

forgot their troubles, those happy wretches. The means lay handy for drowning his trouble too. A savage craving came over him, and held him one hellish minute. He conquered it, and strude alone into the breathless solitude of the surrounding forest.

First the township was left behind; then all its sounds, and there were no sounds at all save the chattering of parrots: the murmuring of leaves, and the swish of Whitty's legs through the ferns and long rank grass. The latter sound was exchanged from time to time for a ringing tread on the dry bed of a creek or in odd spots where the ground was hard and flinty; but the swift restless footsteps never ceased. What was more peculiar, Whitty never raised his eyes from the ground—never directed his steps by one moment's reflection. He was reflecting, indeed, but of the dead past that had died that day. The present, the future, which until to-day had been all in all to him, was less than nothing to him now. But what was all over now had never been so dear to him. When the body is newly dead, and ever more beautiful than it seemed in life, it is sweet to linger by it, to muse upon it, to remember all: and it is sometimes thus with events and time.

The shadows of the tall trees, drawn out until there was no room for their full length on the ground, climbed the trunks of other trees and leapt the bodies of the fallen, overlapping and interlacing in labyrinthine complexity. Here and there the level sun-rays cut the forest like a flaming sword, and deep shadows might have embarrassed any one who happened to be walking anywhere in particular. But any direction was Seth's direction; he cared nothing where his wandering led him. If he thought of it at all no doubt he made up his mind that he could not lose himself, simply because for once he wasn't anxious not to lose himself. But it is more probable that, during most of that long afternoon, he was mentally unconscious of the hollyhock exertions he was making. Yet his clothes were heavy with perspiration, and for some time before sundown he had been tramping steadily uphill.

At last, quite late, when the sun was setting, Whitty stumbled across a blue-gum newly felled. He went on and came to another, at which he looked up, and there, straight in front of him, was Lovatt's tent. He had come in a circle right round to Lovatt's selection. The rough downward track ran twenty yards below.

Seth smiled bitterly. His unconsidering wandering seemed to show the guidance of a malignant fate, now that it had led him here. He stood still, and inspected the spot grimly. There were the traces of the lover's picnic, the white ashes of the fire still hot, and the air above it tremulous—and the rest of it. Here they had sat, hand in hand on this smooth round trunk. Those nodding saplings had heard their whispers, their tender talk, their lovers' sighs. Seth stepped over to the place, and sat down where they had sat, with a strange cold-blooded complacency. It did not move him to sit there, lonely and humiliated; so, then, nothing could move him more, and the jangling of their wedding-bells would fall quite peacefully upon his ears.

His foot touched a book that lay in the long grass, a book they must have forgotten, with the nice, becoming forgetfulness of true lovers. He picked up the book and opened it: it was poetry; he did not look to see whose poetry. He shut the book and laid it on the trunk beside him; there was no poetry in Seth. He rested his elbows upon his knees, and his temples between his hands. The short sharp twilight set in. Seth did not move. Had his attitude been but a thought more comfortable, you would have said that the soft continuous rustling of the leaves all around him had lulled him to sleep; only in that case he would not have detected so instantly a rustle of a different kind—the rustle of a dress.

He detected it instantly, and looked quickly up, and Barbara Lyon, in her cool white dress and wide straw sombrero, stood calmly before him; and, as if her calmness were not enough, a smile of friendliness and of sweet unconcern stole slowly over her face.

"My book," said she.

He got up and gave it to her, and did not sit down again, nor walk away, but stood gravely peering into her blue eyes, until they flinched and fell, and Barbara blushed a lively crimson. She drew away from him, then hesitated; then, with an unconcern which this time was but imperfectly feigned, she sat deliberately down upon the felled tree, and looked him fearlessly in the face.

"If you have anything to say to me," said Barbara, "say it here and now. Of course I did not dream of finding you here; I came for the book I left. But now that we have met, I shan't run away."

Nothing could have been colder than her

tones. Seth stood before her, upright and grave—more grave than sad, Barbara was piqued to think.

"There is very little to be said, Barbara," he answered her. "There is a good deal to think over, quite calmly; there is a good deal for me to grasp, a good deal for me to—"

There he hesitated.

"To judge?"

"Ay, to judge."

"And you will judge so hardly?"

"That will not hurt you."

Barbara's heel went deep into the grass. She took off her great round hat and played nervously with the strings. The soft twilight fell on her with great purity, leaving neither line nor shadow from the undecided edge of her hair to the extremely decided curve of her chin. She raised her eyes.

"Come, Seth, be frank. Tell me candidly that you have not been thinking about me all these months—that you have not been counting upon me. You are hurt, you are mortified; but frankly, admit that you are not heart-broken?"

"You really want an answer?"

Barbara bowed.

"Then I say that I have thought of you all these months—nay, every day, every hour. As for counting, I am human; and until to-day I believed in things, so I have counted too. My feelings at the moment are beside the point; it is of no account whether I am hurt, or so on. But as for breaking my heart for you, it may seem unmannerly, but I shall not do it. I should also say that I shall not think about you much more."

