

Feeling safe once more, Desmoro now leisurely made his way into George Street, thence to the Circular Quay, where all was a scene of stirring commotion. Bullock-teams were being unloaded of wool-bales, and sailors were gaily chanting as they disgorged the freights from the grim holds of the sea-tossed barques.

Approaching the driver of an empty bullock-dray, Desmoro accosted him, and asked him to give him a lift for a few miles.

"Get in, mother, and welcome," returned the man, in answer to Desmoro's request.

The bushranger gathered his skirts about him, and got into the conveyance, where he crouched low as he could crouch.

"Whereabouts do you wish to be put down, mother?" asked the driver, preparing to start, and standing close by the conveyance.

Desmoro started, and looked up into the man's face.

"I know you," he said, with an altered manner; we have met before."

"Eh?" returned the man, confusedly.

"Not many miles away from Snake Gully," continued the bushranger.

The man shook his head.

"You remember Red Hand?" added the other, in an undertone, suddenly holding up his crimson palm.

The man uttered an exclamation of astonishment and terror.

"Hush! Will you serve me? The police are on my track."

"All right! A poor man doesn't forget a kindly act in a hurry. I'll serve you with my whole heart—at the risk of my life itself, if needs be."

Desmoro glanced round: on the opposite side of the road there was a shop where suits of ready-made clothes could be purchased. Desmoro felt anxious to rid himself of his present disguise; and, giving the man some money, he instructed him to go to the shop and procure for him a suit of the roughest sort of shepherd's clothes.

The garments obtained, the question that now presented itself was, how and where he was to put them on?

"There's a shed behind this public-house," said the man, pointing down an alley close by. "You take the clothes with you, and change your appearance there. I'll warrant that nobody will notice you."

There was, as I have already said, a great deal of commotion in the scene. Drays were being loaded and unloaded, and driven away, while other loaded drays were constantly appearing. Everybody was employed with his own affairs, and in this bustle Desmoro succeeded in reaching the shed, and in there exchanging his appearance.

Thrusting his female habiliments behind a pile of firewood under the shed, he returned to his friend the drayman, by whose side he now proceeded to travel, walking with a slouching gait, a lighted pipe in his mouth, and as if he cared for no one. He was safe now, unless some unlucky chance again discovered him.

Instructed by Desmoro, the man turned out of George Street into Castlereagh Street, and stopped before the "Currency Lass," where, looking deadly pale and anxious, Neddy was standing ready with the horse.

Neddy was not at all astonished to see his master freshly apparelled; nothing done by Desmoro ever greatly surprised his faithful and affectionate ally.

The bushranger spoke first. Not for worlds would Neddy have done so.

"I'll take the beast—you must follow in the dray, or as best you can," said Desmoro, hastily. "Have no fear with this good fellow, he added, pointing to the drayman; "he will not betray us!"

"All right, mister, was the obedient rejoinder.

"Heaven bless you!" said the bushranger, wringing the hand of the bullock-driver. "I shall never forget the services you have rendered me this day."

"Don't mention 'em—don't mention 'em!" replied the other. "I'm only too pleased and happy in having had an opportunity of making some little return for the kindness you once did me."

And then Desmoro mounted his horse and galloped away, leaving Neddy to follow him as best he could.

The bushranger deemed himself safe once more. But should he be pursued by the agents of the law and recognised, he has his fleet-footed horse under him, and the open country before him. He had few fears, then, on his own account, and for Neddy, his mind was perfectly at ease in every respect.

But the mounted police had been ordered out, and were already scouring the whole neighbourhood of Sydney for the man who had just slipped out of their fingers. They were on the Woolloomooloo Road, on the Surrey Hills, on the road leading to Parramatta, and on every highway and byway round about. Furnished with fine horses, and armed to the teeth, with the Government reward in perspective, the officers were making a most persevering search.

Desmoro had ridden for an hour fast as his steed could gallop. Now he turned off from the recognised track, alighted from his horse, and led him up a very steep ascent, along which the noble animal panted, and stumbled, and slipped.

By-and-by the pathway became wider and smoother, and the brow of the hill was reached at last. Here the bushranger paused to rest awhile, his eyes listlessly wandering over the beauties of the vale-country stretched out beneath him, mile after mile, until the whole

scene seemed to fade away in a purple mist meeting the skies.

