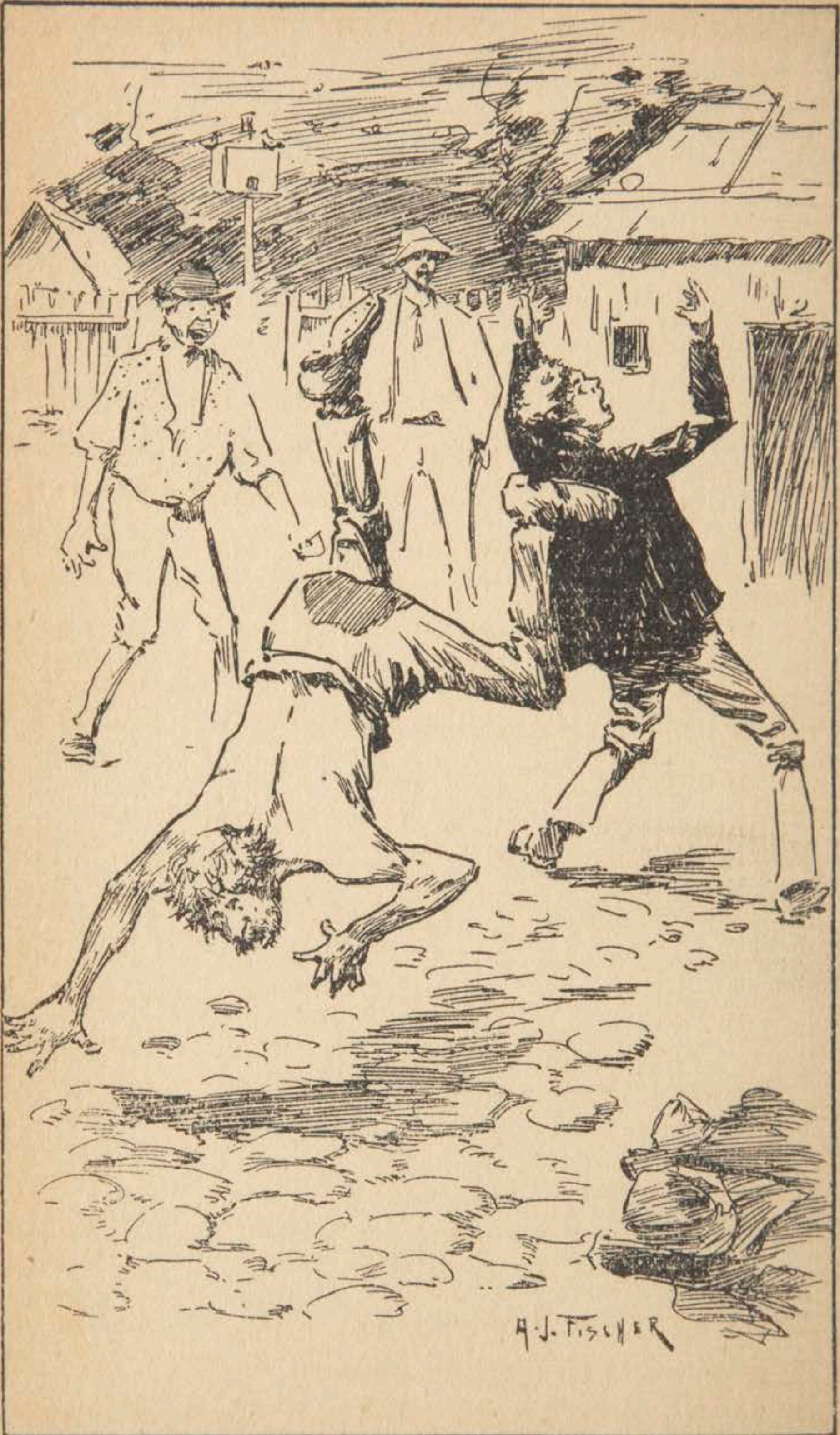
Then Devlin hauled off, but Lucky dodged, and the knock-out blow, though it came with staggering force, only caught him on the shoulder.

Lucky's blood was up when Devlin fiercely came on again. Both men dodged in and out, and at last Devlin made the supreme effort; but a strange thing happened, for Lucky ducked instinctively, and ran at his gigantic opponent with his head low. It was not the approved science perhaps, but it was all Lucky knew, and the momentum of Devlin's knock-out blow carried him over his smaller antagonist, and, in a second, the pugilist was lifted and hurled with cruel force over Lucky's head, falling amongst the hard stones with a painful crash.

"Blow me," said the admiring groom, as he went to the assistance of Devlin, "I never saw anything like that before."

Cut, bruised, and bleeding, Devlin sat up among the stones, feeling a great lump which was rising on the back of his head and swearing hard.

The groom was fanning him with a damp horse cloth in the approved fashion of the ring, whilst he jerked



HE WAS HURLED WITH CRUEL FORCE OVER LUCKY'S HEAD.

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out expressions of surprise and admiration of the novel move which had finished the first round.

Going to the water trough to cool his forehead, which was more or less bruised, Lucky saw for the first time a spectator. It was the selector, who had been for some time calmly looking on.

"Where did you learn that funny way of fighting, Lucky?" said Woolham.

"Playing football—in the scrum," was the reply.

"Well, there is not much in it," replied Woolham, who, like most Englishmen, was something of a boxer. "If you fail once, you are done. He will learn to stop you by and bye, if you don't happen to knock him out first. Take my advice and use your hands. He is not much of a pugilist after all. I have been watching him. His pugilism, like his mining, is largely made up of bluff."

"I never could fight properly," said Lucky. "I don't seem to like to hit a man fair in the face."

The selector smiled at Lucky's simplicity, and added, "Never mind trying to save your face or his, now. He is considerably rattled, as the Yankees say; all you have to do is to go for him with your hands; hit him everywhere at once; give him no time; follow him up."

"I'll try," said Lucky; "but I fear I shall have to be like McDougall when he topped the score, I'll have to 'play 'im with my 'ed.'"

However, Lucky had the sense to strip off for the remaining rounds of the combat.

His white flesh shone in the sun, his firm muscles, instinct with virility, drawn tight for the approaching effort.

Lucky had some dark bruises on his body, but he still had the broad smile upon his face. It is useless to fight with a man who fights smiling—he never knows when he is beaten.

Devlin changed his tactics now, for he was not to be caught napping a second time; so he prepared a swift upper cut for Lucky if he should duck his head again. But that particular upper cut for which the ex-prize-fighter manœuvred never eventuated, for Lucky did not duck this time. He sparred in an uncertain sort of way, and even managed to hit his opponent on the neck.

But he had no time to congratulate himself, for a stunning blow on the chest sent him reeling to the fence.

It was all he could do to stand up to Devlin now, who rained blows upon him at all points. But Lucky had allies that he was unaware of, for the brandy the older man had imbibed did not conduce either to clearness of head or to sustained vigour. The main spring was beginning to go slack.

Lucky could stand punishment better than his opponent, and occasionally he managed to return Devlin's fierce blows in kind. We learn from our enemies.

Lucky saw that he was not the equal of his assailant in rapid manœuvre. He would have to fall back on strategy. Lucky through life had always been able to retire gracefully—a difficult accomplishment.

Choosing the best ground, he now stepped back before Devlin's fierce onslaughts, taking twice as many hard knocks as he was able to give. When he did get an opening, however, he went for Devlin with a will. But as Devlin followed him up he lost strength rapidly, owing to the very energy of his attack and the brilliancy of his sparring. Moreover, he was carried away with the thought that he was winning, and renewed the attack with more ferocity and success, driving Lucky before him almost to the fence. Lucky now roused himself to almost superhuman effort, and indifferent to cruel blows he rushed into close quarters and bore the older man before him with the energy of unconquered youth, until at last Devlin stumbled and fell.

The old fighter resigned himself once more to the ministrations of the groom.

"Don't worry," said the selector to his comrade. "It's all up now. He is done like a dinner. My only advice to you is the advice the waiter gave to David Copperfield, 'Go in and win.' Don't hurry; wait, and as soon as you get a chance, hit him hard."

Meanwhile the presence of the selector had roused Devlin once more to fury, and again he fiercely attacked Lucky, whose tactics had improved to the extent of moving his fists in and out like the twin piston-rods of an engine.

When, however, Devlin again advanced for the knock-out blow, Lucky could not help reverting to his old method, but he improved it to this extent—that while he ducked his head and rushed in he managed by a wild flail-like movement of his arms, to meet his enemy's head. It was a double move, a mixture of the old style and the new, and, fortunately, it was a success.

Lucky's head knocked the breath out of Devlin's big body, while one of his fists met him fairly between the eyes, and the great miner was hurled backward with a thud to the ground. Lucky just barely recovered himself from falling. Taking his position again, he saw that Woolham was shaking with laughter. No doubt it was a strange sort of a fight for a trained boxer to behold. The selector's laughter probably aroused both men. With tigerish ferocity, Devlin, who by this time had been severely punished, rushed at Lucky, who now began to hit out in every direction. He gave the bigger man no pause; he followed him from point to point, hitting him anywhere and everywhere as he could; giving and taking many a hard knock, until at last the ex-prize-fighter simply collapsed.

"I'm done," said Devlin; "but it has been a fair go."

There the big bully sat upon the ground, whilst the indefatigable groom wiped the blood off his face with horse cloths and fanned him. Lucky washed his swollen face and donned his clothes, while the selector congratulated him.

After Devlin had somewhat recovered, he staggered to his feet and said, " 'Ere, I met a better man; shake 'ands on it an' come 'an 'ave a drink."

The groom, by the look of expectation which wreathed his hard face, evidently shared Devlin's fraternal spirit; but his hopefulness was somewhat damped when Lucky stared at Devlin as though he had never seen him before, and replied,

"No, I'll drive in the same coach with you when there is no other, I'll fight with you when I have to, but a team of bullocks would not drag me to drink with you."

"Never mind, sir," said the obsequious groom, "I am not a proud chap; I don't mind 'aving a shandy-gaff with you."

"He is certainly, as he says, not a very proud chap," said the selector, as he looked after the groom, who, linked arm in arm, was leading Devlin to the bar. Lucky and Woolham, thoroughly hungry, after their strange day's work, made their way to the dining room. Later, Lucky, with his beauty somewhat marred, left in the coach for Munilla.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GOLD CAP.

ON the return of Lucky with Patrickson, the selector began to get things into something like order at the mine, which he had named "The Gold Cap."

By building a water race they diverted the creek for the purpose of washing their dirt, and under Patrickson's wise supervision they got the gold in a more up-to-date and systematic way. It ran to something like half an ounce to the load, and there seemed to be a good area of the hillside gold-bearing.

The three were, of course, in undisputed possession of the claim.

Something like a rush had set in to Golden Gully. With the advent of the miners, regular visits from the mounted police began, and as such circumstances were very unfavourable to the industry of the Devlins, they took the road for fresh fields and pastures new.

Strangely enough, with the discovery of the gold the selector's enthusiasm waned. His pride and his heart were at Gilga, and he only valued the means afforded by the "Gold Cap" for the opportunity the increased wealth gave him of developing his selection and completing the white house. How the garden and orchard of the homestead might be improved was a frequent theme of his conversation. The dams he would construct, the model silo he would build—these were the topics he daily discussed with his partners.