Barbara winced. Her heel sunk deeper in the ground. Her eyes flashed.

"Is this all you have to say?"

"I said it wouldn't be much."

"Then I may go?"

"I never asked you to stop."

Barbara turned white with anger, rose up, and went. Seth raised his wideawake; she took no notice. He stood watching her until she reached the road, and the trees and the gloaming hid her from him; she never looked round—he could scarcely have expected it.

When he knew that she was quite gone, and that was the last of her in his life, something seemed to strike and shake him to the core. A shiver went through his frame. He tottered to the felled tree, sat down there once more, and buried his face in his hands. It had been quite dark for some time when he got up. And the hard palms of his hands were wet.

His bearing in Barbara's presence had been very different.

It was seven in the morning when Trooper Whitty got back to the lonely little barracks in the ranges. The sergeant ran into a verandah with the soapuds on his chin, razor in hand.

"What on earth brings you back at this hour? You must have heard!"

"Heard what?"

"Your own good luck. I congratulate you—Sergeant Seth Whitty!"

Whitty stared like a fool.

"You're promoted," the other sergeant went on. "I told you they'd take the first opportunity, and they've taken it. You're to be sergeant, and sole boss of the show—for they don't need two there—at Timber Town. What's wrong? Isn't it good enough? You look like death, mate!"

Seth tumbled out of the saddle and stood just outside the verandah, shaking.

"I can't go there!" he said in a low hollow voice. "Anywhere else, but not there. I'll leave the force!"

Certainly his bearing before Barbara had been very, very different.

III

Of course Seth Whitty did not leave the Mounted Police, and of course he went to Timber Town, as sergeant, in the end. He was the last man to obey on calm reflection the impulse of a craven moment. At the same time, the calmest reflection could not deny that Timber Town, in the circumstances, held out a prospect of personal discomfort such a man might well be justified in shirking; and Whitty went there with set teeth and a heart of lead.

Timber Town made a fuss about him, but not the fuss it would have made at Christmas. It was a reactionary period: the New Year was just in; Timber Town had a headache; so Whitty got off cheaply. It was not the only respect in which he was to get off cheaply. For weeks and weeks he had nothing at all to do. Timber Town showed its high appreciation of his professional parts (as exemplified in the fate of Red Jim) by a temporary lapse into respectability; so that offences worth troubling about were unheard of, and even common assault became the most uncommon thing in the district. They were slack weeks at the bar-

racks. With the school-mistress's love affair going on under his nose, the weeks were something worse than slack for Seth. Now, had the authorities only sent some one else to Timber Town, Seth would have spared all this, while the other fellow might have filled up his odd half-hours very agreeably with Lovatt and Barbara. If a student of human nature, he never need have been dull; the characters of this pair were so well worth looking into.

Any one but Seth would have begun by making friends with his little neighbour, the schoolmistress (whom Seth had made enemies with on Christmas Day). He would have admired her greatly, and without danger or reservation, seeing she was already engaged; he would have admired above all things her pluck and spirit in coming out into the world to work for her own living (though not more than Seth did, who knew the circumstances). He would have discovered in her all the sweetest attributes of woman, and some masculine little traits as well. Only—he would have found her a coquette. Any one but Seth, it is to be feared, would have found her a dire and a mischievous coquette—and the worse one in that she had fallen too desperately in love with Jack Lovatt to work off her coquetties any more upon him. Sergeant Seth (though one would think he might have known, by this time, what Barbara was) was denied this experience at present, for a very simple reason: he was barely on bowing terms with the schoolmistress.

As for Jack Lovatt, he would have afforded a still more entertaining study, but one that required a key. The key to Lovatt's character was his past life. You would not have thought it of the energetic young bushman, but he was a gilded youth, with the gilt gone. Eton had expelled this free-selector; Christ Church had sent him down (permanently); at twenty his character had been too bad to be permissible in any commoner. Jack was only the son of a successful public man, and not even his heir; and in him such conduct was intolerable. You have no idea what a devil of a fellow he was at twenty. Yet at that very time the fellow was in love. A double crisis ensued. The girl gave up Jack for some one else, who was not going to the deuce, but in quite the contrary direction—got engaged, in fact, to her uncle's curate; and, contemporaneously, Jack's father cut him off with a thousand and closed the doors upon him.

So Lovatt came out to Australia. On the voyage he saw his follies in the plain light of reflection, and brooded fiercely over what he had lost, but tailed at his family. And the first thing he did in Melbourne was to take a few letters that were awaiting him, slip them unopened into a big envelope, and post them home with his initials. Then he went to Whittlesea (a fellow passenger gave him the introduction), and was quiet there. He was quieter still in the far interior. Gradually he came to forget, more than to regret; but, before that, he had made up his mind never to return to England, and had dismissed that thought finally. So he did not hanker for home, as some exiles do. On the other hand, he fell in love with bush life. Moreover, he became a highly respectable member of bush society; in spite of those occasional months in Melbourne, his moral colour toned down to a decent drab; and, ultimately, young Lovatt saved some money and determined to "select." His selection went rather farther than he had intended it to go; it so very soon included Barbara.

