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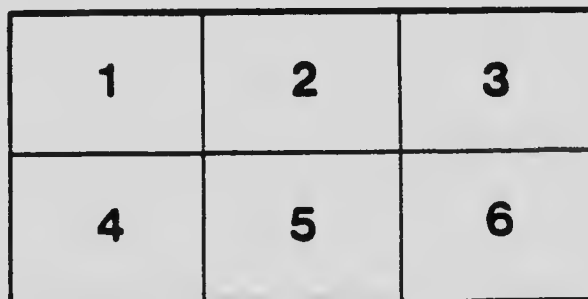
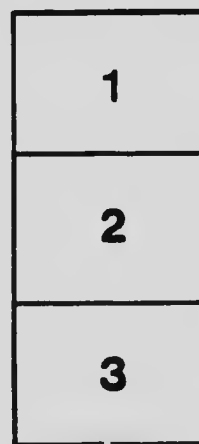
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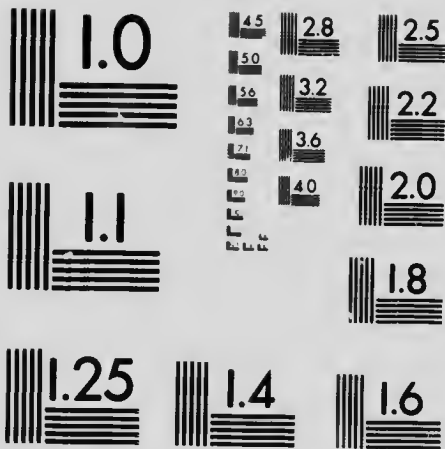
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The white man was swung backwards.

[See page 40]

# IN SEARCH OF SMITH

BY

JOHN MACKIE

AUTHOR OF

"THE HEART OF THE PRAIRIE," "HIDDEN IN CANADIAN WILDS,"  
"THE RISING OF THE RED MAN," ETC.



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## I

### THE GENERAL PROPOSES

“**M**Y dear General, if I had not cultivated politeness in the course of my medical career I should say that you were talking nonsense. You speak of a vast, unexplored region in Australia as if it were about as big as Yorkshire. You propose to penetrate into a country swarming with hostile blacks, and look for a gentleman whom you are not certain is there. And, lastly, you ask me to accompany you. Pardon me for saying so, but that suggestion is absolutely monstrous. I intend to spend the autumn of my life in quiet retirement, not in dodging the catering department of some cannibal queen.”

The General laughed as he bit off the end of a long black cigar. “It’s the same old Dickie Payne,” he said. “The same stubborn, conservative, severely logical, kind-hearted old Dickie. Twenty years have elapsed since you were the sawbones in my regiment, Dickie, and you have not changed an atom.”

“How about the natural process called decay?” I inquired.

“You are not decaying, Dickie,” cried the General. “You have moulted a little on top, and your waist measurement has increased half-a-dozen



inches, but, with those exceptions, you're a boy—a positive boy."

"According to your way of thinking," I said, "people will begin to remark that I am showing signs of age when I celebrate my hundredth birthday, and the papers publish the usual lies about my retention of all my faculties. However, let's talk sense. You propose to go and look for your friend Smith. You say that it is the first wish of your life to find him, and that you won't go unless I go with you. You place me in a most awkward position, General."

"The position I place you in is not half so awkward a position as poor Smith is in, if the reports I have received are true," said the General. "I last saw him in Egypt, when he walked most unconcernedly into my tent one day to tell me he was on his way to the unknown portion of Northern Australia. Since then, nothing definite has been heard of him. I have made exhaustive inquiries, and according to the blacks, who have wandered down from the interior to the coast, the white man that this dreadful black queen they talk of has kept a prisoner is undoubtedly Smith. He always was a chap for going where no other white man had ever set foot, and he has had some narrow squeaks, but this time he appears to have gone once too often. This queen or chieftainess is an example of the black who dominates his or her fellows by possessing qualities that one associates solely with the white race. Possibly, she is not entirely black. Anyhow, she wields immense power, and if one of her subjects so much as winks when she doesn't want him to,

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"Smith walked most unconcernedly into my tent."



off goes Lis head. Why, the blacks who have wandered into civilised parts absolutely shake when they mention her. The lady is said to be physically stronger than any man in her domain, and I should imagine that she is quite capable of picking up her Prime Minister in one hand and chucking him out of the council chamber if he says anything which displeases her. By all accounts, she is a terror, one of the worst, and this is the ogress that has got Smith in her clutches."