Lucky's enthusiasm, however, increased; indeed, he was built for money making more than the selector, although it goes without saying that Woolham welcomed the independence which financial success brought daily nearer.

The three men were pestered with company promoters. "For wheresoever the carcase is there will the eagles be gathered together."

While there is a useful sphere for the enterprise of the bona fide speculator, it is well known that the goldfields are haunted by a species of huckster whose field of operation is the gullibility of the in-haste-to-get-rich public, rather than the potentiality of nature waiting for its development by the intelligent labour of man.

These company promoters put all sorts of methods before the three men by which the mine was to be floated, partly on its own prospects and possibilities and partly on the blind faith of those who are always anxious to enter any gamble which promises phenomenal returns.

The selector had only one answer to this class of speculator.

"Look here, gentlemen," he said to one group, "one bird in our hand is worth two in your bush. We are here to make money, and we reckon this mine is only worth what you are willing to give us in cash for it. This is not a capitalist's enterprise; the mine does not need great expenditure in plant or new exploration; but, if you think so, you are welcome to try; only you must come to us with cash, not paper, and you must not expect us to come in with you in an effort to create expectations in the public mind for which we see no guarantee of realisation.''

The selector wrote to Bessie telling her the story of ''their visit to the dentist'' and its success.

''I believe there is a great fortune awaiting some man,'' he said, ''at Golden Gully; but I fancy it is not in the gold but the copper; however, it is not for me, but for a man of more technical knowledge and experience, who will have to move the authorities to extend the railway in this direction, so as to reduce the traction. This is sure to come some day, and, if coal were discovered somewhat near (Gunnedah is the nearest place where it may be obtained now), the problem would be solved. Sometimes I have been tempted to launch myself upon the enterprise, but I fear its delays and risks, and—Gilga draws me. There I have an immediate ambition, which, if smaller, is more satisfying to me. Wheat and wool are the materials of which I must make my career. I am a selector, and have chosen my vocation. Sometimes when I sit at the door of our tent in the twilight and see the great mountain of copper looming in front, I seem to see the skirts of Dame Fortune trailing across its heights, but I turn from the vision and its temptation, for Gilga, and all that Gilga means to me, draws more surely, and I say, 'Ah! Fortune, some other man must woo thee.' I am like Raleigh when he wrote upon the window pane:

'Fain would I climb but that I fear to fall,'

and the Lady Fortune seems to reply, in the language of Queen Bess:

'If thine heart fail thee do not climb at all.'

"I believe there are other things than mere money in this world worth living for, such as home, peace, love, the esteem of neighbours, and the consciousness of doing something to make the landscape more beautiful, and life the better worth living. It is not given to all men to live in history, but all may live in the hearts of those around them."

Closing his letter, Woolham wondered if Bessie would understand. Little he knew about women, to doubt that Bessie knew all the time that she was the loadstone drawing him back—back from the prospect of great fortune, back to Gilga and all that he wanted Gilga to be—her home and his.

But there was something else to draw him away from Golden Gully. He had news of the departure of his people from England for Australia. They were coming out via India, where they were to pay a visit to his father's youngest brother, who was in the Indian Civil Service.

This meant that the selector must hasten home to complete the homestead internally, and furnish it suitably for the entertainment of his own folks. Meanwhile Patrickson and Lucky were well able to manage things at "Golden Cap." It was inevitable that sooner or later a good offer would be made for the mine if it continued to yield.

The three friends were prepared to sell, though they were determined to keep clear of the fictitious schemes of company promoters.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE OYSTER AND THE PEARL.

THE selector's father was delighted with Gilga, but the impressions of the rest of the family were of various sorts. Mrs. Woolham, a fresh-looking and sweet lady whom no one would dream of calling old, though she was of an age when most Australian women begin to confess to being at least no longer young, could not reconcile herself to all the neighbours being miles away.

Laura, a dignified typical English girl of open-air persuasions, thought it was "just lovely," but where was the society without which life, even amidst pleasant surroundings, was but a one-sided affair, especially to a pretty girl of twenty years' experience?

Her brother pointed to the tennis court, and reminded her that there were horses and vehicles, and these things in New South Wales meant society, but her reply was difficult to parry.

"Yes, I admit that we may have a family game of tennis, but you don't seem to have used your tennis court much till we arrived upon the scene. You speak of a mysterious hero of yours whom you call 'Lucky' who is learning tennis. Then there is another mysterious person, evidently an amiable old gentleman called Patrickson, who, I understand, lives in that pretty farm on the way to the township—we would be satisfied at home to call it a village—of Gum Flat.

"You make no secret, however, of the fact that the old gentleman really despises tennis.

"There are young people at the big homestead of Ringari, but I infer that these people stand in something like the same relation to you as the blue-blooded aristocracy at home do to the villagers—that is, they do not often condescend to you. You have introduced us to some people at Gum Flat, but you admit that their social ambitions are bounded by the meeting at church services once a month, an annual visit to the Agricultural Show in Sydney, an occasional hare-drive, and perhaps a race meeting once in a while—all of which contains little promise of society for us."

"Yes," said Edgar, who somewhat sympathised with his sister and longed for company, "I should be inclined to say in the language of Gum Flat, 'I don't believe there ain't such a person' as either Lucky or Patrickson. We hear of their strange wisdom and wonderful exploits, but we have not had a sight of the heroes yet."

Edgar, who was just seventeen years old, had rural ambitions, and had already made arrangements for a term at the Hawkesbury Agricultural College, where he would have both company and the chance of experience.

Harold, the selector's youngest brother, had no doubts about the desirability of Gilga. Life there to him was unadulterated joy. The horses, cattle, and sheep were material for daily interest, and he followed all the details of wool growing and wheat farming with unabated enthusiasm.

Already he dreaded the day when his people would take up their residence in a Sydney suburb, for this was the programme which had evolved from the frequent discussions of the selector and his father.

The day and the necessity for hard work on the part of Woolham senior had gone past. In Sydney he would be able to fill in his time acting as agent for the selector and his partner, Lucky.

Whilst Edgar at Hawkesbury College would not be far from home, Harold was to complete his education at Newington, and Laura, too, in Sydney could perfect herself in those accomplishments the attainment of which is not easy in the bush.

The happy days passed amid new and pleasant surroundings for the united family. There was much for the selector to do, for he had the oversight of Eureka as well as Gilga, and the joint business of himself and Lucky required much attention.

His father accompanied him on his rounds in the sulky, and, whenever he rode, his brothers eagerly sallied forth at the risk of life and limb on the Gilga horses, which were more lively than those to which they had been accustomed in the old country.

As for Laura, her adventures on horseback were strictly confined to riding lessons, for she was entirely a novice on horseback, besides being somewhat nervous.

In the evening there were long talks of the old land and the old friends there, and of the new land and its new prospects.

When all the others had retired, the selector and his father would sit, pipe in hand, on the moonlit verandah, talking things over.

During these long satisfying confidences Woolham senior learnt to adjust himself to his son's outlook, and he began to form a truer estimate of life and its possibilities in Australia.

"There can be no question," he said one night, "that Australia offers a better chance for a young man to establish himself than the old country. Here there is still room, and while vast tracts of land remain unoccupied, a competence, if not a fortune, is within the reach of every enterprising and persevering young man.

"You are, however, execrably governed, as there appears to be little real patriotism in your politics. In fact, here politics is not regarded as a vocation, but purely as business.

"It seems to me that a man goes into politics not so much for a career as to make money at the game.

"Thank God, it is different in the old land. There is some excuse for the existence of an aristocracy which gives its wealth and social status to the building up of the Empire.

"We have our faults, but still there is something in the political life of old England which is not paralleled in any country in the world, not even in the over-rated democratic United States nor in our own Colonies.

"Notwithstanding these things, Australia is a fine field for young life.

"Compare your case and my own. I began life favourably, my parents giving me a good start, and as a farmer in a big way (for England) I have succeeded fairly well. But what have I done? I have done fairly well for my family in the way of education and providing them with a good home; but you have done much better financially in a few years than I have done in a lifetime.

"You have done more than your Uncle John in India has done in two decades, though he holds a good position. What surprises me is that Australia has so many detractors, even amongst its own people."

"You must remember, father," rejoined the selector, "I am one of the lucky ones. Australia has its share of failures."

"But I notice," said Woolham senior, "that every township, however small, has its group of lucky ones."

"Australia," continued the selector, "is like an oyster on the rocks. Many who pass by notice the oyster; some linger for awhile to try and dislodge it, but, finding that it clings hard, they soon give up the attempt and go on their way. A new-comer notices the oyster, and with some difficulty succeeds in dragging it off the rock, but, finding that the effort to open it means cut fingers, gives up the task in his impatience and goes away complaining. At last one comes who, seeing the oyster clinging to the rocks, attacks it determinedly, and, after much labour and many scratches, wrenches it open, and discovers therein a pearl of great price. Now, I am the odd man who has discovered the pearl. Remember, I toiled for more than a year and earned nothing but experience; then for a considerable time I looked for land, and, at last, when I had almost relinquished the quest, I found it unexpectedly—I had got the oyster off the rock. Then, after hard work and some privation, I managed to open the oyster and find the pearl.''

''Yes,'' said Woolham senior. ''In spite of your good luck, I am convinced that men of real grit, men who hang on to their purpose tenaciously, will usually succeed in opening the oyster and possessing the pearl of your parable.

''Take your great difficulty—drought. You wouldn't seriously assert, would you, that it is more difficult to provide against drought than it is for us at home, or for the farmers in Canada, to provide against our long and severe winters? Moreover, we have our winters every year, but you do not have your droughts oftener than say every five years.''

''That is a very difficult question,'' replied the selector. ''It is the next problem I shall try to solve, and the first key I shall use is called Silo.''

CHAPTER XXX.

A RIDE TO VICTORY.

THE "Gold Cap" showed signs of petering out, and, a fair offer having been made for the property, the selector readily agreed to its sale, and Lucky and Patrickson were accordingly on their way home.

Woolham was quite eager to see them, and suggested that Laura should accompany him in the sulky to meet them, and that young lady, eager to see her brother's friends, readily consented. She had formed her own ideas as to what sort of men they would be, but she was doomed to disappointment, for she had yet to learn that the Australian in the bush is a distinct type. He is many removes from the "John Ploughman" type of English farmer, for he combines within himself the characteristics of the adventurous pioneer and the shrewdness of the business man, and often something of the polish of the gentleman—at least, this is so in the North-West.

The selector calculated that they might meet the returning prospectors somewhere about Ringari. The cob rattled along at a good pace, and within a few miles of Ringari gate, the prospectors' sulky, drawn by "Last Resource," was discerned in the distance. The two men had not the appearance of successful speculators whose bank credit was pretty solid, for they had just stepped out of their rough work, and, glad to get home, had driven without any unnecessary delay towards Gilga.

Patrickson's beard was more unkempt than ever, and Lucky's tonsorial ability had not reached so far as to cut his own hair, although he was shaved clean. His long curly locks burst the bonds of his slouch hat, and gave him a dishevelled, bushwhacker appearance. The whole ensemble, completed by the worn-out sulky and the scraggy mare, was distinctly shabby.

"Why," said Laura, "your heroes are wild men of the woods, and your young friend is the more barbaric of the two."

"Welcome home," said the selector, pulling his sulky up alongside the shabby turnout and reaching across the dash-board to shake hands. "How are you both?"

"Pretty well," replied Patrickson heartily, shaking Woolham by the hand.