From the vast eminence on which he stood, hills and crags, which made important features in the landscape, when viewed from below, now appeared like tiny hillocks, and towering gum-trees like only bramble-bushes.

A river could be discerned, twisting like a silver ribbon through the vale, thence through the deep, dark gullies, thence for a time losing itself beneath barren rocks, to sparkle forth afresh between wild flowers of various kinds.

Wrapped in fancied security, Desmoro suffered his horse to crop the short grass growing about. The bushranger was now lying on his back, tired, hungry, and faint, and yet far, far distant from his cavern-home, from which he had proceeded in a somewhat contrary direction.

After a pause of half an hour, Desmoro arose and glanced around him. He was not altogether ignorant of the place before him, yet, as he had diverged from the beaten track, he was at a loss to surmise whither the one opening in front of him would lead.

Taking hold of the bridle, he walked onwards, his willing steed following him. The path led to the sheer brink of a precipitous cliff, along the face of which ran a shelving, slanting ledge, or pass, wide enough for a horse to pursue, but dangerous in the extreme.

This pathway, so hazardous, led the outlaw and his beast to a bridle-track through that same valley, visible from the heights which Desmoro had just left.

The bushranger now found his way to the river, and refreshed himself and his horse with some of its cold drops.

The sun was now declining, and yet the outlaw was many, many long miles away from his home. Soon it would be too dark for him to travel along this road, with which he was only half acquainted. He would have to sleep this night under the canopy of the blue heavens, with the earth for his couch and his pillow.

As long as the light lasted, he, however, continued to travel onwards, feeling very little fear or anxiety of any kind. He was thinking of his father, of Marguerite d'Auvergne, and, lastly, of the dead Jew, who had bequeathed to him all his wealth.

Then Desmoro reflected on old Ben's dying words of advice, wondering whether he should ever be able to act upon the advice.

Should he ever be able to quit the colony, and find for himself a safe resting-place in any foreign land? Was it possible that there was a corner in the universe that would afford him concealment and peace? Hitherto, he had been so buffeted about, so hunted by disappointment, misfortune, and sorrow, that he thought the world held nothing for him but trouble and darkness.

He meditated on his father, with a gentle and forgiving spirit. The past was not to be recalled, and the deeds done in that past could not be undone. Nevertheless, he could not help wishing that matters had been otherwise with him than they were; but he did not respond—his lawless mode of life, so full of perilous adventure, admitted of few reflections, either melancholy or otherwise.

He felt that his existence had lately been strangely disturbed—disturbed as he had never anticipated its being disturbed. And a simple accident had brought about this change in Desmoro's feelings, and lifted some of the iron off his heart.

Had he never met with Marguerite d'Auvergne, it is probable that he would never have become acquainted with his own father, or learned to what family he belonged.

"The dragon-wing of night o'er-spread the earth," and the weary bushranger's day's wandering was done. Fastening his poor, jaded horse to a tree, Desmoro prepared for himself a place of rest; and, stretching his tired, aching limbs, he closed his eyes, and sought forgetfulness in balmy sleep.

His bed was a hard one; nevertheless, it yielded him repose, for "weariness can snore upon the flint, when restive sloth finds the down pillow hard."

Once Desmoro turned in his slumber, disturbed by the distant cries of the native dogs; but as no intruder presented himself before the bushranger, his senses still continued lulled.

When the bushranger awoke, the sun was riding high in the heavens, and his horse was neighing and snorting, restlessly pawing the ground and tossing his head.

"What ails thee, thou faithful steed?" exclaimed Desmoro, rising and going to the animal, which he at once conducted to the river-side, where man and beast both refreshed themselves.

But the horse was still as restless as before. Desmoro could not understand what was the matter with him, until he looked up towards the pass, than all was at once explained.

Along that narrow, shelving ledge, which bordered a dizzy precipice, Desmoro saw several of the mounted police, carefully leading their horses. Aha! Desmoro was pursued—his enemies were already within sight of him.

"My brave brute!" cried the outlaw, patting the neck of his beast; "you heard the rascals yonder, and knowing they are on your master's track, strove to give him timely notice of his danger, eh? Now for flight!" he continued, tightening the saddle-girths, and flinging himself across the back of his noble charger, which showed every sign of eagerness to be gone. "Now fly, my beauty, make thy way homeward!"