"Then," I said, getting up and hobbling to the mantelpiece for a match, for my old enemy, the gout, had me in a close grip, "I think I'll stay here, if you don't mind. I don't fancy interviewing her. But, seriously," I continued, as I resumed my seat, "doesn't it occur to you that all this sounds very like a fairy tale?"

"I daresay it does sound like a fairy tale," said the General, "a good many true things do. The fact remains, that such a woman does exist, and by accounts given at different periods by black fellows who have never seen one another, she is holding a white man in captivity. Now, not a few white men must have got into her clutches, because it is known that there is plenty of gold in the district that she rules, and in spite of the danger several fellows have been after that gold. Smith thought he was the first, but he wasn't. Nothing more was ever heard of those white men, and so presumably, our queen, finding nothing particularly attractive about any of them, disposed of them in the usual way."

"They went into the interior in two senses?" I suggested.

"An old joke, but it will pass," laughed the General. "Yes; we may assume that they served to replenish her stockpot. Smith, however, she found to be a man of different kidney. I know Smith well, and there is no end to his resource. He has had to use his wits so often in order to save his life, that he has developed all sorts of tricks for humbugging the simple native mind. Depend upon it, the queen found him too fascinating a fellow to serve merely as human nature's daily food."

"Well," said I, "go if you like. There is one thing you must remember—your boy Jack won't draw any insurance money. No insurance company on earth would have any dealings with a man proposing to take a trip of this kind."

"My boy Jack is going with me," said the General quietly.

I almost leapt out of my chair, but remembered my gouty foot just in time.

"You are going to take a lad of eighteen into a district swarming with cannibals?" I asked.

"The lad of eighteen," said the General, "is six feet high, weighs twelve stone, and can ride a horse and handle a rifle with any man in this country. When he heard that it was my intention to go to Australia, in an emphatic manner that is peculiarly his own, he expressed his intention of going with me. You have never met Jack, have you?"

"No," I replied. "I left the service before you married."

"You will find," said the General, "that he is the most dare-devil youngster you ever encountered,

and thirty-five years in the army makes a man acquainted with not a few bold spirits."

"Go on," I said. "Who else will be of the party?"

"My man Parker will, of course, go with me, and it would certainly do Maitland—Jack's tutor—a large amount of good to see a little rough life."

"Maitland? What sort of a fellow is he?" I asked.

"Another pleasure in store for you," said the General. "He is the exact antithesis of Jack. I found him down here when I came, you know. He is supposed to be suffering from his nerves, and I should think he is by the look of him. He is an Oxford man; took a good degree, and won the Newdigate prize among other pots. It seems he has been staying here for a year, and doesn't appear likely to budge. Got just enough money to live on, I should fancy, and doesn't see why he should make any more. At first he seemed inclined to run out of the room when Jack and I came into it, but I fairly cornered him one day, and talked to him like a Dutch aunt."

"What were the sentiments you expressed?" I inquired with a smile.

"Well, I suggested that a Varsity man of seven-and-twenty, sound in wind and limb, ought not to be prowling about a hydro among a lot of rheumaticky old men and women. I pointed out to him that the longer he stayed the longer he would want to stay. He didn't like it at all."

"So I should imagine," said I. "How did you prevail on him to accept the post of tutor to a young gentleman of the Jack persuasion?"

“ Oh, I got him on a soft spot,” said the General. “ Talked about his classics and how he was letting them rust. Read up Keats on purpose to talk about poetry to him. Got a shilling Emerson in the town and read that, and worked him up into an argument about some of Schopenhauer’s theories. Oh yes! after a time he left off looking as if he’d like to bolt out of the room as I came in, and one day, to my surprise, he laughed, and then I knew I had him. I have offered him a hundred a year with board, and lodging, and washing and all that sort of thing, if he’ll come away and tutor Jack until the young cub goes to Oxford. He’s accepted—at least, he says he’ll come to me for a month on trial, and yesterday he and Jack went off to my place in Leicestershire. I expect it will be a bit of a job getting him started for Australia, but Parker will manage it. You don’t know Parker, do you ? ”

“ No,” I said. “ Is that yet another pleasure in store for me ? ”

“ Distinctly,” said the General. “ Parker is about six men rolled into one—a sort of combination of soldier, sailor, bootblack, groom and professional cricketer. There’s nothing that’s ever been done on the cricket field that he doesn’t know.”

“ Quite a disturbing assortment of characters,” I said. “ Well, as far as I can make out, Jack and Parker and yourself are eminently suited to undertake this vague expedition. Mr Maitland will probably die on the voyage, and I’m not coming.”

