

THE LUCKIEST MAN IN THE COLONY.

That is ever a nice moment when your horse knocks up under you, and you know quite well that he has done so, and that to ride him another inch would be cruelty—another mile a sheer impossibility. But when it happens in the Bush, the moment is apt to become more than negatively disagreeable, for you may be miles from the nearest habitation, and an unpremeditated bivouac, with neither food nor blankets, is a thing that demands a philosophic temperament as well as the quality of endurance. This once befell the manager of Dandong, in the back blocks of New South Wales, just on the right side of the Dandong boundary fence, which is fourteen miles from the homestead. Fortunately Deverell, of Dandong, was a young man, well used from his boyhood to the casual hardships of station life, and well fitted by physique to endure them. Also he had the personal advantage of possessing the philosophic temperament large sized. He dismounted the moment he knew for certain what was the matter. A ridge of pines—a sandy ridge, where camping properly equipped would have been a perfect luxury—rode against the stars a few hundred yards ahead. But Deverell took off the saddle on the spot, and carried it himself as far as that ridge, where he took off the bridle also, hobbled the done-up beast with a stirrup leather, and turned him adrift.

Deverell, of Dandong, was a good master to his horses and dogs, and not a bad one to his men. Always the master first, and the man afterwards, he was a little selfish, as becomes your masterful man. On the other hand, he was a singularly frank young fellow. He would freely own, for instance, that he was the luckiest man in the back-blocks. This, to be sure, was no more than the truth. But Deverell never lost sight of his luck, nor was he ever ashamed to recognize it: wherein he differed from the average lucky man, who says that luck had nothing to do with it. Deverell could gloat over his luck, and do nothing else—When he had nothing else to do. And in this way he faced contentedly even this lonely, hungry night, his back to a pine at the north side of the ridge, and a short brier pipe in full blast.

He was the new manager of Dandong, to begin with. That was one of the best managerships in the colony, and Deverell had got it young in his twenties, at all events, if not by much. The salary was seven hundred a year, and the homestead was charming. Furthermore Deverell was within a month of his marriage; and the coming Mrs. Deverell was a girl of some social distinction down in Melbourne, and a belle into the bargain, to say nothing of another feature, which was entirely satisfactory, without being so ample as to imperil a man's independence. The homestead would be charming indeed in a few weeks in time for Christmas. Meanwhile the "Clip" had been a capital one, the rains abundant; the paddocks were in a prosperous state, the tanks overflowing, everything going smoothly in its right groove (as things do not always go on a big station), and the proprietors perfectly delighted with their new manager. Well, the new manager was sufficiently delighted with himself. He was lucky in his work and lucky in his love—and what can the gods do more for you? Considering that he had rather worse than no antecedents at all—antecedents with so dark a stain upon them that, anywhere but in a colony, the man would have been a ruined man from his infancy, he was really incredibly lucky in his love affair. But whatever his parents had been or had done, he had now no relatives at all of his own: and this is a great thing when you are about to make new ones in an inner circle; so that here, once more, Deverell was in his usual luck. It does one good to see a man thoroughly appreciating his good luck. The thing is

so seldom done. Deverell not only did this, but did it with complete sincerity. Even to-night, though personally most uncomfortable, and tightening his belt after every pipe, he could gaze at the stars with grateful eyes, obscure them with clouds of smoke, watch the clouds disperse and the stars shine bright again, and call himself again and again, and yet again, the very luckiest man in the colony. While Deverell sat thus, returning thanks on an empty stomach, at the northern edge of the ridge, a man tramped into the pine from the south. The heavy sand muffled his steps; but he stopped long before he came near Deverell, and threw down his swag with an emancipated air. The man was old, but he held himself more erect than does the typical swagman. The march through life with a cylinder of blankets on one's shoulders with all one's worldly goods packed in that cylinder, causes a certain stoop of a very palpable kind; and this the old man, apparently, had never contracted. Other points slightly distinguished him from the ordinary run of swagmen. His garments were orthodox, but the felt wide awake was stiff and new, and so were the moleskins; these, indeed might have stood upright without any legs in them at all. The old man's cheek, chin, and upper lip were covered with short grey bristles, like spikes of steel; above the bristles he had that "lean and hungry look" which Cæsar saw in Cassius.

He rested a little on his swag. "So this is Dandong," he muttered as if speaking to the Dandong sand beneath his feet. "Well, now that I am within his boundry-fence at last, I am content to rest. Here I camp. To-morrow I shall see him!"

Deverell, at the other side of the ridge, dimming the stars with his smoke, for the pleasure of seeing them shine bright again, heard a sound which was sudden music to his ears. The sound was a crackle. Deverell stopped smoking, but did not move, it was difficult to believe his ears. But the crackle grew louder, Deverell jumped up and saw the swagman's fire within a hundred yards of him; and the difficult thing to believe in then was his own unparalleled good luck.

"There is no end to it," he chuckled, taking his saddle over one arm and snatching up the water bag and bridle. "Here's a swaggie stopped to camp, with flour for a damper, and a handful of tea for the quart-pot, as safe as the bank! Perhaps a bit of blanket for me too! But I *am* the luckiest man in the colony; this wouldn't have happened to anyone else!" He went over to the fire and, the swagman who was crouching at the other side of it, peered at him from under a floury side palm. He was making the damper already. His welcome to Deverell took a substantial shape; he doubled the flour for the damper. Otherwise the old tramp did not gush. Deverell did the talking, lying at full length on the blankets, which had been unrolled, his face to the flames, and his strong jaws cupped in his hands, he discoursed very freely of his luck. "You're saving my life," said he gaily. "I should have starved, I didn't think it at the time, but now I know I should. I thought I could hold out, between belt-and 'baccy, but I couldn't now, anyhow. If I hold out till the damper's baked, it's all I can do now. It's like my luck! I never saw anything look quite so good before. There now, bake up. Got any tea?"

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