

## THE MAD HATTER.

The man was squatting by the edge of the pretty little stream that gurgled and rippled along, and, to my astonishment, as I rode closer, I saw that he was gold-washing, or apparently so. Now, as the country round about did not appear at all auriferous, nor did I know of any diggings in the neighborhood, I felt considerably astonished.

He did not move when I came close.

"How are you getting along?" I asked, for the sake of opening a conversation. "An ounce to the dish?"

He twisted his head around to look at me, and said: "Not now, but it don't run bad. Three and four pennyweights."

He was a solemn-looking old fellow, and he made this statement so seriously that he rather staggered me. Then he went on quietly finishing the last of the dish, while I leant on my horse's neck and watched him. When he had finished he straightened himself up, and, with a satisfied smile, handed me the dish. I took it and inspected it. There was a little black sand, such as you can find anywhere in Australia; beyond that, nothing. I gave him back the dish without a remark, for I concluded it was a joke of some sort he was playing off on me.

Taking the dish back, he remarked, "You wouldn't think stuff ran like that about here, would you?"

"No, I should not," I replied. "How is it that the place is not rushed?"

The old man looked at me with a cunning grin.

"'Cos they can't. All this land about here once belonged to me; but I was swindled out of it. But not all—not all. I was too sharp for them. They didn't know that there was gold on this bit of land, so the swindlers left me that as worthless and now I'm working it. Listen," and he came close; "I've got nearly enough to buy back everything. I've been sticking at it now for years, and as soon as I've got all I want I mean to buy everything back."

I didn't know quite what to make of it, but the little township to which I was bound was just ahead, and I wished him luck and pushed on, leaving him filling up another dish from a bag of dirt that lay beside him.

Seated in the verandah of the hotel that evening, I mentioned to the landlord my meeting with the old man.

"Old Forsyth, the mad hatter," he said. "Yes, the old fellow's a character, isn't he?"

"He told me he owned all the country about here once?"

"Partly true; he had a big station once, and got a lot of land purchased, but he lost it all."

"He said he was swindled."

"Ah! that's part of his madness. He played the fool, and, of course, others took advantage of him. I'll tell you the old man's story if you like; it's a queer one."

Naturally I agreed, and the landlord commenced.

"Old Forsyth originally made his money on the gold fields, but that was before my time. When I came here he had a good bit of land, and leased a fair-sized station, and was a hard-

working fellow with a capital bank account. was a widower, with no children, and married a young wife. She was a good-looking fellow who married him for his money, and hadn't sense to know when she was well off. She finally eloped with a flash overseer he had, and that settled poor Forsyth. He drank and muddled away all he had in about eight years. Of course, he was swindled to a certain extent, but unscrupulous people took advantage of his stupidity to make good bargains out of him. No one would have believed that a man like him could be so fond of the woman; but there is no mistake, it broke him right up. That's the story He wound up with a bad attack of brain fever and since then he's been a harmless lunatic, possessed with an idea that he has a private gold mine, and has panned out a fortune in the creek. Of course there's no gold in this part need not tell you that."

"How does he exist?" I asked.

"That's where the romance comes in. When his wife ran away, she left him a year-old baby daughter, and when this child was born he was so delighted that he insisted on setting on her birthday gift of a small farm, and it was this up so tight that when the drink softened his brain, he could not make ducks and drakes—that; though many tried to get it from him, it was not of very much value, but that deserted girl has grown up a regular wonder. Smart as pretty. She keeps a lot of poultry, and runs the farm as a dairy. She's between 18 and 19 now and could have married well half a dozen times but no, she runs the place, and looks after the old man. Not that he wants much looking after as long as he's allowed to fill his bag with what he thinks is wash dirt, and take it down to the creek and wash it, he's happy."

The landlord stopped and lit a fresh cigar.

"There's one thing," he went on, "which none of us can make out. No one stops on the place at night but the old man and the girl, and a queer-looking servant woman they have there. Nobody's ever asked there. Two or three party sons have tried, in that familiar way they can put on when they like, but all they've got is snubbing for their pains. No, there's no reason why the girl shouldn't marry and have a home and family of her own, for the old man is a

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