The General rose from his chair. “ We leave a week from to-day,” he said, “ and by that time you ought to have got your gout under. Anyhow, it’s

a wonderful place, this Southville. I came down after a go of "flu," and I feel better than I've felt for ten years. Meeting you has put the finishing touch to my cure. I never thought when I took train for Southville Hydro that I should run across Dickie Payne, once of Ours. Think it over, Dickie." He put out his hand. "After all, you might come and see a bit of the world, and turn back when we approach the danger zone."

I, too, rose from my chair. "If I were to come," I said, "I should not turn back until I'd seen you through with the business—but I'm not coming."

"Sleep on it," said the General. "I've been piling on the agony a bit. The blacks Smith is supposed to be with may not be cannibals, and I believe they're approachable if you approach them nicely. I believe they've got Smith, and I'm going to have a look for him. It would not be a bad sort of trip, so don't make your mind up in too much of a hurry. Sleep on it." And with that General Taylor gave me a friendly nod, and strode off to bed.



## II

### THE EXPEDITION STARTS

**I**N ordinary circumstances, and with an ordinary man, I should have said no, and have stuck to it. But the General was not an ordinary man. More than that, he knew me, and knew just how to play upon my weak points to sway me to agree with him.

Sir Donald was one of the first soldiers in the land. Such was his popularity, indeed, that a brand of biscuits had been named after him. The reader may smile, but stars and orders and decorations and columns in the newspapers do not testify to a man's hold on the public mind nearly so eloquently as does his name on a biscuit tin. Was not Garibaldi so honoured? One recalls his famous red shirt—emblem of liberty!—every time one enters a grocer's shop. Is not Wellington also immortalised in boots and knife-powder?

It is unnecessary for me to detail how and why I yielded to the sponsor of the Donald Taylor biscuits, but yield I did. Two days after he had come into my life again we left Southville—with its soft breezes, its public gardens, its bands, and its invalid chairs—for the General's place in Leicestershire. The departure filled me with inexpressible relief, and I believe the General was glad to see the

last of this town of white faces and boarding-houses.

Although a person playing no very important part in this narrative, I owe it to the reader to explain that I had come to Southville when I sold my practice in a rural part of Warwickshire of which guide-book makers speak in glowing terms of praise. Having put in the twenty years that had elapsed since I left the R.A.M.C., as the parish doctor of the place, I was thoroughly tired of the beauties which these good gentlemen extolled in such lavish terms. I knew every tree, I might almost say, for miles round. So I retired upon my savings which, added to the substantial sum that the sale of my practice brought me, and the amount realised by the disposal of what little property I owned in the neighbourhood, were sufficient to yield me an income of three hundred pounds per annum—an income upon which a man of simple tastes, and no dissipations, save a liking for a game of bridge at mild points, ought to manage very comfortably.

When we arrived in Leicestershire I was duly presented to two members of the expedition—Jack, the General's son, and Maitland. Parker, of course, I got to know in a less formal manner. He was an ex-cavalryman, having left the colours when the South African War came to an end. Throughout the war he had acted as the General's orderly, and had not hesitated a moment in making up his mind whether to remain in the army or enter Sir Donald's service. Parker was a Cockney, with all a Cockney's ready wit and, if I may borrow a word from our late

foes—and spell it correctly by way of a change—“schelmness.” He was as ready with his fists as with his tongue, and was a perfect master at “hustling.” I would back him to pack up luggage, get it corded, carted to the station, labelled and put in the train against any man. There breathed not the cabman, waiter, or any other like functionary who could steal a march on Parker. In addition, he was perfectly at home with horses, could ride any kind of animal, and was as plucky a fellow as ever put foot in stirrup or glanced along the sights of a rifle.

His all-roundness was wonderful. He followed racing and cricket with avidity—knew the history of every horse of any quality, and could rattle off the points of all the big cricketers with a thoroughness that was surprising. He was, besides all this, a shrewd judge of character—and that was probably why he waited on Mr Maitland, on the morning of our departure, and reduced the chaos of that gentleman’s packing into perfect order in the short space of fifteen minutes.

“It was a job packin’ all them medicine bottles so they wouldn’t break,” he said to me with a grin; “so I left ’arf of ’em under the bed and the other ’arf on top of the wardrobe.”

Undoubtedly it was the versatile and untiring Parker who was responsible for getting us all duly on board the good ship *Dacca*, at Plymouth, bound for Queensland, within the remarkably short space of one week. How he did it I will not attempt to explain. I only know that the moment Sir Donald had mentioned the matter to him, Parker, without lifting as much as an eyelid or expressing a syllable of

surprise, immediately placed the telegram book before his master so that he might send a wire to the agents of the company and secure berths. He drew up mysterious lists, resurrected forgotten leather trunks and kit-bags, and began to pack them with such clothing as was necessary for a tropical climate. He also gathered together sufficient firearms to stock a small armoury.

