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A THWARTED REVENGE.

A ROMANCE OF THE GOLD FIELDS.

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I

"I tell you, boys," said old Saul looking keenly into the depths of the pan which he had been dexterously twisting—"I tell you there ain't the colour of gold in this 'ere claim now. I guess it's played out." And he angrily tossed the worthless mud and dirt from his pan, and flung the latter down by his side.

The rest of us laid down our tools and looked blankly at the speaker.

"No," he went on, removing his pipe from his lips; "not even the colour of gold. I reckon we'd better shift elsewhere straight away. Wat's the good of hanging around here?"

"No good at all," agreed Pete—"no good at all. We can't live on sand," looking at the long stretch of barren waste about us. "Nor"—pointing to a great reef of bare rocks a few yards off—"nor on stones."

Old Saul nodded his head sagely.

"What I ses is"—put in another of our party—"what I ses is just what Saul ses. Let's hump our swags."

"Well," I began, when a melodious voice interrupted me:

"Good morning, Camarados. What luck?" it said.

I looked up in surprise, and the speaker, a tall handsome Spaniard, nodded pleasantly to me.

"Ah," he asked, turning to Saul, "a new chum, eh?"

"Yes," Saul grunted; "only been with us a week."

"So?" the man shrugged his shoulders, "and tired already, my friend?"

"No, not tired," I answered; "but disheartened."

"Why?"

"Why?" broke in Saul; "so'd anybody be. Never the color o' gold, and work, work, work, 'till the sweat runs o' yer 'eels, and not a peg for it. It ain't all dinkum with us, sicknor."

Again the Spaniard shrugged his shoulders, and then, with a smile he passed on.

"Who's that toff?" I asked as soon as he was out of earshot.

"Oh," and one of the diggers laughed. "I don't know who he is, but I know who he reckons he is. Guess he thinks he's the boss, and is running this field on his own hook."

"That sort, eh?" and I elevated my eyebrows.

"Aye. He does give hisself a few airs. He's a hanging arter old Anstill's darter they say."

"She's far too good for the likes of him," I cried hotly.

A general laugh was raised by my chums at my expense. Although I had only been on Crooked Creek gold field for a week my heart for six days out of seven had been enslaved by her charms.

As far as I could prevent it, I determined that the Spaniard should never win her.

I stood looking after the foreigner until an intervening shingle shanty shut him from view; and then, with a sigh, I picked up my pick and listlessly stuck it into a tuft of coarse, wiry, grass near.

Old Saul laughed.

"Never mind, chum," he chuckled, "the greaser's got the running now—cos why? He's got the nickers. It's no good o' a man a-sticking his cap to 'rds Ida Anstill without them. D'ye see?" and he gave a savage kick at the pan which sent it clanging and banging twenty or thirty yards off.

"Never mind, Saul," cried Pete, as he

quietly gathered his mining implements together; "we must go on the Wallaby track agin, that's all. Mobbe we'll strike it rich nex' time."

The others, following Pete's example, commenced arranging their swags preparatory to strapping them upon their backs. Then Pete turned to me:

"Come on, Cockney," he laughed; "hump yer swag. Let's prospect a little higher up country. This field's a goner. Ther' ain't a sprat's worth o' washin' in it."

I looked about me. All around me, with the exception of the rock before mentioned, stretched the great sandy waste, glittering beneath the blinding glare of the sun. Here and there about were dotted the shanties—rough, wooden affairs—and ragged tents of the miners. Away on a slight incline behind me a few huts and dumpies—dignified by the title of a "mining settlement"—clustered together, and in the very midst stood the long, low, whitewashed shed, known as Anstill's store.

"Come on, Cockney," said Pete, as he hurled a tuft of wiry grass into the crooked yellow stream which gave the gold field its name; "pack up yer swag if you're coming with us."

I looked toward the store again, and in a moment I decided to stay where I was, be my luck what it would.

"I shall stop here a little longer," I answered.

My chums burst into hoarse peals of laughter.

"My eye!" Saul shrieked, "Cockney's fair struck this time!"

"What do you mean?"

"What does we mean, pards? What does we mean? Ha! ha! That's prime! Just as if we ain't bin over the same ground ourselves! Mobbe we ain't bin struck wi' a pair o' peerty blue eyes. Mobbe we has, eh? Why, love yer, it's as plain as yer face, Cockney, and, hivin' knows, that's plain enough. When's the weddin' caids a-goin' ter be issoced. Mobbe we'll git our dress soots ready."

I did not reply, and after the boys had laughed themselves hoarse, Pete said:

"Never mind Cockney, we knows yer secret. Miss Anstill's hit yer hard, I know, and we wishes yer luck."

Saul stretched out a horny hand to me.

"Shake," he said, "good luck to ye. Cut the greaser out. As the poetes ses, 'Adoo.'"

I clasped his extended hand and wrung it cordially. Then the rest of them came round, and I shook hands with each.

Then with their last wishes for "good luck," and Peter's advice to "keep my eye on the Spaniard" ringing in my ears, I stood and watched them as—with their "swags" neatly folded on their backs, and their "billies" in their hands—they slouched in a gloomy, dejected fashion, through the one straggling street of the town, and set off across the sands.

Then, with another sigh, and a glance towards the store, I turned, and striking my pick into the ground commenced to tear up the dirt and soil at my feet.

I cannot tell how it all happened—it seemed more like a dream. All that I know is—that when I ceased tilling and twisting my pan, and looked at the residuum from which the water had drained, all that I know is that I saw—gold!