Lucky had eyes only for Laura, who presented a vision which we may say at once appealed to him, and not in vain, for admiration. There was just a touch of proud restraint in Laura's greeting, when they were introduced, for she was really disappointed in the appearance of her brother's bosom friends; but she had yet to learn that in Australia, and most of all in the bush, it is never safe to judge by appearances.

The old sulky, having finished its useful life, was returned to its bark shed, and "Last Resource," having crowned an honourable career by heroically responding to the call of crisis, resumed its leisurely existence in one of the richest paddocks of Eureka.

Patrickson and Lucky, having resumed the habits and clothes of a higher civilisation, foregathered that night at Gilga, where the old farmer at once struck up a friendship with Woolham senior.

The selector's brothers found the returned prospectors quite up to their expectations, Lucky from the start being quite a favourite. Even Laura had to readjust her estimate of the young man as she saw him in the drawing-room of the White House.

I don't think that in these pages Lucky's appearance has been portrayed since we saw him as that strangely fathered baby.

On his return from gold mining even Woolham could not but observe a most pleasing development in his protégé. Lucky was really a rather handsome fellow, a true type of the real Australian of the better class. He was slightly beyond the average in height, upright as a sapling, lithe and strong of limb. His merry face was tanned to a healthy brown, for his skin was of that sort which the sun tans without freckling. His contact with Woolham had improved his speech. But the interest and excitement of gold digging, combined with a certain air of independence, had had a wonderful effect in the development of a manly character, which would never have been expected by those who knew the "rock from which he had been hewn." Moreover, the company of Patrickson at Golden Gully had opened up a new vista to his mind, for Patrickson had introduced him to Shakespeare, and had taught him something of the literature and poetry of his own land. Under these influences, combined with a recognition of moral sanctions and some religious aspirations which Lucky had possessed from boyhood, and which had been strengthened by the influence and friendship of that ideal back-block parson, Mr. Donald, Lucky might now be said to have come to his kingdom. He lived, and that means more than existence. His horizon had widened and his sympathies had deepened, and now, standing on the threshold of manhood, "he looked the whole world in the face, for he feared not any man." But it could not be truthfully said that he feared not any woman. He feared one, at least, and that was Laura. He had more than fear for her; he loved her, though as yet he knew it not, and it would be a long while before his love would become articulate.

Laura would have to be brought to fear him somewhat before their love story could even open. Then, afterwards, on both sides perhaps, perfect love would cast out fear. To see Lucky in the heart of a crisis, to discern then his native fortitude, to begin to trust him and look up to him, would be a healthy experience for the English girl, for all women love best those who can command them.

This phase of Laura's education was soon to be reached.

They were out riding together; for Laura was eager to become an equestrienne.

Exhilarated by a splendid morning and good soft bush tracks, both the riders and the horses were in high feather, when suddenly the thump, thump of a motor was heard in the distance, a noise which never fails to fill horses that are unused to it with panic.

It was Dr. Sanderson hurrying out to a patient at Gum Flat on his motor-bicycle. Laura's horse, a young roan of some blood began to prance about excitedly, and she herself swiftly descended from self confidence to anxiety, and from anxiety to fear. In vain Lucky urged her to "hold him steady." Laura couldn't, for she couldn't hold herself steady. Doubt and fear in the rider quickly and mysteriously communicates itself to the horse; for probably there is no other animal so sensitive to hypnotic suggestions. After prancing and rearing until poor Laura's hat and hair and nerves were shaken loose, the animal at last got the bit between its teeth and went off in a determined bolt.

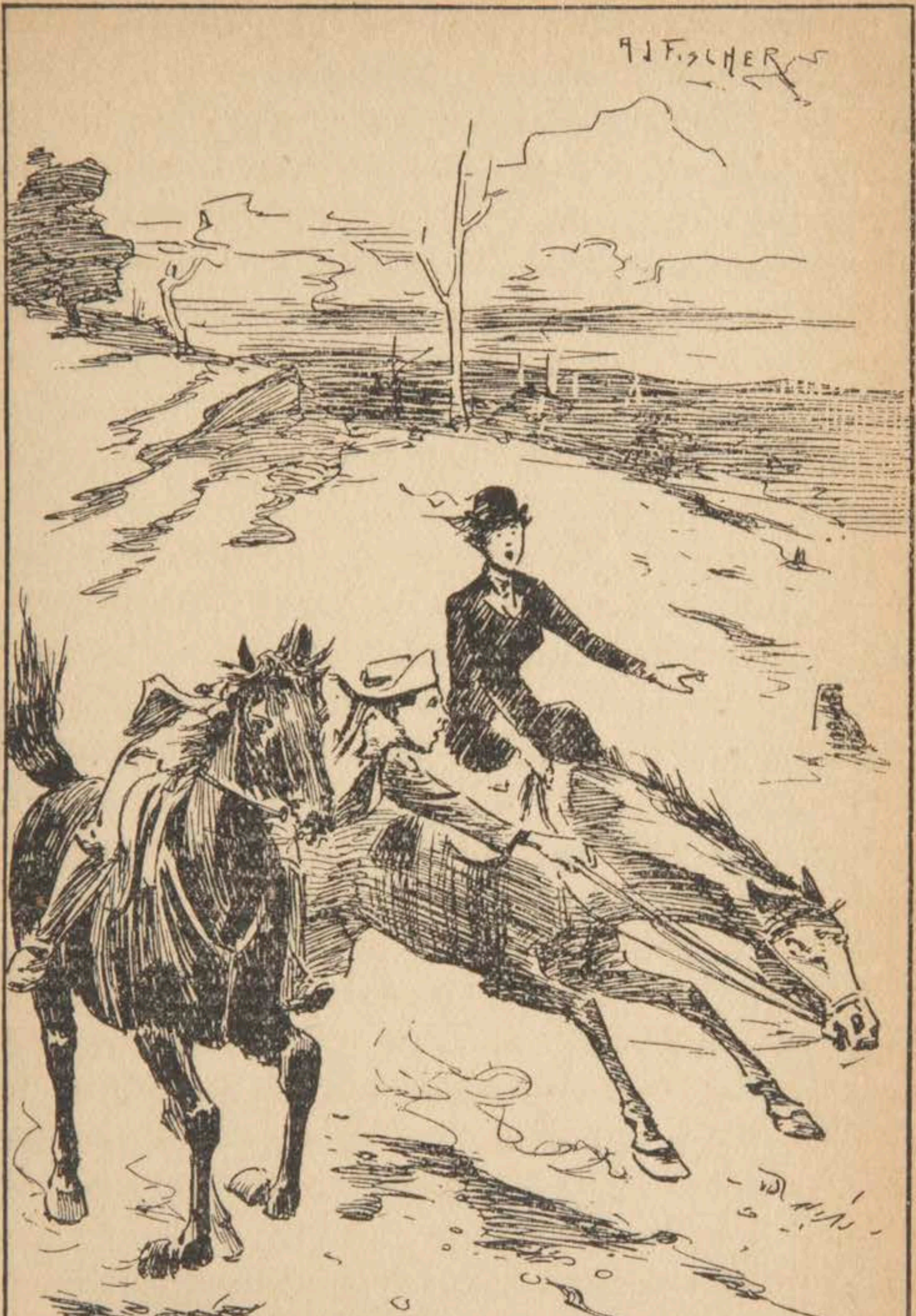
Lucky, holding his own horse with iron grip, kept immediately behind, but now he saw that it was impossible for Laura to control the brute, for she clung to the saddle in a state of helpless collapse, and, should the horse shy away from any obstruction, there was no telling what might happen.

Lucky put his own horse to its speed, and was soon alongside Laura; then he dexterously reached over and seized the reins which Laura was holding limply.

But every time he tried to stop the galloping horse it sprang away from him in a way calculated to unseat Laura, whose hold was very insecure. Lucky saw that it would have to be a long pull and a strong pull, and the rider would have to control herself, for they were coming to a dangerous gully.

"Pull yourself together," he called out to the girl, who hung loosely in the saddle. "There is no danger if you can take hold of yourself."

But Laura had given up hope, and evidently was expecting the worst. I really think that Lucky got a little angry. Perhaps being so much at home in the



LUCKY REACHED OVER AND SEIZED THE REINS.

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saddle, and naturally cool in times of crisis, he was unable to understand the difficulty of another.

"Here! you are an English girl, are you not?" he cried. "You must not give in. Get hold of him again. He is all right."

His words stung Laura to action, and, shooting him a look of indignation, she roused herself from the torpor of fear, and, again taking charge of the reins, she straightened herself in the saddle. Whatever was to happen, she would show this "wild man of the woods" who had appealed to her courage that she was no hysterical girl collapsing at the first sign of danger.

"Keep him on the safe road," said Lucky, as they raced together down the bush track leading to the gully.

What a superb figure Lucky was on horseback! Like a veritable Centaur he sat his horse as though horse and rider were one. She noticed, too, how skilfully he managed his horse, so that her fiery mount was forced to take the safer part of the road. Something of the intoxication of battle entered into her veins. Her eyes glowed wih the same courage which leads men to the cannon's mouth, and wins a V.C. amid the smoke of battle and the hail of bullets. If she could command this horse she would never fear another. So they raced together towards the gully and its danger, the man guiding his own horse skilfully with firm grip and sure eye, the girl with hair and hat flying in the breeze and with eyes sparkling with excitement, but with lips and hands closed firmly in determination. And now they were almost at the foot of the rough gully. A little creek full of stones lay at the bottom of the gully.

"Rise with him when he jumps," said Lucky, forcing his own horse to the front to show the way. Then Lucky's horse rose gracefully to the leap, and over it went. How she managed it Laura did not quite know, but, rising with the horse, she safely reached the opposite bank, and a pleasant feeling of victory filled her heart as her horse came alongside Lucky's; for she felt now that, with a hill and a soft track before her, the danger was past.

"He is all right now," said Lucky. "He'll soon quieten down. You did splendidly."

Soon the horses dropped into an easy canter, and Lucky and the girl, thoroughly thankful, turned towards home.

Lucky was uncertain whether Laura would forgive him for "bouncing her," but with natural tact he said nothing about the adventure.

As for Laura, she cast many a side glance at Lucky as he rode unconcernedly by her side, as though such escapades were the ordinary incidents of the day's work, and she realised that here was a man whose character had been developed to a fine edge of heroism amidst the dangers of the bush. He was a man upon whom one might lean for help and follow for guidance.

When the time at last came for the Woolhams to turn citywards, the selector and Patrickson regretted the severance; but Lucky recognised that when the train steamed out of Munilla Railway Station for the metropolis his heart went with it.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A WALLABY DRIVE AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

THERE was quite a large party gathered at Ringari, for the week's merrymaking was to end with a wallaby drive. The wallabies were certainly getting inconveniently numerous, and there was probability of good sport. Half the party were to beat up towards the boundary between Ringari and Gilga, where it was thought that the wallabies might be got within range of the shooters posted at the other side of the valley.

The whole business was a great bore to Bessie Stuart. She liked tennis, riding, rambling, golf, and other forms of outdoor sport, but she loathed shooting wallabies.

Although it was heresy in a squatter's daughter to say so, in her heart Bessie loved every living thing in the bush, even to that multitudinous nuisance, the rabbit.