As the General had predicted, Parker took charge of Maitland. He simply told the latter off-handedly that we were all going for a little pleasure trip into the interior of unexplored Australia, and that he would help him with what packing there was to be done. Before the bewildered Oxonian had grasped the import of his communication, Parker had taken possession of the luggage and packed it—with certain omissions!

Honestly, I do not believe that the tutor, although the principal party interested, was allowed to entertain any option of making up his mind as to what he should do. Parker settled that. When Maitland crossed the gangway to board our ship, I verily believe he only imperfectly realised he was really *en route* for Australia. Until we were well out at sea and had dropped the pilot, he might have been a deserter with an affable plain-clothes escort, so jealously was he guarded by the watchful Parker. Never, surely, was a distinguished classic kidnapped in so barefaced a fashion!

I am not going to weary the reader with facts and details of our voyage. It was much of a kind with the average. We had a few dirty spells, during which Maitland yearned in vain for his missing pills,

and was copiously supplied with draughts of seawater, Parker's infallible remedy for all the ills of the bad sailor; but for the most part, the weather was glorious, and by the end of a month even Maitland was looking a different man, though he was still very shy and retiring, and not half so bronzed and fit as most young men of his age would have become by this time.

The voyage gave Sir Donald ample time in which to mature his plans and sketch out the route he intended to take. Together we pored over the latest maps and came to a pretty definite conclusion that the particular district we were bound for was still practically unexplored and unknown. The reader may acquaint himself with the geographical position of the district in question by drawing a line through the map of Australia from north to south, almost exactly halving it; then, following this line down about one-third of its distance, he will know as much as we did, during our voyage, about Smith's possible whereabouts.

In due course we transhipped at Thursday Island in Torres Strait and made for Normanton in the Gulf of Carpentaria. From that young and growing little town we went to Burketown on the Albert River, and it seemed to me as if this must certainly be the *Ultima Thule* of civilisation. Nor was I far wrong, for between it and Port Darwin in the Northern Territory, about a thousand miles distant, there was no other settlement worth calling such; nothing but a few solitary cattle runs—great open plains by the coast, where the cannibal black and the wild horse roamed, with here and there long

rocky, wooded spurs running down from the wild chaotic mountain-land of the northern Never-Never.

I have not paused on the way to analyse our respective emotions when, after six weeks of ocean and sun-baked deck, we found ourselves at the other side of the world under a seldom-changing sky of clear opalescent blue. It will be readily understood that Maitland and myself did not readily grow accustomed to such a complete change of scene and climate. I doubt, indeed, if Maitland ever did grow quite accustomed to it. I believe that his attitude from beginning to end of the adventures we were destined to experience was never anything but that of a wondering tourist, and, moreover, of a tourist who had undertaken the tour much against his will. As for me, let the reader place himself in my shoes and transport himself from a humdrum country village, with its peaceful lowing of cattle, grunting of pigs and clucking of poultry, its uneventful yearly round, its very local gossip, its tiny scandals and trivial excitements; a village where folks—as I had good reason to know—suffered but little from illness, and mostly attained a sturdy old age; a calm, provincial settlement where Time pursued his “everlasting journey” almost unnoticed—let the reader, I say, transport himself in imagination from such a spot to an Australian coast township, peopled by a mingled assortment of white, yellow, brown and black men, and visited from day to day by a crowd of furtive-eyed, evil-looking, so-called semi-civilised savages, who wore next to nothing in the way of clothing, and always carried spears, clubs and boomerangs. Such was the heat

that, of the whites, no one save the principal store-keeper wore a coat, he in consequence being regarded as a person entitled to give himself airs.

Jack Taylor settled down to his new surroundings with youthful ease; like a kitten starting life in a new home, he investigated everything with boyish zest and curiosity. His spirits never flagged, and his energy was untiring. As for Parker, tropical skies were no novelty to *him*, and the ex-cavalryman, pursuing his duties with an unruffled mien, looked the world in the eye with a cool truculence that soon landed him in a series of contertemps from which he emerged a little less beautiful of countenance, but emphatically victorious. For Parker was a "Tommy" of the best fighting quality; as ready with his fists as with his tongue, hard as nails, level-headed, alert, and of the dogged type that fears no foe and never knows when it is beaten. It is this type that has won the little British Isles such big slices of the world.