And, as if fully sensible of his master's impending peril, the sagacious creature galloped

down the bridle-path, where horse and rider both were soon hidden from view, screened by the thick foliage of the surrounding trees.

Once or twice Desmoro paused in order to listen for the pursuing steps of the police. But he heard no sounds save the screeching of numerous parrots, and the dismal cawing of a flock of crows hovering about.

Desmoro, perceiving that he was not far from the highway, now made towards it, thinking that he should be able to baffle his pursuers by again seeking the public road. Had he not borne about him that unfortunate birthmark, he would have defied the recognition of all the police in the world.

"Let them hunt through the bush, and welcome, now!" exclaimed the fugitive, as he once more emerged upon the highway, and hastened along in the direction of the Snake Gully.

Desmoro was very hungry, and no wonder that he was so, remembering that he had not tasted food for upwards of twenty-four hours. Yet he did not droop; he still struggled, struggled vigorously onward, anxious to reach home, and feel himself in security.

Desmoro was familiar with every inch of this road, and with every niche and cranny round about. No matter, then, howsoever expert and vigilant his hostile followers might be, he had many chances of escaping them.

He did not entertain a single doubt concerning the object of the men whom he had seen winding the dangerous pass; he felt convinced that they were on his track, that they were endeavoring to hunt him down.

Desmoro laughed defiantly and thinking that he had evaded them, that he was entirely out of their reach, he rode leisurely along. There was a hot wind blowing at the time, and the sky overcast, and growing darker and darker each succeeding moment. There was every sign of an approaching thunderstorm, which storms, at the season of the year, were generally exceedingly sudden and violent.

The bushranger had almost reached that spot where he would have to turn his horse's head once more from the recognised track, into one known only to himself and Neddy, when a quick, vivid flash shot across the inky firmament, and a rumble of thunder made itself heard.

Desmoro's steed snorted loudly and swerved aside, apparently full of fear.

Just at this moment the bushranger's listening ears caught the ring of horses' hoofs behind him.

"Ha! they are at my very heels, it seems," Desmoro exclaimed. "On, on, brave beast—another half-mile, and we can then defy them!"

But just as those words were spoken, a blaze of blinding light illumined the sky, and the animal stood still, shivering with terror, and refusing to go on. Then came a peal of thunder, rattling, crashing, and booming with terrific and appalling detonation.

Desmoro urged his horse to proceed; but neither coaxing nor whipping would get the animal to budge an inch. There she stood, shuddering, covered with foam, obstinately rooted to the spot.

Meanwhile, the sounds of the approaching hoofs were heard more and more distinctly. Desmoro's head was beginning to swim, and a dense perspiration was starting out of his every pore. He knew not what to do, nor whither to turn.

Great heaven, must he fall into the hands of his pursuers at the very moment when he had deemed himself in perfect safety?

One more effort, and the animal he was bestriding bounded along at a desperate and maddened speed, wholly heedless of the road he was pursuing.

Presently they arrived at the spot called Snake Gully, close by which there was a bridle-track, leading by a circuitous route to Desmoro's home. But just as the bushranger was about to turn his horse's head, a fiery flash shot aslant the sky, and the bushranger and his steed lay together prostrate on the earth.

With a groan of pain, Desmoro dragged himself from under his fallen steed, and staggered to his feet. The faithful animal had been struck by lightning, and was dead, but the bushranger himself had escaped with very little injury.

Bestowing a farewell glance upon the carcass of the brute, Desmoro plunged at once into the bush, and made his way homeward. He grieved over the loss of his gallant charger, but thanked heaven for his own preservation.

Neddy welcomed his master with a cry of heart-felt joy. Neddy had been apprehensive that Desmoro had met with some fresh mishap.

"Where's the horse, mister?" he asked.

"Lying near Snake Gully, poor beast!"

"Eh?"

"Struck by lightning during the past thunderstorm."

Then Desmoro proceeded to explain the particulars with which the reader is already well acquainted.

"They'll find only the dead animal for their pains," laughed Desmoro, alluding to the policemen on his trail. "I've had a sharp run for my life, and am half-famished with hunger, and entirely worn out with fatigue of both body and mind."

"All right, mister; you shall have a famous meal directly."