Whilst admitting the gravity of the situation from a pastoralist's standpoint, Bessie could not help yielding to the spell of the sight, whenever, as she rode through the bush, she saw a group of young rabbits playing among the fallen trees. On her approach they would rush with nervous folly into imagined security, and then sit down in fear.

She had caught one sometimes, and, feeling its whole furry body quivering with fear beneath her hand, had let it go again. As for paddymelons, opossums, bears, and wallabies, she simply loved to see them, and never enjoyed the sight of their death, much as her father and brothers desired it. The visitors from Sydney staying at Ringari had no such sensitiveness in regard to the sport of wallaby hunting. They could have tennis and golf at home, but a wallaby drive was only possible in the bush, so there was much excitement in prospect of the event.

There was another cause for Bessie's lack of interest in the wallaby hunt.

She was getting tired of the attentions of Eric Walters, a solicitor from the city, and in many respects a good fellow. Evidently, with the full, if tacit, approval of the rest of the Stuart family, with whom he was a favourite, Walters was paying court to Bessie, in a sort of self-satisfied and over-confident way. Walters was perhaps somewhat spoilt. Good looking, of good family and prospects, he had received much of that social attention from mothers of marriageable daughters—not to speak of the interest that the said daughters themselves had taken in him—which is calculated to give a young man a good conceit of himself.

Eric was, to say the least, very fond of Bessie's company.

He was more in love with her than he himself as yet knew.

Perhaps it only needed some opposition or difficulty to emerge to rouse him to a grand passion for her—

for man always follows the apparently unattainable with the greatest zeal.

But Bessie was tired of his worn-out compliments and conventional, though smart, phrases, which, obviously, had done duty before.

No knight-errant would ever be allowed to take conquest for granted with Bessie; she would be wooed before she was won.

This thought had not as yet penetrated the egotism of Eric Walters.

Bessie was well-nigh certain, too, that Walters was not the knight-errant she desired to see enter the lists, however popular he might be with her family or desirable in himself. Indeed, she would have been sorry to see the young man more in earnest, and she made no effort to carry the outworks of his conceit, for she was no vulgar head-hunter, desiring, as so many girls do, to bring as many men as possible up to the point of proposal, in order to add them to her list of slaves or victims.

With much merriment the party started from the homestead, and Bessie found Eric Walters as usual by her side.

After two or three exciting gallops the party entered the scrub.

Walters was just as nice as he could be, but Bessie was in a mood which made her ungrateful even for his pleasant company, and she wickedly resolved to rid herself of the necessity of seeing the slaughter of the innocents, as she called the wallabies, and the company of Walters at the same time. How could she manage it?

Perhaps she could contrive to get lost, or lose him. She had the advantage of knowing the bush thoroughly, and joining the party for the return home, or returning home alone, would be easy of explanation—for a woman. If she could get away, it would not be easy for him to get the others to give up their wallaby hunting to seek her, for her brothers would laugh at the idea of her being lost, and say, "Oh, leave Bess alone; she is all right. She knows the bush as well as we do."

She would try it. How glorious it would be to have a day or even half a day entirely to one's self in the bush after all the company and entertaining of the week. With this project in view, she made a detour to the side of a hill, which took them away from the rest of the company, who were now spread out in such a ragged line as the nature of the bush compelled. Nothing loth, and quite unsuspecting, Walters offered no objection.

Bessie then began mockingly to question Walters' bushcraft. He might know his way through the labyrinth of the law courts, but she would not care to trust him as a guide in strange country! Ere long, when they found themselves among some fairly close scrub in a little gorge, she said:

"Now where would you suppose the others to be?"

"Over there to the left," said Walters, pointing in the right direction.

"And how would you find your way to them—up which side of the hill? I have my own opinion," she continued, "of their whereabouts, and I'll undertake to reach them sooner than you."

"Agreed," said Walters, turning his horse to the left, whilst Bessie turned her horse to the right of the little hill before them, with great apparent eagerness. As soon, however, as Walters was out of sight, she slackened her speed, and, with smiling satisfaction, contemplated the thought that for a little time at least she was free. Walters would find the others and wait for her; and "He may wait," she ejaculated beneath her breath.

Bessie rode on amid the glories of the bush. The gay-plumaged parrots flitted all around; the ground parrot in his bright dress of green; the rosella in red and green darted hither and thither, and a wise looking 'quarion in his robe of sober grey gazed meditatively down upon her from an apple tree. She noticed the bright blush of pink upon his cheeks; then came the long pure note from the throat of the little grey bird as he looked at her so seriously from his perch above.

"Oh, you little preacher," she said. "You are rebuking me, I know, for my deceitful conduct. But you need not blush so pink for me. Remember, sir, you are free, and you do not know the longing which we poor humans sometimes feel for just the freedom which you possess."

Now she came to a little billabong, and, dismounting, she let her horse graze around with the reins trailing on the ground, as a precaution against his escape, whilst she enjoyed the sandwiches which she had, with feminine forethought, packed in the pocket of her saddle.

Quite a new world waiting for exploration lay before her.

A kingfisher poised himself gracefully on a fallen log.

Should she move, away he would fly. She sat perfectly still and admired the little wonder of blue and green relieved by the golden copper colour which no artist can reproduce.

"Strange it is," reflected Bessie, "though I have often seen his majesty the kingfisher, I have never seen him with a fish in his mouth. There he is with a dirty worm. I suppose he will carry it away to his numerous family."

Like a flash the bird darted away, probably to verify her thoughts by providing the dinner, which, in the case of a kingfisher's family, seems to go on all day long, so hungry, or greedy, are they.

A splash in the water attracted her attention to a little deep pool formed by rocks in the little creek. War had been declared against a peaceful community of minnows by a water-rat. Bessie sat quite still and, fascinated, watched the cruel sport.

Sir Water Rat dived into the creek right in front of the little school of minnows, which he proceeded to drive as though they had been sheep and he the sheep dog.

There was no breaking past the marauder. He was a veritable concentration of vicious energy and agility.

Did a small column break away from either flank of the main body of minnows, this way or that, he was there, and, having at last thoroughly terrorised them, he herded them securely in the pool. There he watched them, evidently gloating with satisfaction at the success of his manœuvres.

By and by he began to approach the frightened fish stealthily. At this Bessie's interest caused her to rise, and Sir Water Rat himself took flight and swam away, releasing the minnows, which scattered in every direction.

Mud-larks went to and fro on their obviously urgent business undeterred by Bessie as she sat quietly in that sylvan spot, and a happy family of "Twelve Apostles" noisily flitted about, whilst a soldier-bird stood stiffly to attention!

Wrens and honey-birds could be seen amongst the wattles, with all their delicate tints; and Bessie reflected that it was only in the artificial institutions of mankind that the female is found assuming the brighter raiment. Throughout nature, and particularly among the birds, it is the male who puts on the fine feathers and struts about in vanity. Then again, when we descend in the scale of civilisation, we find a reversion to this natural custom, for it is the "man" in the South African Zulu or American Indian who dons the cats' tails, hyena crest, or ostrich feathers and daubs himself with paint. Is plainness of dress then a mark of high culture and character? Certainly not! Bessie was prepared strongly to resist such a conclusion. It was an educated woman's duty—stern duty, nay, more than duty, her privilege—to dress in perfect taste. She ought to be graceful and beautiful. Certainly Bessie herself was a perfect illustration of how this duty and privilege may be pursued as she reclined there upon the long grass in graceful ease.

A dainty sailor hat with blue and white band held her golden tresses firmly in their folded bondage, and a perfect-fitting, tailor-made riding habit of dark blue cloth revealed her willowy and graceful figure. She held her riding whip in her little brown gauntletted hand, and altogether she was a picture of maidenly happiness and beauty.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE KNIGHT ERRANT.

BUT Sylvania must be left behind, and Bessie rose and caught her horse for the homeward ride.

Now she could hear the sound of the guns.

She had no desire to join the party. She would prefer the lonely ride home.

She emerged from the glade just beneath the hills where nestled the White House in all its beauty. She could not help feeling proud of Woolham, who, battling against all sorts of difficulties, and denied that practical sympathy which neighbours should show each other, nevertheless had made a home for himself and was apparently winning in the conflict. Then she turned her horse's head for a canter homeward, and the animal impatiently began the descent at a smart pace, too swift to be sure, for they were still in rough country abounding in boulders and fallen timber. Full of buoyant happiness, Bessie did not check the horse's pace, and suddenly, when swerving to avoid a branch, the horse stumbled and fell, and Bessie was thrown heavily.

For a moment she lay stunned, and then, trying to rise, she discovered that her ankle was badly sprained; it had evidently been twisted in the fall.

She lay helpless, suffering excruciating pain, which seemed to increase in severity.

Her ruse in getting away from Walters and avoiding the rest of the company began now to appear in a different light. It was an occasion when the presence of friends would have been appreciated. She might have to lie there in pain for hours, and yet she hardly wanted them to find her there, for sooner or later some of them would inquire how she hoped to find the party in *that* direction.

She lay very near the Gilga fence; it was not the way home nor the road to the rest of the company. Would they smile if she explained that she was just riding anywhere, following any fleeting fancy as a butterfly goes from flower to flower? She did hope that her sister May would not discover her. She would ask very awkward questions, and probably inquire if she was on her way to Gilga when she was thrown.

When she lay quietly her foot was not so bad now; but she must make an effort to catch the horse and get home. She struggled to her feet and tried to secure the horse, but with annoying obstinacy the animal kept retreating. She was determined, however, and pressed on, until at last, getting very close to it, she quickly reached out to grasp the bridle, but the animal, eluding her grasp, galloped away.

Bessie, who had reached the last stage of endurance, sank upon the ground in a swoon.

How long she lay unconscious she knew not, but at length she was roused by the sound of horses' feet, and she saw the selector, mounted on Vixen, riding in the tracks of her horse and leading the runaway.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come!" she said with a sigh of relief as he approached, whilst Woolham, who was plainly anxious, dismounting, took her by the hand and said,

"I hope nothing very serious has happened, Bessie."

"Only a sprain; and I tried to catch my horse, and twisted my ankle again, and—I fear I fainted."