Sir Donald, too, being no stranger to scorching suns and unluxurious methods of life, quickly adopted the look of the land, and might readily have passed for a genuine colonial. He was not new to Australia, having, when stationed in India a dozen years previously, utilised a six months' holiday in looking up a younger brother of his who had a cattle run in this very locality. About the time that the eccentric and adventurous Smith set foot in the Never-Never country, this brother of the General's had died. Sir Donald had, he told me, endeavoured to persuade his widowed sister-in-law to sell the run and leave the Gulf country, but as she and her

## THE EXPEDITION STARTS 23

family liked the place they had stayed on, generally going south in the hot season. Of course, at the Antipodes the farther south one goes the cooler it gets.

“The eldest girl,” Sir Donald added, “is eighteen, and is called Madge. I’m told she is quite nice-looking, and I’m wondering what her manners are like.”



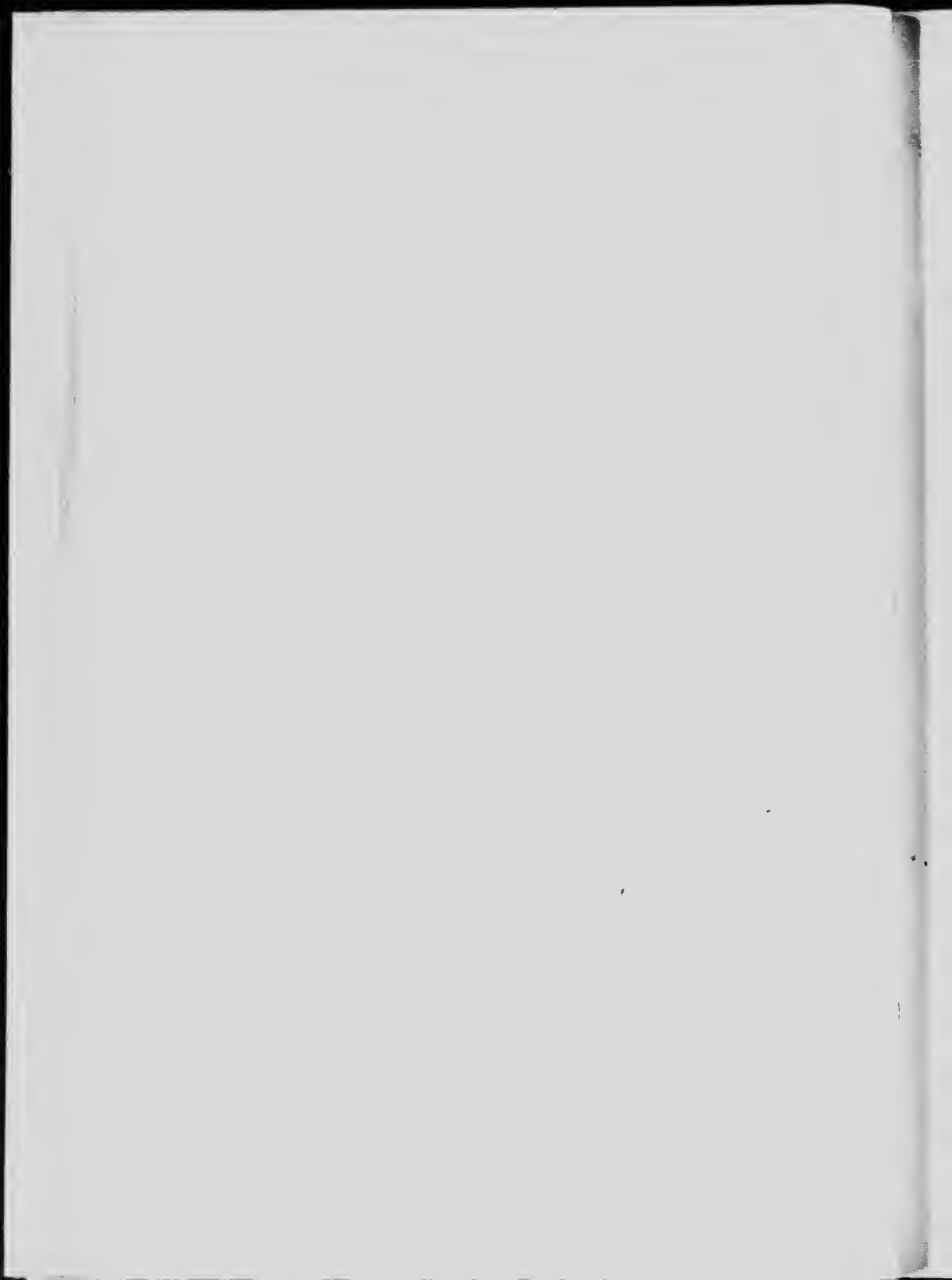
### III

#### INTRODUCES A FAIR DUELLIST

I SHALL never forget the first time I caught sight of this young lady. The General, Maitland, Jack, Parker and myself having bought several horses, chose five of the best, and rode out to Hans Lagoon, where the widow's cattle run was situated. Though open and bare round Burketown, the country was beautifully wooded as we neared the lagoon. Before we got to the station buildings, which were pleasantly placed on slightly rising ground, we heard an odd hubbub ahead. The excited barking of dogs was mingled with pistol-like cracks. We pushed forward, and in the clear space of the bush beheld a remarkable sight. A tall, slim girl in a white dress, with a stock-whip in her hand, was facing an enormous carpet snake which was coiled close to a large fallen tree. His big head was raised, and his slender neck was bent into the form of a capital S, the curves lying flat behind the head. His agate-like eyes were instinct with a fiendish intelligence and rage. He must have been fifteen feet long, a more than usually large specimen of this, the larger of the Australian species of the python family. Smaller than the boa-constrictor, the anaconda of America, or the rock snake of India and Java, the carpet snake of Australia



She was facing an enormous carpet snake.



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and his cousin, the diamond snake, are fairly awkward reptiles to tackle when roused and disposed to show fight. Although not venomous, they have a good set of biting teeth, and once those teeth grip the flesh, the long powerful body writhes round the victim, and squeezes the breath out of him with a pressure of mighty strength.

As we rode up, the snake was making ready to strike. The head lay absolutely motionless, but behind it the neck was slowly curving into loop after loop until the loose flat coils represented enough "slack" to enable the head, when shot out, to reach to its object, while yet the lower coils remained firm, held by the grip the end of the tail had on the fallen tree. The blue forked tongue flicked in and out between the lips as the head commenced to sway to and fro gently and rhythmically. The lighter-coloured scales along the neck began to glisten, and the dark mottled pattern on the body, not unlike a Brussels carpet worked out in blotches ranging from dirty yellow to purple-brown, became more vivid as the sweat of anger oozed through the skin.