Lovatt was five and twenty now, and sufficiently attractive still; his attractiveness had been the ruin of him in England. He had hair like Byron's; nor was his hair the only point in which he plagiarised from that poet: one need not name them all; one need only mention that he was addicted by turns to infectious high spirits, and to a peculiarly winning form of melancholy. It was when the latter fit was on him that he met Barbara, and told her his story, omitting the love episode. Between them they substituted a new episode of a similar nature. There was plenty of intensity about this one too. Barbara, especially, was quite ridiculously in love; and Lovatt possessed the very qualities to keep her in love; thoroughgoing masculine selfishness, and a command of others which was as strong as his self-command had been weak.

Sergeant Whitty, during his first weeks at Timber Town, saw a good deal of Lovatt, and, as has been indicated, next to nothing of Barbara. To the sergeant's thinking, the Colonies, and the Colonies alone, had made a man of Lovatt; and, allowing for Colonial bias, there is no doubt that the sergeant was mainly right. Certainly Lovatt had roughed it a good deal, and that is always improving. His English conceit (Seth called it "English") was, at least, no longer conspicuous; those English mannerisms which, in the "new chum," had been so very offen-

sive to Colonial Seth, were invisible in the energetic selector. Yet the young fellow's charm of manner remained, and this was considerable; it had made even the new chum popular, and popular even in the bush. It was not difficult to conceive how Barbara had been fascinated by this young man; Seth was fascinated himself. Seth should have hated him; but it was impossible to hate the fellow. Seth came nearest to hating him when he fancied (as he sometimes did fancy, from little things) that Lovatt did not value Barbara quite as he ought.

Theoretically, it is better that you should not think a girl perfect just because you are in love with her, but there is generally something wrong somewhere if you don't. Perfection had once been too weak a word for Seth's estimation of Barbara. Unfortunately it was so still. But it was not a word that would have occurred to Lovatt. There was something wrong somewhere.

Lovatt worked hard and heartily on his selection, clearing the ground and preparing the site for the homestead; Barbara was happily at work in school; their spare hours they spent together. It was only the sergeant who was idle, and lonely, and sad.

Seth was no reader, so books could not help him through. Nor had he ever been a particularly sociable fellow; so the verandah of the Royal Hotel had no attractions for him. He occupied himself during the first week or two by setting his house and garden in order; but the garden, unfortunately, had been very well cared for by his predecessor, so there was no lasting labour there, and crime was still scarce. At length came a regular inspiration. Whitty offered to lend a hand at the selection, and the offer was accepted. Here he toiled the harder of the two. A craving for Barbara's good opinion lent him feverish energy, for it was an odd fact that what had principally troubled Seth of late weeks was the haunting recollection of his part in that interview with Barbara on Christmas Day. He was ashamed of his part in it. Not only did the memory of it prey upon him, but Barbara's cold looks reminded him of it whenever he saw her. If he had only kept her for his friend! As it was, she let him slave out there at her future home without rewarding him by so much as a smile. So at last he gave that up too, and sank into deeper dejection than ever, and gnashed his teeth over the continued law-abiding character of Timber Town, and yearned for another Red Jim to rise up and depredate the neighbourhood.

No such luck was in store; but an exciting thing did happen one evening in February. It was late, and the sergeant was smoking gloomily in his front verandah, when it all came about very suddenly. It began with a single sound: the sergeant just heard it, and it tightened every constabulary nerve; it was a woman's short, stifled cry of alarm.

The sergeant bounded out of the verandah, and crouched an instant to listen and to draw his revolver. In that instant the cry was repeated, still more faintly, but he knew now that it came from a back room in the schoolhouse, and from Barbara's lips. He leapt two fences and was in the school verandah in three seconds. The door was locked. He tried it with his shoulder; it would not yield. Barbara's cry came again. Then Seth stood back a yard and brought his flat foot with full force against the door right over the keyhole. The door flew in. Seth followed. A light came from under a door at the far end of the passage. Seth ran down the passage and opened this door upon a curious scene.

The room was a sitting-room—Barbara's sanctum, in fact; and at the far side of it, under the window, Barbara was sitting at a little round work-table, with her work-basket not twenty inches from her dilated eyes, and a brown snake rearing itself out of the work-basket!

Barbara never took her eyes from the snake when the door opened. The sergeant saw that she was paralysed with fright. Therefore the first thing he did was to say three words in a confident whisper:

"He's not deadly!"

But Barbara did not seem to hear.

Whitty was a fine shot with a revolver. But the snake was in a dead straight line between his hand and Barbara's bosom, picked out sharply against her loose white blouse, like a shadow on a screen. Whitty shifted his revolver to the left hand, crept forward with his right extended, and forefinger and thumb forming the capital letter C, pinched the snake just below the head in this forceps, and whisked it like lightning through the window.

Barbara glanced up in his face one instant, then lay back in her chair and burst out sobbing.

The sergeant went away and calmly despatched the snake. When he had killed it