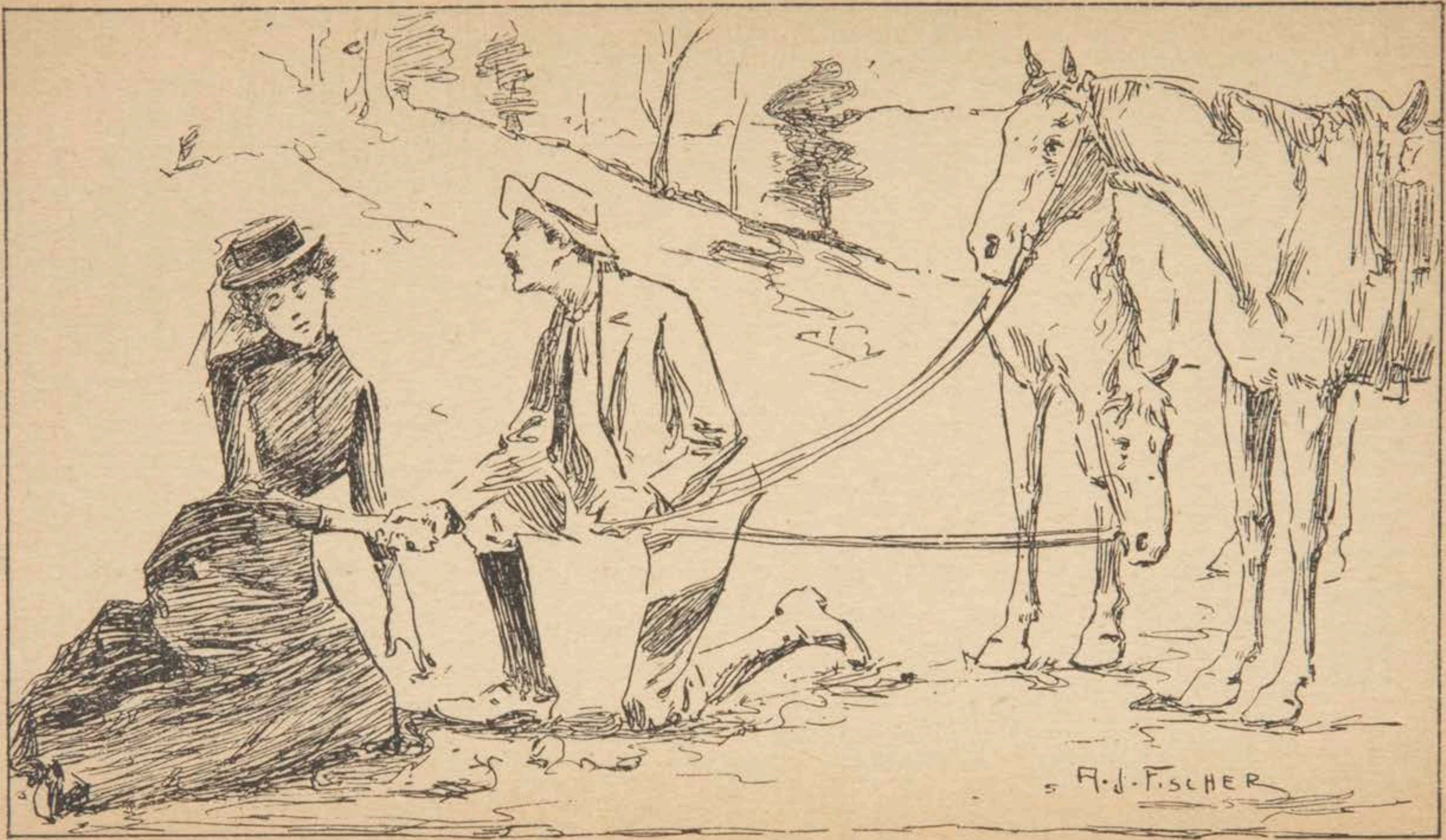
"I am sorry, dear," said Woolham, still holding her hand. Bessie did not seem to notice this, however, nor did she appear to note that he had called her "Bessie" for the first time, though, when the word "dear" was uttered so naturally, a faint blush suffused her cheeks.

How long the selector knelt upon the ground holding Bessie's hand it is hard to say, for the sun still seems to stand still in the heavens, as it did for Joshua, to await the issue of great events. In that fleeting moment all pretence vanished, and Woolham's eyes looked into Bessie's soul for love, and found it there—waiting.

Each of them had resolved not to advance one step nearer to the other whilst strained relations existed between the squatter and the selector.

Bessie had thought that this was due in loyalty to her father. Woolham's pride had set up the restraint on his part.

In this illuminating moment they both saw that in the last analysis nothing in this life matters but love, and love must claim its own. Settle a man's relation to God, and the next sacred and fundamental relation is that between him and the wife of his youth and the children of his love. Nothing must intervene



“I AM SORRY, DEAR,” SAID WOOLHAM. [*Page* 212.

between this love and its object, and no cause, however sacred, must bisect this mystic circle. Even the high call of patriotism to sacrifice for the public weal finds its sanction and source in the love of home and dear ones. These thoughts, however, were not formulated in the minds of the two. They simply knew that the inevitable crisis had come, when the angel of love links hands and hearts together and bids two march forward together into the future for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, nothing separating them until death parts, and even then the parting looks still with faith towards reunion.

"Bessie," said Woolham, "I cannot do without you any longer. You know I love you. Nothing must keep us apart. What is your answer, darling?"

"There is only one answer, Edward," she said, burying her blushing face upon his shoulder. "When you call I must come. I see it clearly now."

The selector placed her arms around his neck, and, lifting her gently, he kissed her, as he placed her in the saddle, and together they rode slowly to the homestead. Carefully as she had to ride to avoid irritating the sprained ankle, Bessie was wholly happy. When she gave, she did it royally. There was no reserve in her love, but it revealed itself with heroic abandon.

Arriving at the house, Woolham carried Bessie into the dining room and placed her upon the couch, explaining meanwhile to Mrs. Stuart how she had hurt her foot.

Mr. Stuart was away in the city, but the sweet old mother was all solicitude for Bessie and grateful to Woolham.

"And now," said the selector, "your foot needs attention, and I will leave you, and if I may I will call to-morrow to see how you are progressing."

"Mother," said Bessie, "before Mr. Woolham goes I must tell you I have promised to be his wife."

Mrs. Stuart was a wise woman, who, instead of trying to change the course of destiny, had through life striven rather to soften its asperities and magnify its benedictions.

Folding her daughter in her arms, she kissed her again and again; then, advancing to Woolham, she offered her hand. Her heart was too full for words. Woolham, bowing, lifted the hand that had ever shielded his betrothed to his lips. Bessie bravely recovered herself first, and, bidding Woolham good-bye, she said archly,

"Yes, I think I should like to see you, once in a while; come to-morrow, and as soon as I am well I want you to take me for a ride, and I would like to ride Vixen again."

The wallaby hunters returned later to the homestead in great glee at their successful drive; all except Eric Walters, who had been very worried about Bessie's non-appearance.

When he heard of the accident he covered himself with reproaches, and tried to make up by consoling Bessie in his best manner for the ground he thought he had lost. His sympathy was so great that he began to imagine himself, at last, as carried away on the flood-tide of great affection, but for some subtle reason, which he could not divine, he made no headway. "The stars in their courses" fought against Walters, for Destiny had not as yet held out to him the golden sceptre.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AUNT PEGGY HAS A DREAM.

AUNT PEGGY had something on her mind. She was up at daybreak, and had old Roger out at least an hour before his usual time. But she was as silent as the Sphinx till after breakfast. Then, when Roger began to fill his clay pipe, she said, ''No time for that; you take Towser and get all the cattle into the home paddock.''

''Zurely you doan't zay that,'' said the Somerset man. ''What be ye after now?''

''We'll take all the cattle up to Pine Ridge to-day,'' said Peggy.

''Zurely no!'' said the astonished man.

''Yes,'' said Peggy. ''I've had a dream.''

''You'am 'ad a drame, and I be to take all the cattle up to the hills! Zurely, zurely!'' said the bewildered Roger.

''Yes,'' said Peggy. ''There's going to be a flood.''

''We bean't 'ad a flood for twenty year,'' said Roger, ''and we bean't 'ad rain for two months.''

''There's going to be rain now, and a flood soon the like you've never seen,'' said Peggy testily.

''Well, zure! Well, zure!'' said the well-disciplined Roger.

He believed in Peggy's dreams, and he also believed in Peggy. In the Methodist testimony meeting he had once thanked God for giving him a good wife, "for which he was thankful," and said he, "I do luve 'er with reverence and godly fear."

Peggy had been particularly pleased with this testimony, and had regaled Roger with unexpected coffee and scones on their return from the meeting. She had confided to him "that she did think the Lord had given him great liberty in testifying that night."

"Yes, zure, I did spake as the spirit moved me."

Be that as it may, it was generally suspected that Roger not only believed in Peggy, but feared her; at all events, he usually did as he was told.

"What be the drame?" he asked.

"In my dream," said Peggy, "the rain came down softly, and everybody was glad. And it kept on coming down, day after day, harder and harder. Up in New England it came down hardest of all, until every crik was full, and torrents dashed down the hillsides and carried away fences."

"But you've never bin to New England this years, zurely," said Roger.

"I was dreaming, you fool!" said Peggy; and Roger did not interrupt again.

"The Namoi was a banker," continued the old woman in her monotonous voice, as though she was chanting some weird story given her by some spirit to repeat; "and the Munilla river was higher than it has ever been.

"The rain washed away some of the wheat paddocks. It carried away Tarpoly Creek bridge. I seed cattle and sheep floating down the river, and great logs with snakes crawling on them.

"Ti-tree Island was covered with water. The Union Church was nearly under, and you could only see the chimney of the little public school.

"Our house was flooded up to window, but it did not come up to the ceiling."

During this recital Aunt Peggy had kept her eyes vacantly staring up at the ceiling, as though she could see her dream again, and Roger was very much impressed.

"Zurely! And when be it starting?" he asked eagerly.

"To-morrow," said Peggy decisively.

The old man and the dog went out at once to bring in the cattle, and Peggy went to her milking. Later on, when Mr. Donald, the minister, called, he was surprised to see that Peggy, in spite of her age, was up among the rafters. The old couple had made a series of platforms of boxes and a table; so, beginning from the floor, it was easy for the old man, who was the feebler of the two, to climb up with the various goods to Peggy.

"What is the matter here?" said the minister. "Are you moving?"

"Yes, zure!" said Roger. "Peggy have had a drame."

Meanwhile Aunt Peggy was skilfully fixing cheeses, sides of bacon, provisions, and bedding as high up among the rafters as possible. A side of bacon in a bag hung close to the roof, and a bag of potatoes kept it company, whilst an interesting wardrobe was displayed on nails which had been driven into the rafters.

By and bye, having disposed things to her satisfaction, Peggy came down box by box, and, with the help of Roger and the minister, landed safely on the floor. She immediately set to work to brew the tea, Roger having previously spread the repast; and whilst the meal progressed she entertained the minister with the story of her dream.

After lunch Mr. Donald helped to put the old horse in the sulky, and Peggy took the reins.

The vehicle was loaded with what was needed for a long stay, and Peggy drove slowly ahead, whilst the old man drove before, with the help of Towser the dog, the small herd of cattle and few sheep which the old couple owned. Peggy said, as she left the little slab house behind:

"Please God, there won't be much hurt when I come back, unless I made a mistake in my dream. Yes, it wasn't beyond the ceiling, so it won't touch the things; but I expect there will be an amazing lot of slush and dirt to clear away."

The old folks stayed at Jamieson's at Tarpoly for lunch, and Peggy interested the farmer with a graphic account of how she saw his wheat paddocks swept by the flood waters. She advised him strongly to put logs in the watercourses, if he could, to turn the hill creeks off his paddocks, and thus save the soil.

There was much secret amusement amongst the young folks at the old lady's recital.

Mr. Jamieson said they wanted rain very badly, but he hoped it would not carry the top soil off the wheat paddocks. All his wheat was on the side of the hills; he thought it would be as well for the boys to stop up some of the watercourses after dinner.

And this they had to do, partly as a rebuke for laughing at the old lady, and partly because Jamieson knew that already there were some deep clefts in his paddocks caused by rain storms. The young men, however, not believing in the necessity of the work, put no enthusiasm into it, and very little was done.

Leaving Tarpoly, the old couple wended their way towards Pine Ridge, the home of their married daughter, which was very much higher than the old home. Much amusement was caused by Roger's reply to all questions on the road.

"Peggy have had a drame. Yes, zure, there's going to be a flood, zurely!"