The girl heard us approach, but did not take her eyes off her enemy.

"Keep back, dogs, keep back!" she said; then, raising her voice, "Keep back on those horses. Can't you see you'll scare him!"

Scare him! Scare that cold merciless fiend making ready at the moment to strike at her, and grip her to death with those terrible writhing coils! I reined in my horse, fascinated by the spectacle, not able

to move my eyes from it, forgetful ever of the rifle that was slung to my saddle.

The girl stood, lithe and willowy, one hand grasping the short eighteen-inch haft of the stock-whip, the long, thin, twelve-foot lash of green-hide held in coils between the fingers of her other hand. Her left foot was slightly advanced, and her weight rested on the right. There was a slight flush showing under the tan of her cheeks, and a purposeful determination in her hazel eyes. We realised that Round No. 1 was about to take place, and that the combatants were watching each other for an advantage.

Suddenly the girl raised her right arm and the long lash leaped out and swung round her as she circled the whip-haft over her head. The snake, taking time by the forelock, reared and threw himself at her as might a hand-roped whirl on a pier when thrown from an incoming ship. Our hearts stood still, and I heard Maitland give a cry of alarm. But the girl saw the snake coming, and sprang to one side; then, turning, her arm went up sharply, the long coil straightened out behind her; there was a quick forward motion of the wrist, and down came the lash like a living thing. It cracked like a pistol shot, and we could see a quiver run through the frame of the huge reptile as he winced under the blow. In a minute he had recovered, and gathered himself up as before to await Round No. 2.

Evidently the young lady did not believe in the rules of Queensberry when fighting snakes, for she gave him no time to recover from his discomfiture. Up went her lithe arm again, back flew the green-hide, and with a sharp, determined, downward

## INTRODUCES A FAIR DUELLIST 27

motion which brought it up with a jerk, the lash was at its limit, and again a sharp report rang out right over the head of the enemy. She had missed his neck by a bare inch.

He took the insult fairly well, though his eyes absolutely scintillated with fury. If he could only throw himself more than half his own length—which is a snake's limit—he would have this slip of a girl in a trice!

No one dared speak. The girl and the snake were watching each other like two gladiators. It was Round No. 3, and a fight to a finish. Which of them would make the first move?

A dog precipitated matters. It rushed in upon the serpent, the latter made a lunge at him, and the dog only escaped by the merest fluke. A cut from the whip sent him yelping away to safety.

The Diana-like maid of the bush had hardly drawn back the lash before the snake recovered himself, and struck at her again. Too much to the right this time, but he coiled back like lightning and prepared for another spring. Obviously he was getting aggressive now and wanted stopping. With a firm upstroke of the hand over the right shoulder, the green-hide flew out to its full length. Then, with a forward and downward swing, out went the thong of the whip. This time the end of the lash caught the snake full on the throat, and it fell back with a broken neck—a bullet from the General's revolver putting an end to its contortions.