While Desmoro was eating his famous meal as prepared by Neddy, the mounted police were vainly scouring both highway and bush.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Two days after the event, recorded in the above chapter, the *Sydney Herald* gave a long and rambling account of Red Hand's recent visit to Sydney, of his escape out of the clutches of the constables, and the useless pursuit of him afterwards by a party of mounted police.

There were two persons who read that account with strangely interested feelings, and with great pain as well.

Marguerite d'Auvergne trembled and grew sick as she perused the startling intelligence and made herself acquainted with the late risks Desmoro had been incurring.

While she had yet the paper in her hands, Colonel Symure was announced.

The officer entered, with a pale face and a disturbed air.

Marguerite had not seen him since the morning after the consul's dinner party, when, it will be remembered, he sought her by appointment; and she was in entire ignorance as to whether he had been successful or otherwise in carrying out his intended projects with respect to seeking his son.

Colonel Symure saluted the lady, and then sat down, almost unable to speak further.

"Papa is very particularly engaged in his study, Colonel," Marguerite observed, in a significant manner, which was well understood by her hearer.

The Colonel bowed his head.

"Have you seen this morning's *Herald*?" asked she.

"I have, mademoiselle, and with great terror, I assure you. Sooner or later I am afraid that his rashness will be his undoing," the Colonel made answer. "My poor, poor boy! Oh, I have seen him, mademoiselle, only to love him, and to deplore his fearful position more and more!"

"You have seen him, Colonel—you have seen your son?" cried Marguerite, her eyes suddenly lighting up, her lips quivering and losing all their bright colour. "When, and how, Colonel? Oh, tell me—tell me!"

Accordingly, he briefly and graphically narrated all those particulars with which you are already fully acquainted, Marguerite listening to his recital with a throbbing heart and suspended breath.

"And where did you part with your son?" she inquired.

He told her.

"So recently? And he has incurred all this terrible risk since you parted from him! I cannot comprehend wherefore he came to Sydney, placing himself in the very jaws of danger?"

The Colonel shook his head sadly.

"He must be induced to abandon his present course of life, Colonel!" she said, with great firmness. "He must fly from this land, and seek another."

"Alas! who will induce him to do so? He has nothing whatever to live for, he says, and therefore he is somewhat reckless of his life."

Marguerite's face paled, and then became scarlet as a peony. Strange feelings were at work within her bosom—feelings which she dared not make known to any living being. She had confessed herself to heaven in the silence and loneliness of midnight prayer, and between her Maker and herself alone she desired her secret to remain.

Twice she was about to speak, and twice she checked herself and remained silent.

"I have written to him," the Colonel went on to say, avoiding the mention of his unhappy son's name.

"Written to him?" echoed she, in considerable surprise. "And how will you get your letter delivered to him?" she added, with great eagerness.

"Oh, that will be an easy matter enough," the Colonel rejoined.

"Easy matter! Pray explain to me how it will be such?"

"Willingly, mademoiselle. You remember the spot where you and your father were all but upset into Snake Gully?"

"Perfectly, Colonel."

"Well, counting ten paces from the north end of that gully, and plunging into the bush to your left hand, there stands the towering bole of a gum-tree, all withered, stark, and death-like, looking like a grim skeleton in the midst of its living companions. On the side of this said tree there is a cavity just within reach of your hand; that cavity is his letter-box, to the custody of which I have promised to entrust any communication I may wish to reach his hands. It is my only mode of communicating with him."

Marguerite had listened to the Colonel most attentively.

"Ten paces from the north end of the gully, eh?" repeated she, as if speaking to herself. "I fancy I could find that tree, were I so inclined!"

"You, mademoiselle?" exclaimed the Colonel.

"Yes; if, as I remarked, I felt so inclined."

The Colonel seemed to meditate for some moments.

"Oh, if I had but influence enough over him to draw him away from his present hazardous and guilty mode of life, all might yet be well with him. Another land would afford him a safe refuge, if he could only be persuaded to seek that refuge."

Marguerite made no rejoinder. She was sitting, with her cheek leaning on her hand, apparently deep in thought.

"What brought him to Sydney, I wonder?" pursued the Colonel. "He has escaped the clutches of the law, so far, but such good fortune may not always be his."

His listener shook her head, and shivered.

"You would advise me to write to him, en-