Peggy's dream became a district joke before the day was out; but she cared not.

That night they added such of their worldly goods as they carried to the stock of their son-in-law, who regarded the whole visitation in a fine spirit of Christian resignation.

"Well, it's a good thing to be prepared either way," he said philosophically.

"Yes, zure! You'am right," said Roger.

When Mr. Donald returned down the road towards Gilga the next day it was raining gently.

"Who knows," said the minister to himself, "but what the old lady's dream may come true? 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HOW BRUTUS LED THE WAY.

THERE was no need for anxiety on the part of Woolham and Lucky, for their property was out of flood reach, and Woolham had his house built on the hill. All the sheds and outbuildings were arranged in a square at the back of the house and were high up on the slope.

But most of the settlers were getting anxious, and some already had suffered loss.

Steadily the rain poured on, and the river was rising every day. Patrickson's place was now quite cut off by the flood water, and Ti-tree was an island again. The old settler was quite taken by surprise when he woke up on the third day of the storm, and found the low-lying land between his place and Gilga under water. He came across in his punt to discuss the situation with the selector.

They agreed that nothing could be done. The herd clung to the dry land, and as the waters rose, the swirl rushing over the old swamp looked more dangerous than the deeper water of the river on the other side of the island. Patrickson grew very anxious. His cattle were the joy of his life. How many blue ribbons had old Brutus not taken? And the cows—he knew them by name. He had studied each, and had for them an affection such as he might have lavished upon a wife and children.

Patrickson stayed that night at Gilga, and early next morning the men were amazed to discover that Ti-tree Island only remained to the extent of a couple of acres above the flood waters. The herd were contentedly feeding about the haystack, and Patrickson looked at the swirling current, and wondered if the river would go much higher. Some of the Gum Flat settlers had brought their cattle to Woolham's higher land, and there was now quite a colony of men, women, and children camped around the White House in huts, tents, and under waggon tarpaulins. The absorbing theme of discussion was, "Would Patrickson's valuable herd escape?" All were in sympathy with the old settler, whose anxiety was now painful to witness. In the afternoon there was not half an acre clear of water, and though the rain had stopped the flood was rising rapidly.

Great logs were coming down the river, turning and turning in the eddies. Often the heads of snakes were seen just lifted clear of the water; fowl coops had come down with their living freight, some of them being washed ashore on the slope below the White House. Cattle were now and again seen swimming for dear life. Some were rescued, and others came ashore quite mad and had to be shot.

Everybody recognised now that Patrickson's herd was doomed. Ti-tree Island was certain to be completely inundated. The old settler was in despair. Woolham had had hard work to prevent him crossing in his punt, but now the old man would listen no longer to remonstrances, and declared that he would go even if he had to swim the flood. He would have a last look at them. A watery mist was gathering around the island, and the cattle could be seen clustering round old Brutus, the bull. There was little danger for a good rower in the current, as, by starting high up on the mainland, one could drift on to the island, though it would be harder returning from the island, it was thought that a landing could be made on the slope below the White House lower down. There were plenty of willing hands to help, but the real danger was the risk of floating logs striking the boat.

But the old man was determined, so they hauled the boat up to the most favourable point, and he started. They watched him as he carefully guided the punt through the flood, and they saw him land. The cattle came down to meet him, nosing him round and lowing gently.

"Good old Brutus," said the settler, rubbing the forehead of the bull. "Many a blue ribbon ye've brought me. And you, Ballyface and Nancy, there ain't two better cows in the north." He went from one to the other, stroking them and rubbing their noses. He lingered so long that the watchers became anxious. It was getting darker; the mist was thickening, and the waters were getting angrier.

They coo-eed to him again and again, but he still lingered. "I must say good-bye now," said the old man, as he stood among the herd, and he began slowly and reluctantly to move towards the boat, and the herd followed with their noses to the wet ground suspiciously. Brutus was nearest to him, bellowing now vigorously, all the herd joining together in a clamouring chorus of despair. The old man took his seat in the boat, and sat there saying, "Good-bye, Brutus! Good-bye, Nancy! Good-bye, Ballyface!" He bade them all good-bye as though they were human beings. When he slowly moved off, they came a little way into the water. Patrickson could wait no longer; the crowd on the opposite bank were hailing him frantically. He drew slowly away, and Brutus plunged in after him, as though he would drown rather than be parted from his master.

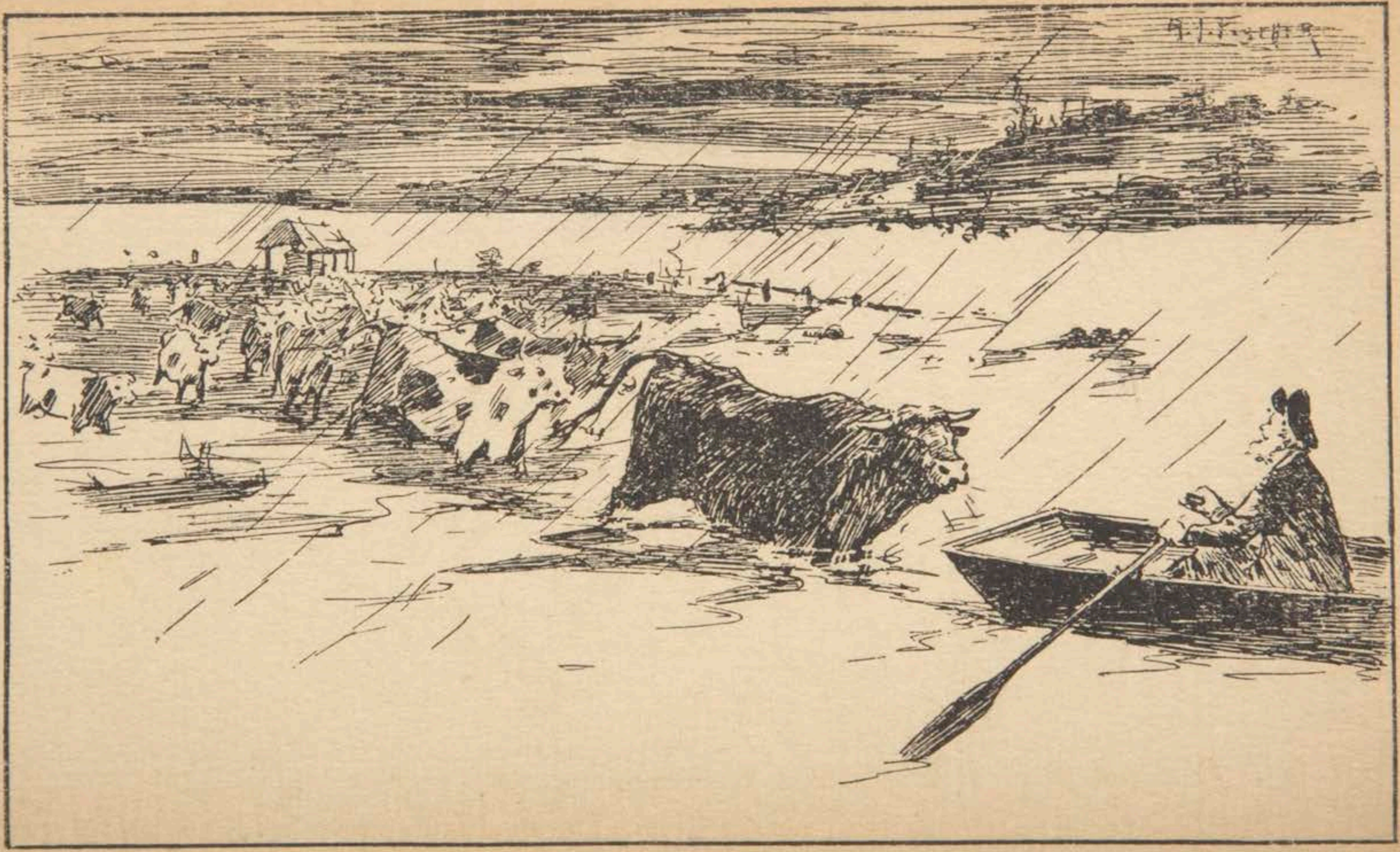
"Come on, Brutus," Patrickson called out. "Come on and let me stroke your nose again." And Brutus came boldly now. He had made up his mind, and the cows, hesitating nervously at first, dashed in after the bull.

A great hope filled the mind of the farmer now. As he pulled strongly against the current, so that he might have room to drift to safety, he called out, "Come on, Brutus! On, Nancy! Come on, Bally! Come on! Come on!"

The watchers on the other side caught the contagion of excited interest, and joined in the cries as though it were a race. "Good boy, Brutus! Go along, Bally! See, Lass o'Gowrie won't be left behind."

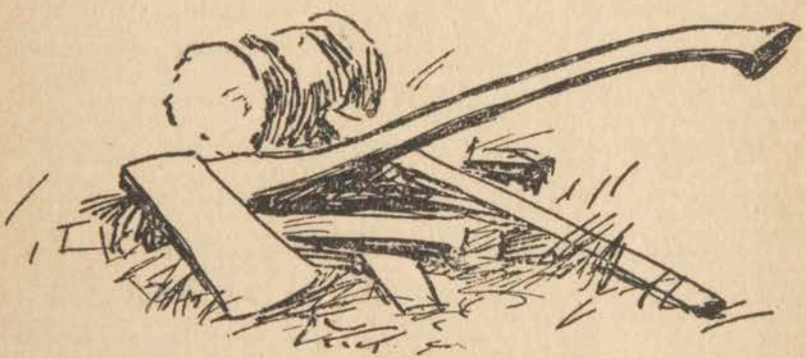
The animals were nearly all known to the settlers, as they had often seen them in the show ground, and never was a race for life watched with more excitement and followed by tenser interest.

Old Brutus led the way, keeping his nose close to the punt, and Patrickson guided them warily. When the



BRUTUS CAME BOLDY NOW. [*Page* 225.

crowd on the bank pulled the old settler out of the punt, though exhausted, he was beside himself with excitement, and he watched the herd, every one of them, land safely on the slope, with a pride he could not conceal.



CHAPTER XXXV.

"MANY WATERS CANNOT QUENCH LOVE."

IT was the fifth day of the flood. The rivers had never been so high within the memory of living man, and the flood was still rising, for, although the rain had ceased, the creeks still brought down torrents of water from the New England Range.

The selector began to fear for the Ringari homestead.

No news had reached him for two days, and Lucky and Patrickson agreed that it was worth while attempting to get within sight of the house, even if it were only to allay the fears of the "Boss."

The horses were ready, and the men were discussing the possibilities of the ride, over breakfast, when "Corny," the aborigine, was ushered into their midst, a wet and bedraggled object.

"Well, Corny! How is it at Ringari?"

"Plenty big fellow flood at Ringari, Boss."

"Not at the house?"

"Youi (yes). Water all up to house. Mister Stuart and all the ladies go away."

"My God, we had better be going!" said Woolham, starting to his feet.

"Patience, patience!" said Patrickson. "We must hear the whole story and lay our plans."

"All big fools at Ringari," said Corny. "Thinkit blackfellow know nothing. I tellem six-seven days gone by, big fellow flood coming; water sit down this way. You clear out. They laugh and say, 'Blackfellow fool.' I tellem, 'You big fellow fool by'm-by. You see.' "

"Never mind that now," said the selector. "Tell us where they have gone to."