It had been a plucky tussle, and this time the woman had prevailed over her traditional enemy.

"Bravo!" cried Sir Donald, lapsing from his

usual dignified bearing, and waving his hat wildly ;  
“ well done, my dear young lady. That was as good  
a fight as I ever saw in my life.”

She looked up at him quickly. It was a striking  
face, slightly flushed as it was with the excitement  
of the moment. It would have monopolised our  
attention had not something happened to distract  
us. Maitland had dismounted, and was leaning  
against his horse with a very white face.

“ Hullo there,” cried the General sharply, but  
not unkindly, “ what’s the matter with you ?  
You’re surely not going to faint ? Give him a drink  
out of your water-bottle, doctor.”

But I was too late, and had it not been for the  
girl herself, who caught the reeling tutor by the  
shoulder and steadied him in a very business-like  
way, he would have fallen. He came round quickly,  
although he was white to the lips.

The girl gazed curiously at the Oxonian, and  
then, turning away from him, looked at the General.  
Sir Donald caught her by the shoulders, and gazed  
intently at her as he held her at arm’s length.

“ I see my brother’s face in yours. You are my  
niece, Madge Taylor, are you not ? ” he cried.

“ Why, you are my Uncle Donald ! ” she ex-  
claimed, and kissed his sunburnt cheek. “ Fancy !  
We didn’t expect you for days. Why didn’t you  
send on word you were coming ? Are these all your  
sons ? I thought there was only one.”

Her eyes settled on me with so much quizzical  
mischief in them that I laughed outright.

“ My sons ! My dear Madge—that’s my old  
regimental sawbones. My son ! What next, indeed !

## INTRODUCES A FAIR DUELLIST 29

Why, Payne's as old a man as I am. Good gracious me! That's my son there—don't laugh at your father, sir—that's Jack, and this is Mr Maitland, Jack's tutor, who is going to make a man of him."

"Is he?" The delightful inflexion of the girl's voice as she bowed to the pallid Maitland was perfect. She looked away from him to Parker, who had walked over to the dead snake, and was turning it over with his foot.

"And that?"

"That's my servant Parker," the General answered curtly.

"Ah!" said the girl.

I saw the General's brows contract. His niece was puzzling him somewhat.

"But come to the house, Uncle, mother is dying to see you again," she said.

She turned and caught her horse, which had been quietly standing in the shade of a tree. Jack sprang forward to help her, but before he could get up to her she was in the saddle, Parker standing open-mouthed in admiration and astonishment.

"We'll take the nearest way," she called out, and as we mounted her horse went off at a gallop, setting us a pace that tried poor Maitland's horsemanship sorely, for the route lay through the bush, over logs and ant-hills, and between trees, until every moment I expected to see the scholar's saddle empty.



## IV

### WE MAKE AN ENEMY

**T**HE station homestead was a long, low house with deep verandahs, shaded by picturesque, graceful palms and tall trees, from which trailed magnificent passion vines ablaze with scarlet, white and purple blossoms.

“I daresay there are many things here, Mr Maitland, you will think primitive and crude,” said Madge to the tutor; “but remember, you in England have had all your beautiful old places made for you, while we have had to make ours out of the wilderness.”

“And Nature has nobly backed you,” I said, admiring the magnificent vegetation and the lawn-like stretch of green turf that led up to the front of the house.

We were led under a deep, cool verandah with a bark roof, and there we found the General's sister-in-law, Mrs Taylor, widow of his late brother, and Madge's mother. She looked what she was—a woman of refinement and capacity for work, one who in a new country had taken the rough state of affairs as a matter of course, who had not sat still and sighed for comfort and luxury left behind in a distant land, but had courageously tackled the work around like a true gentlewoman. She had made

order out of chaos, and a beautiful home with most of its comforts, and even luxuries, out in the wilderness. Truly Providence helps those who help themselves.

She welcomed us in a way that made us feel at home at once. Besides Madge there were two other girls, who would soon be going down to Sydney to school. The oldest of the family, a boy, was away there at the University. Mrs Taylor, like her daughter Madge, had a great liking for the bush, and all the many wonderful things it contained. So far as Madge was concerned, she knew infinitely more remarkable truths about it than the many naturalists who peep into it, and then go away to write a book about it.

When Sir Donald told about our mission, which was to find his old friend Smith, his newly-found relatives evinced considerable interest. It was evident they were cognisant of something that might throw light upon the subject. Mrs Taylor told us of it.