I dug and delved like mad after that, and at every washing the precious metal seemed more plentiful. I kept on into the night, and then, at last utterly worn and weary, I looked up to the full southern moon, and realised that I had "struck it rich," and that Ida Anstill might—now that I was on the road to wealth—yet be mine. I had only one regret—that

my chums, even then tramping dejectedly along somewhere in the solitude, were not with me to share my luck.

During the next few days I worked hard with pick and pan, keeping the knowledge of my good fortune to myself, and every evening burying the day's findings in a quiet corner of my hut.

Only once, since my chum's departure had I seen the Spaniard, and then, with a mere nod, he had passed me, without apparently noticing that I was alone, or that my companions had left me.

One night, after a rapid and rough calculation of my buried treasure—a calculation which afforded me the pleasant knowledge that I was a tolerably rich man—I went for a quiet ramble across the still heated sandy fields.

The moon was at the full, and all things were as though lying in a bath of silver. Finally I turned my footsteps in the direction of the rocks, and, clambering up their rugged face, I flung myself down in a small hollow, leant back, and gave myself up entirely to thinking, and the quiet enjoyment of my beloved pipe.

From thing to thing my thoughts went flitting. Now I was back in the diamond mines at Kimberley—which I had only left behind me a few weeks previous—and then I was amongst my relations in dear, dirty London. But each time, by some strange force, not wholly unexplainable, my thoughts again reverted to the sweet face and lovely eyes of Ida.

Although I had never spoken above a dozen words to her, I was hopelessly—no, not quite hopelessly—in love with her. She, probably, had never given a second thought to me, and yet I—

What was that? Something—I could not tell what—suddenly broke in on my musings and, with a start, I was recalled to myself. I sat up and listened.

There it was again, and in a moment I was scrambling madly over the rocks, towards the road that wound between them.

"Help! Help! Help!"

It was a woman's voice, and I scrambled madly on. Then at last, with a quiet "Thank Heaven!" I dropped into the road.

It was so dark there, being bordered by rocks on either side, that I could not distinguish anything. Again I listened—straining my ears in the endeavour to hear what my eyes could not see.

A faint rustling on my right made me turn in that direction, and then again the woman shrieked.

In a moment I recognised the voice, and my heart seemed to cease its beating. It was Ida's.

"Help! help!" she shrieked again.

"Roderigues, you cur you—"

"Silence," another voice cried. "You she-cat, you vixen, be silent!"

"Where are you? Where are you!" I shouted, running over in the direction of the voices. "Help is here! It is I! Cockney! Miss Anstill!"

The sound of scuffling increased, and I heard a faint gurgling, followed by an angry voice, saying:

"You will have the whole colony here, and I—Ah!"

In the blackness I managed to grip the man's collar, and I forcibly tore him away from the girl.

"Run! Run, Miss Anstill!" I shouted. "He shall not hurt you now!"

The pattering of feet followed, and I knew that the girl had followed my instructions, and running her hardest towards the end of the rock shadowed road.

Then the fellow whom I was holding engaged all my attention. The way he struggled and swore was something awful. From side to side he swayed; he endeavouring to tear himself from me, and I endeavouring to

hold him; and at last, by some mischance, I was thrown. The fellow broke away from me and tore his hardest after the girl. In a moment I was on my feet again, and after him.

At the end of the road I could discern a strip of moon-whitened waste beyond, and already I could see the form of Miss Anstill's flying figure standing out like a silhouette against it.

I breathed a sigh of relief; another moment and she would be out in the full flood of the moonlight and comparatively safe.

But still I ran on—and then, before I could stay my course, a pair of strong, muscular arms encompassed me.

"So," a voice hissed, and the speaker's breath came hot on my cheek, "So, Cockney, you would interfere with a gentleman's love-making?"

My blood rose to fever heat, and went bubbling through my veins.

"You cur, to insult a woman," said struggling to free myself. "Let me go!"

The Spaniard laughed hoarsely.

"You have thwarted me this time!" he cried, "but you shall not do so again. I will kill you!"

He loosened me somewhat, as he put his hand down to draw his knife, and in that instant I tore myself free.

Even as his knife glistened in the air, I sprang forward, and, launching out, dealt a terrific blow at his handsome face. By the terrible oath that followed, and the pain in my knuckles, I knew that my blow had gone home.

"Maledicta!" the man hissed; "You English dog. I will kill you."

He rushed towards me, and again I sprang aside and launched out.

So the unequal fight went on in the gloom; but at last, the Spaniard, apparently tired of it, for, with a last threat, he suddenly turned and fled.

III

Although I did not mention a word to any of the men on the diggings regarding the foregoing incident, it by some means—probably through Miss Anstill—became public property.

About noon, on the following day, the Spaniard sauntered up to my claim, and, with his hands in his pockets, watched me at work for awhile.

At last I ceased in my labours, and, leaning on my pick handle, I returned his look.

"Well, what do you want?" I asked.

The man's dark face flashed angrily.

"What?" he asked, "What is to prevent me shooting you where you stand?"

I rapidly slid my disengaged hand round to my hip pocket.

"Want of pluck, and fear of the sheriff's rope," I answered.

"Ha! Would you insult me?" The Spaniard snarled, and half-drew one of his hands from his pocket.

But I had him covered: as quick as a flash my revolver was out.

"Not this time, Roderigues," I laughed. "Put your hand back."

With an oath the Spaniard replaced his hand.

"You have the drop on me this time," he cried. "I didn't know you were armed."

"You see I am," I answered. "After that little affair last night I decided to be prepared for you."

"Never fear!" Roderigues shrugged his shoulders. "I shall not be hereabouts now; you—and that finicky wench—are too much for me."

I gave vent to a thoroughly English "Hurrah!"

"Yes," the Spaniard went on, "and if it will do you any good, I will tell you why. The men have given me two hours to clear