A few questions skilfully put by Patrickson, and illustrated by diagrams drawn with a burnt stick upon the white hearth revealed the fact that the Ringari party had made their way in the direction of the higher land of Gilga, and they were now cut off by a roaring torrent, which had converted a tiny rivulet into a flooded creek. The danger was great, for the plains behind them were covered, and the creek rising might yet inundate the little hill where they were beleaguered by the surrounding waters.

Bessie had commissioned Corny to take the news to Gilga, which he had done at considerable risk. On hearing these details, Woolham got a party to work to load Patrickson's punt in a cart, and, leaving the punt to follow, the three men, reinforced by some of the Gum Flat settlers, and led by Corny, set off to the rescue.

Reaching the creek with some difficulty, the Stuarts could be seen on the brow of the hill.

Their horses had crossed the creek, and the men might have done so earlier, but now it was a question whether even a strong swimmer could breast the great current. Corny, who had crossed early in the morning, declared against it. Bessie waved her handkerchief to Woolham, and he and the others responded, shouting out encouraging messages.

By this time the punt arrived, and the men launched it and made an effort to cross.

Again and again Woolham and Lucky in the punt had to be dragged back by the ropes which had been tied to the punt. The creek was like a Maelstrom, and, added to the circling currents, there were the great logs floating down with the flood, which at any time might strike the boat.

It was clearly impossible to ferry the punt across with oars. A council of war was now called. The selector thought that they might manage to get the punt out far enough so that a rope might be thrown across.

"But," said Patrickson, "no ordinary rope would bring the punt across loaded."

Then a happy idea came to Lucky. "What about the steel rope we got up for the Gum Flat punt? We still have it at the house."

"The very thing," said Woolham; "if we can get it across and fix it."

This cable was intended for a horse punt which was being built, and was therefore strong enough to resist even the pressure of the flood with its drifting trees, if only they could get it fixed so as to work the boat along it.

"I have made up my mind, Lucky, that we must go further up stream, make a desperate effort to get well out, and then throw the rope to Alick Stuart; and if that cannot be done, I must have a swim for it."

"If we can't throw it you can't take it," said Lucky.

Having indicated to Alick Stuart where the crossing was to be attempted next, they pushed out, and, straining at the oars, they got well out, and when the boat began to drift back in spite of their efforts, the selector stood up in the boat and threw the line.

Rushing into the water, Alick Stuart managed to secure the line, and the punt was quickly hauled back. To the thin line a stouter rope was attached; to this, again, the steel cable, which was safely landed and strained around the trunk of a great tree.

Woolham and Lucky now managed with great difficulty to work the punt across, partly by the use of the oars and partly by pulling on the steel rope, to which the boat was attached on a pulley.

When the ropes were fastened to the boat, it was expected that it might be pulled across from either bank with safety. When more than half-way across, a rope was thrown to Alick Stuart, who hauled them in to the bank.

So far all was well, and the boat, containing May Stuart and one of the men, with Lucky in charge, safely crossed and landed the two. Then the punt was hauled back, and it crossed again and again in safety, carrying two each trip, Woolham and Alick Stuart seeing to the difficult work of getting them on board the frail craft.

In this way most of the Ringari party had managed to reach the opposite bank safely.

Old Mr. Stuart determined on seeing the others to safety first, but the time had come to insist upon the old folks crossing, as the waters were coming down in great force, and the little punt had suffered some ugly bumps from passing logs. So Alick now ferried his mother and father across, leaving the selector, Lucky, and Bessie on the other side. When the boat was hauled across it was leaking badly, and it was no longer possible to cross without getting very wet. In fact, everything now depended upon the cable. Lucky got into the punt, and the selector put Bessie by his side.

"Hurry along, Lucky, and come back for me," he said. "The punt cannot hold up more than two now, and I am all right. If necessary, I could even cross on the pulley."

Bessie protested strongly against this, but it was no time for delay, and Lucky pushed off.

Ere they reached the other side the punt was half full of water, but they were safely lifted out, and the empty punt, being baled out, was hauled by Woolham on receiving the signal. The situation had now reached to another climax of anxiety.

The punt was rapidly filling with water, and by the time the selector had hauled it half-way across it sank below the surface, and the pressure of the stream, which seemed to focus upon it at that point, added to the weight of water, defied all the selector's strenuous efforts to move it an inch further.

The party on the Gilga bank watched the solitary man exerting all his strength on the rope with painfully strained attention. But what could one puny man do against the Titanic forces Nature had arrayed against him. Man may launch his boats, build his bridges, or stretch his steel cables across the waters and send his ferries back and forth. He may build his towns on the river banks, and, erecting his training walls on either side, say to the river, "Thus far shalt thou go and no further." But all is in vain! On some grey dawning, the birds, forgetting to sing, flutter restlessly from tree to tree, the living things of the silent bush crawl stealthily out of their lairs and seek shelter more secure. Only ignorant man awakes in fancied security, knowing not the time of his visitation. Nature arouses herself like a giant awaking from a long sleep, and then the rains descend and the floods come and sweep away the paltry cables and bridges. The training walls and the townships are blotted out, and the boats are as twisted straws in the eddies; the very pillars of Heaven tremble, and civilisation is rebuked.

It seemed a long time whilst old Mr. Stuart watched with dilated eyes at the straining man, and the others in various attitudes watched as though hypnotised by the crisis, but really it was only a few seconds, for when the selector saw that he could not move the boat, he fastened the line to a tree, and, taking his courage in both hands, began to work his way along the cable, which was still taut. By this time the flood waters had almost reached up to the cable, and the watchers could only see now and then the head and hands of the selector above the water, as he strenuously struggled on, hand over hand, along the cable. Occasionally he had to release trees and logs that had wedged themselves along the cable—in itself a dangerous task—and at last he reached the waterlogged boat. Placing his feet upon the boat and holding on to the cable, he secured a much needed breathing space, a respite after his tremendous exertions, and before the more difficult and dangerous effort awaiting him. For this was the focus point of danger; here all the currents seemed to converge amid a swirling and eddying attack, apparently launched at man's last effort to defeat the flood by stretching the cable across it. Here all the roar and hiss of the waters rose in one mighty crescendo of doom, and to this point, as though guided by a cruel design, all the greater logs floated down stream secured together—like battering rams aimed at the slender cable.

Whilst they looked, a great gum tree entwined its gaunt branches around the cable, like the tentacles of an octopus, and the steel rope began to bend and sag under the pressure, whilst the party on the bank gazed tensely at the hands clinging to the rope and the head still held above the water. And they could do nothing but look! Bessie sank on her knees, and, shutting her eyes to the awful sight, lifted up her heart in appeal to Him, who alone can say, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed."

The crisis ended; for with a mighty crash the great trees and logs forced a way for themselves; the cable was broken, and the little punt was crushed to driftwood—man's last barrier had been swept away.

But the real crisis had only begun, for, where was the selector? Was he, too, crushed amongst the driftwood? Had some blow deprived him of the power to fight for life?

The old squatter's strange behaviour on this occasion was never forgotten. It wiped away all his sins, even in the eyes of the Gum Flat Progress Committee.

He had been pacing to and fro like a caged lion, with his hands clinched and his teeth grinding; but when the cable parted with a crash, he awoke to a commanding energy.

Whilst divesting himself, with frantic haste, of coat, vest, and boots, he cried out:

"A thousand pounds for anyone who will bring that man out of the water! We need that man!"

He himself was eagerly searching the flood waters for a trace of the selector, prepared to dash in to the rescue.

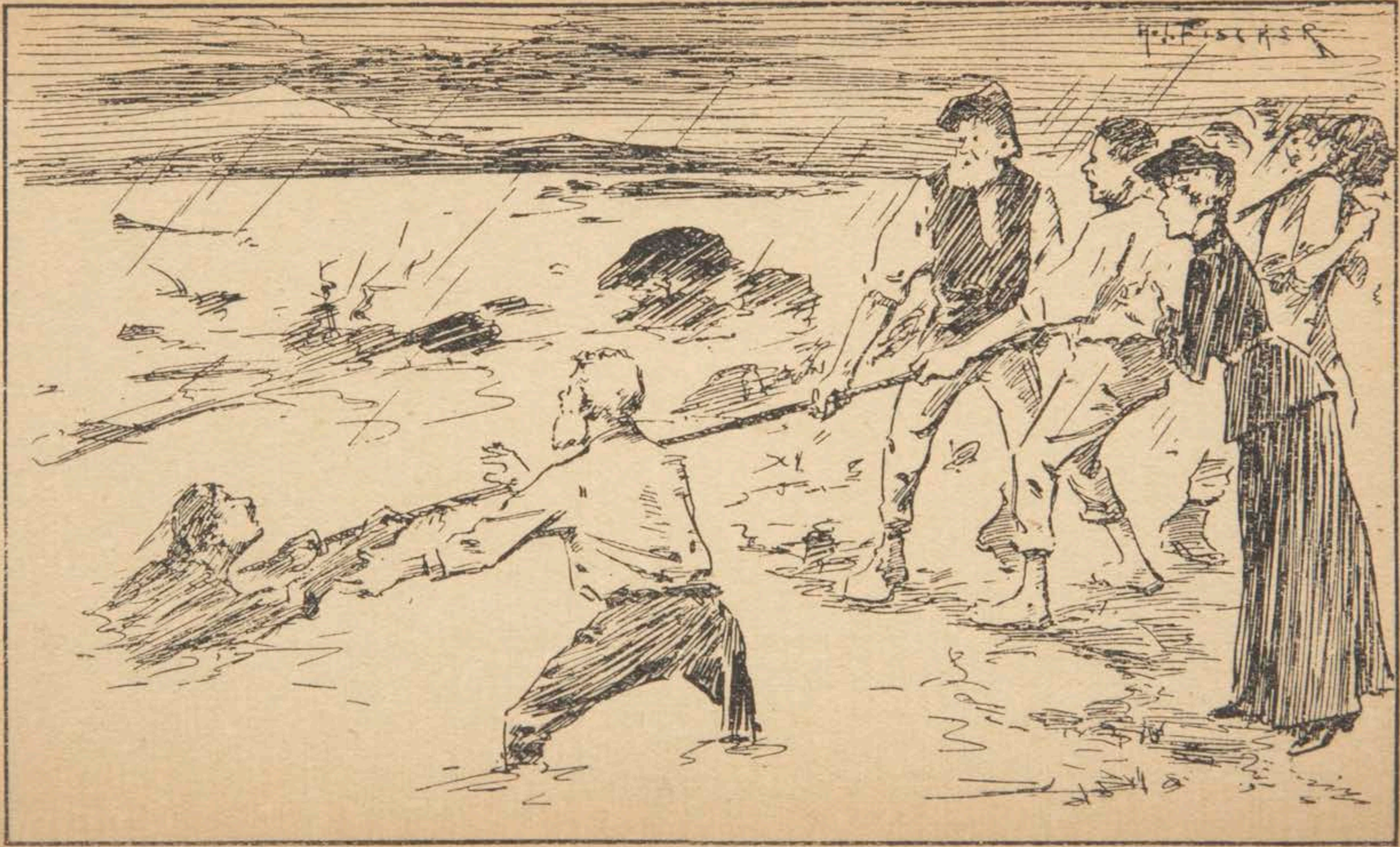
But it was to Bessie that the inspired idea came. She cried, "The cable, the cable—pull it in!"

