The Heir?

CHAPTER IX.

Cottie waited and watched.

any more, would not hurt her; on the

other hand, he might be a bushrang-

er. At the thought her face grew

paler; f r she knew something of the

gangs of desperate men who were the

pest and the peril of that lonely re-

gion; and she had had experience of

their ruthlessness when they had at

tacked the stage-coach by which she

and poor Ronnie had been travelling,

She had escaped then, but, if these

were bushrangers, could she hope to

Then, with swift transition, he

thought, her heart, flew to Geoffrey.

It was not only she who was in dang

er but he the man who had protected

her. He would be coming up the

hill presently, all unconscious of the

peril which threatened him, and she

knew the character of the bushrangers

too well to doubt that they would fire

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Presently, after what seemed an age, she saw a movement in a bush a little way from the hut, and she knew that the man was approaching, crawling towards her like a snake; just, indeed, as she had crawled the night she had come to the hut. A lunp rose to her throat, the perspiration stood on her brow in big drops; she glanced round desperately at the loaded gun which stood in the corner; she knew that it would be worse than useless to fire at the man unless he

As she turned towards the window again she saw him crawling across the open, and she drew back from the window so that he might not catch her watching him, and going to the fire pretended to be cooking; but she watched the window with the tail of her eye, and presently, just above the sill, she saw his face. Seen under such circumstance as this, a face is imppressed upon the mind as a seal is impressed upon wax; and this one

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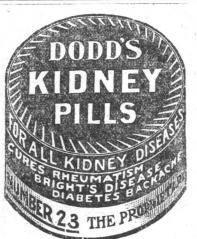
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was indelibly stamped upon the girl' memory. It was a countenance of the worse type, with brutality and cunning crying aloud from every feature. eyes were small and closs together the nose long and pinched, the mouth thin and cruel; it was a kind of face one sees amongst the criminal classes in a London back slum; and even at the moment the girl noticed that was unlike either that of a bushranger or a digger. It was an unpleasant face to gaze on at any time; it was a terrible face seen there, just above the window-sill, with its small, cunnng eyes, roaming round the room. She could have borne it better if he had knocked in the door and entered

openly and threateningly; but the effort to remain outwardly calm, and to affect ignorance with those horrible eyes wandering over her was almost too much for her, brave though And she was brave; for, incredible as it may seem, she managed, forced

herself, to keep her back to the window, and actually sang as she bent over the fire. And all the time she was actually thinking of Geoffrey, and praying, not that he might not come back, but that he might remain dangerous and an obstacle in their of warning him.

path. At the thought her heart beat Still singing, she went to the flour quickly, and she had hard work to tub and spread some flour on the suppress the cry which arose to her board as if she were going to make a damper; then, slowly and casually, She must warn him, save him; but she raised her eyes to the window.



The face had disappeared. Its absence brought a sense of relief to her overstrained heart, though she knew the man had not gone far; and after awhile, still with an appearance of perfect ease, she crossed before the window and glanced out.

There was no sign of him: and by

this she knew that he was not alone, and that he had gone back to report to his companions. She leant against the wall with her hands pressed to her brow, and tried to think. She told herself that she was safe, that they would not be likely to harm a lad; it was Geoffrey, the strong man who would resist them, who was in danger. She remembered, too, the presence of the gold; it was just possible that they might discover it; for the rangers were adepts at discovering hidden hoards; and the thought sent the blood to her face and made her set her teeth, with a sudden revolt against fate: for the gold was Geoffrey's, and might mean happines to him.

The silence, the almost intolerable silence and suspense, grew after a minute or two indeed unendurable; it was impossible that she could remain there like a rat in a cage, and do nothing. Under a sudden impulse, s're opened the door, and, again forc ing herself to sing, stood looking round her singing as if in search of

something. She had placed a bakingtin to dry in the sun, and she went towards it now, her eyes, under their long lashes, scanning the surrounding bush; and she reached the point which commanded part of the track up which Geoffrey would probably come. If she saw him, she could wave him back, could signal some kind of warning to him. But no Geoffrey was in sight; and with a still heavier heart, she went back to her hut, and softly slid the bolt in its place again. It was just possible that Geoffrey might not return for hours, not, perhaps, till night-fall; by that time all peril for him would in all probabil ity be over; for the rangers would not wait so long before attacking the hut. If Geoffrey did not return, the whole affair was in her hands; and the question was: what course she should adopt. To hold out against them was impossible She had the gun and a revolver; but the gang might be a large one; and even if there were only three or four, she, alone and unaided, could not long keep them at

She knew very well what their mode of procedure would be; they would search and rifle the hut of all that they could find - and they would search her! At the thought, the blood mounted to her face and her heart beat with a sickening dread. Her secret would be discovered, and not only her secret but the packet which was conceiled in her waist-band. She had forgotten the packet-it seemed to her at that moment as if during the last' few weeks

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she had forgotten all the past, everything, in the strange, sweet pleasure of her companionship with Geoffrey She must hide the packet some- can't tell what they've got stowed where. With trembling fingers she away. ripped open the seam of the waistband and drew the packet out. It was a small, flat parcel, folded and wrapped tightly, and roughly sealed with two splotches of re ! se !ling-wax. The sight of it recalled poor Ronnie and their old boy and girl life in Paradise Camp; and the tears sprang to her eyes; but they were forced back by a sharp thrill of terror, for at that moment she heard a step outside and there came a knock at the door. There was no time to hide the packet : mechanically she slipped it in her pocket, and stood, biting her lip and fighting hard for the semblance of

' Now, the scoat, after reconnoitering the hut, had crawled back through the bush to a hollow in the forest where two men were lying, face downward, awaiting him. They were rangers of the ordinary type, lean and desperate-looking ruffians, with countenances unrelieved by even the look of cunning which distinguished the scout's face. Not far from them their horses nibbled at the grass between the bush, every now and then glanc-

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ing about them, with the animal's instinctive imitation of his mister; it seemed as if they, too, were on the

watch and all alert. As the scout crept towards them, one of the men asked a mute question with a jerk of his head. The

scout drew himself close up to them. 'It's all right.' he said in a whisper-a low and almost soft whisperwhich had a touch of the Cockney

drawl in it that sounded strangely in that wild place and under such circumstances. 'It's a hut, but whether it's sheep or gold I can't say.' 'Let us hope it's gold, Sheeney.

whispered one of the men, with a glistening of the eye. 'Who's there?' Only a boy, replied Sheeney. 'I got up to the window and looked in

without his seeing me.' 'Sure?' asked the other ranger. "Quite sure, replied Sheeney. 'The

young beggar was singing over a damper while I was looking in.' What was in the hut? asked the

first ranger. 'Anything worth hav-Sheeney shrugged his shoulders.

'Usual kind of things; but you

(To be Continued.)

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