They hauled in the end of the severed steel cable, and there they saw the selector, apparently more dead than alive, clinging to it. The squatter dashed into the flood to secure the man he had learnt to value.

Woolham, now unconscious, clung to the rope with a grasp which they only relaxed by the use of great force. All his remaining strength was concentrated in that grip. But, beyond being utterly exhausted, and suffering from some ugly bruises and cuts, there was not much the matter with the selector.

There were plenty of willing and loving hands to minister to his needs.

It was the squatter who took command of everything now. He it was who commanded Woolham to drink an unreasonable quantity of whisky, which he had refused from others.



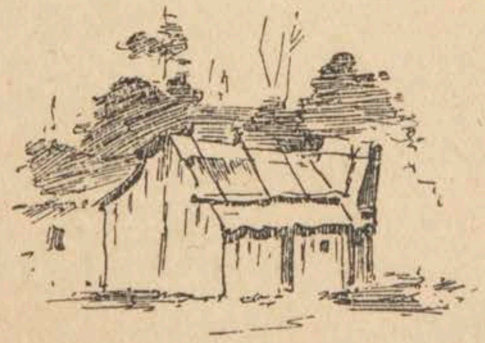
THEY HAULED IN THE SEVERED CABLE. [*Page* 235.

It was he who helped to lift him into the double buggy when it arrived.

"And now, Bessie," he said, giving her his hand, "let me help you in beside this man of yours, and look after him, for he is worth it."

Lucky drove the horses carefully to Gilga, with Mrs. Stuart by his side and the selector and Bessie on the back seat.

The squatter astride of Vixen rode home to the White House with the rest of the party. He rode at the head of the group like a general, with Patrickson at his side just a little way behind, like a "chief-of-staff," and all the rest following at their distances, as they ride who ride with their chief.



CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FOUNDING OF STUARTVILLE.

THE great flood was over, and, after all, the damage done was not so great as expected, though great enough. Cattle turned up from all directions; instinctively they had found the high lands. With the courage of true optimists the farmers set to work to rebuild their houses and sheds, and, as far as possible, repair all damage. There were compensations. Though some paddocks had been covered with river gravel, and boundaries had been swept away, as the rivers and creeks had cut for themselves new channels, in other directions the land had been blest with a new fertility, begotten of the flood water. Patrickson's holding at Eureka had benefited considerably, for the flats over which the floods had poured so ruthlessly, with the coming of spring, were being transformed into rich meadows. Lucerne paddocks received a new lease of life, and the progressive settlers of Gum Flat faced the future with high hopes. Indeed, a meeting of the Progress Committee had been called to settle the outstanding questions of debate once for all.

The direct road to Munilla, the abolition of all public and private gates on that road, the new name for Gum Flat, the need of a Post and Telephone Office were once again burning questions pressing for settlement.

Patrickson saw that the situation demanded all his strategy. The selector was perplexed.

He and Bessie were to be married in a month, and, whilst his relation to Bessie's parents was sacred, he could not turn his back on his old friends and their projects.

Patrickson and Lucky, for the first time, abandoned the selector to his dilemma, but the two had many a secret talk about the situation and its solution.

Out of these talks sprang a series of strategic moves which fitly crowned Patrickson's career as a diplomatist. To begin with, he artfully canvassed all the subjects to be discussed at the meeting, suggesting casually his own ideas. Later in the conversation, or on a second visit, when his own ideas were mentioned again, he recognised them as original and brilliant suggestions on the part of those to whom he spoke. Consequently each member awaited the meeting with anticipation, knowing that he had the key to this difficulty or that.

He was ably supported in this work of preparation by his faithful lieutenant, Lucky, whose cheerful tact was a great asset in the problem.

As the conspirators had foreseen, a great crowd turned up to the meeting.

Patrickson had marshalled all his forces, and though the selector was ill at ease in the chair, the meeting made steady progress.

Brief speeches were the order of the day, and resolutions were passed reaffirming Gum Flat's policy of progress.

It was on the election of a new president that Patrickson's strategy came out in full flower.

"Mr. Chairman," he said, "there is one man, whom some of us have thought of for this office next year. He is the oldest settler amongst us, and the first pioneer of this district. He is one of the hardest hitters and most obstinate of fighters; but he is no worse for that. When we have him battling at our head we shall soon get all we want. I have great pleasure in moving that we elect Mr. Stuart of Ringari as the president of the Gum Flat Progress Committee."

Loud cheers greeted this resolution, which, to the selector's surprise, was seconded by a settler whom he had never known to say a good word for the squatter before.

When this had been carried unanimously, the selector, with relief, began to see which way the clouds would break. Next the name for the new township was discussed. It had been well canvassed, and when one of Mr. Stuart's erstwhile detractors, who fondly imagined himself to be the author of the idea, rose to move that the Government be requested to officially name the township "Stuartville," no one was surprised but Woolham, and he was gratified. But they were not to have a unanimous vote. They had not converted old Mr. Smythe, who moved that the township be named "Woolham."

How far this matter would have gone it was hard to say, but that Woolham himself, whilst thanking Mr. Smythe for the compliment, appealed to him to give them a unanimous vote for Stuartville.

Having reached the end of the business, Patrickson rose and in the name of those present invited the selector to a banquet, to take place in two months' time, on his return from his honeymoon.

"This banquet is not only as a recognition of your good work as president of the Progress Committee, but we desire to honour a good man and a noble and beautiful woman whom we all respect and love," said the farmer, amid cheers.

What could the selector say?

As a speech his reply was a failure. The settlers' wives had prepared lunch, and after the repast the whole of the committee, with the selector and Patrickson at their head, rode to Ringari. The squatter was more than surprised.

The selector introduced Messrs. Patrickson and Smythe as the spokesmen, and their speeches were in good form. The squatter was obviously flattered and embarrassed. But he said "he had quite made up his mind to go with the times. I think it is high time," he said, "that we had a direct road to Munilla," and with a twinkle in his eye he continued, "if you folks would only do away with your gates, I think I would be inclined to do a bit of fencing and take down the few gates on my place."

At this the farmers cheered and laughed. It was considered a rather good joke, as nearly all the gates were on his property.

. . . . .

The marriage of the selector and Bessie was a very popular event. Mr. Donald married them in the Union Church, and they went away amid showers of rice, flowers, and blessings. Mr. Stuart gave Bessie a thousand acres adjoining Gilga, which made the property very complete.

The banquet was a great success, and no more popular couple ever settled down than Woolham and his young wife.

. . . . .

Under the presidency of Mr. Stuart the Stuartville district has become a model place. To lovers of colonial country life it would repay a visit. Telephone to Gilga, and the Woolhams will be prepared to give you a good reception. There is a straight road, good enough for a motor-car, from Munilla. You will easily identify Ringari, for a great white gate leads into the avenue of pepper trees. After the flood Mr. Stuart built a new house—a great bungalow residence with verandahs all round, and a fine garden surrounding the homestead, with an orchard at the rear.

Following the straight road you cannot fail to see the White House on the hill.

The garden has become luxuriant, and there you may often see Mrs. Woolham among her flowers.

The house has been exquisitely furnished, and the selector and his wife love congenial company. When Patrickson and Lucky foregather at the White House, as they often do, the hostess seldom fails to give them wrinkles in the art of finding a wife.

Patrickson says that he is too old, and Lucky asserts that he is too young to enter the matrimonial lottery.

"I'm too old to try experiments, beside," Patrickson will say. "I don't see any more Bessies in this district."

It is not quite safe, however, to tease Lucky in connection with such an important topic, for he still suffers the sweet pains of a love which is perplexed by doubts and fears.

Mrs. Woolham's skilful and sympathetic hand is the only one which can touch the sore spot in Lucky's sensitive nature with healing balm.

It is not my purpose to tell Lucky's love story now, but I may hint that Lucky's peculiar timidity and great humility have been the cause of many of his perplexities, but, although Lucky's suit proceeds somewhat haltingly, it is wonderful with what ingenuity that young man finds occasions to visit Sydney.

Last, but not least, I must tell you that there is a little golden-haired boy at Gilga. His name is Edward, but he is often called by his fond mother and father "Curlybobs."

It is perfectly absurd to see how Mr. Stuart fusses over this child. In Mrs. Stuart it is excusable. She belongs to the ''softer sex,'' but, for a hard-headed business man like Mr. Stuart to sing nursery rhymes and rock the cradle for that precious child, seems almost like a falling from grace, although Mr. Donald calls it a ''falling into grace.''

If you stay at Gilga for a few days, they will probably suggest a ride or a drive to Stuartville. Go by all means. If Mrs. Woolham can make herself leave the baby, which I doubt, she may drive you over in her pony trap. If you are a woman, she will probably do that if you suggest taking Curlybobs. But if you are a mere man, the selector will mount you on the cob, and, himself riding Vixen, he will show you round. Without leaving Gilga property, he will take you by a picturesque bridle track to Eureka.

There is no change in Patrickson's house, except that it is simply covered with vines. At the front, roses cover the trellis work of the verandah, and at the sides of the house there are masses of passion vine.

The ugliness of the old-fashioned brick chimney, which stands out from the wall, is hidden beneath Virginia creeper, and the road to the kitchen covered with grape vines.

The old farmer is sure to point out to you his prize herd browsing knee-deep in the rich grass of the meadows. Yonder is Brutus, Lass o'Gowrie and the rest, famous in the show ground, and even more famous in the way in which they followed their master through the flood.

Leaving Eureka, you will come out upon the well-kept road, and, passing a white gate, your guide will point to a pretty cottage on the banks of the creek, which you will be told belongs to Mr. Edwards Lovell, otherwise Lucky. The elder Lovells pass the evening of their life there in peace and comfort.

Entering the township, you will see Mr. Donald's new church on the hill. Only occasional services are held at the old Union Church at Ringari during moonlight nights, the regular Sabbath services being held at Stuartville. The red-tiled Post Office and Public School occupy the leading sites in the town.

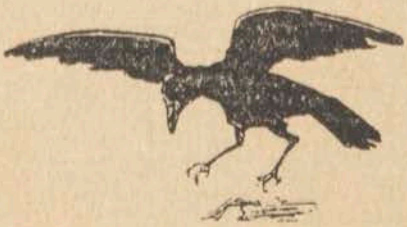
There is no public house, but the Smythes keep a very good boarding house, which they call "The Bushmen's Rest." On the gate you may read the legend, " Accommodation for man and beast."

You will probably call there with the selector or his wife for lunch, and be pleased with their light scones and rich coffee and all the other good things for which the house is famous.

Mark Scarsdale is the business man of the village. You will see his office next to the Post Office. He is bush lawyer, land agent, and auctioneer all in one, and he has recently started a weekly newspaper.

As you leave the village in the twilight you will look back at the pretty gardens, white fences, and red-tiled roofs under a soft haze of circling grey chimney smoke, blending all into an ensemble both beautiful and restful; and when you return to the city, that picture will often reflect itself upon the canvas of your memory as the ideal bush township of the mother State. From such townships her best citizens must come, and when worn out in the battle of life, they will instinctively turn for rest and inspiration to the bush again—to the old flower-embowered homesteads, the rippling creeks, and the great wheat paddocks carved out of the hills.

THE END.



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The good wife's sons come home again
With little into their hands,
But the lear o' men that ha' dealt wi' men,
In the new and naked lands.

But the faith o' men that have proven men
By more than willing breath,
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