Some surveyors about a year ago, she said, were defining the one hundred and thirty-eighth degree of eastern longitude—the hitherto hypothetical boundary line between the Northern Territory and Queensland. They had travelled up from the south with camels, traversing hundreds of miles of arid desert with here and there magnificently watered and wooded strips of country. For months they had not seen a white face outside their own little circle. At times the blacks had showed up, but generally kept at a respectful distance. They had

reached the wild, irregular, mountainous country of the Never-Never, when one day the party with the exception of two of its members went out on its usual survey. One was the cook, the other a surveyor who was sick. The cook had probably gone to sleep, and the sick man was wondering when his companions would return, when he heard a footstep outside his tent. Next moment an odd-looking white man stood in the doorway, and nodded to him in a most casual fashion.

The sick surveyor afterwards said that, such an extraordinary appearance did this stranger present, for the moment he was inclined to believe he was asleep and dreaming. The visitor was tall and very thin, with mild blue eyes, and long fair hair. On his high Grecian nose were eyeglasses, from which dangled a piece of string. A dirty white battered helmet was perched on one side of his head; a faded shirt in tatters; an extremely dirty pair of cord breeches in a like condition; and a pair of Wellington boots with the tops partially cut off, completed his wardrobe. In one hand he held a sporting rifle. Across his back was slung a leather bag resembling those used by school children. He seemed remarkably self-possessed and placed his gun against the side of the tent, removed his helmet, from the crown of which he took what looked like an old rag and mopped his forehead. Fixing his pince-nez, he said: "Good-morning!"

The surveyor was so taken aback by this apparition in the lonely wilderness that, for the moment, he was incapable of speech. But the stranger seemed quite at his ease.

“Anything in the papers lately?” he inquired in a courteous if somewhat casual manner.

“It’s nearly a year since I’ve seen a paper, far less seen a white stranger,” exclaimed the surveyor. “But you’re very welcome, sir, and you’ll pardon me if I express surprise at seeing you. May I ask where you come from?”

“Over the way,” replied the visitor, jerking his thumb in the direction of a precipitous mountain-side. “Do you happen to have such a thing as a match about you? Making one’s own fire like a nigger become monotonous.”

The still wandering surveyor handed him a box, and inquired where the rest of the visitor’s party was, and if it had been sent by the Queensland Government to meet them.

“I’m all on my little lonesome,” replied the human scarecrow, skilfully striking a match on his trouser leg. “I’ve been batching it all by myself for some little time now. Could you kindly inform me, sir, what the name of the fortunate quadruped was that won the Derby?”

“Bless my heart, how could I hear!” exclaimed the surveyor.

“Or which of the blues won the boat race?” asked his questioner.

“My dear sir,” said the surveyor, “how was it possible to hear such things in this howling wilderness!”

The seedy stranger stroked his long moustache, and as he blew the tobacco cloud into air, meditatively remarked:

“Ah, well, I admit this sort of life has its dis-

advantages. I thought perhaps you might have heard somehow. It's only lately an interest in such worldly topics has begun to revive in me. You see, once upon a time I had too much Derby and that sort of thing generally, and then there was Natal and the Tugela only a few years ago, so being a believer in change I came out here into the wilderness for a spell to recover. Signs of recovery in me are a desire to resurrect old interests: and, by the way, you don't happen to have such a thing about you as a cigar, do you? The law of association works wonders where a cigar is concerned, and the weed I'm smoking is vile."

The surveyor was beginning to wonder if his mysterious visitor was in his right senses. Fortunately, he did happen to have a cigar—one that by some unaccountable whim he had kept intact for many weary months. He found and handed it to the stranger, whose thanks were profuse and obviously very sincere.

The stump of a briar pipe was put away and the cigar promptly lit and smoked with every sign of enjoyment. The conversation was resumed. But the surveyor, although he tried hard, could get no definite information from the ragged stranger as to what he was doing in the wilderness.

Having finished his smoke and warned his host to keep a sharp eye on the wild blacks in the neighbourhood, his mysterious visitor picked up his rifle, shook hands, backed out of the tent, and made off up the valley again. Although a search party was instituted to find his whereabouts, no traces of him could be found. It was noted that the wild blacks

in no way interfered with them in that particular district. So skilful had the stranger been that the surveyor had not elicited the slightest information regarding his identity.

When Mrs Taylor had finished her extraordinary story, Sir Donald exclaimed :

“That was Smith, my old friend Smith ! He was always reserved concerning himself, and I can remember his weakness for good tobacco. To me the strangest feature of the whole affair is that Smith is as level-headed in most things as any man I know, so what he is doing out here is a mystery I cannot fathom.”

Despite the General's earnest manner, his remarks were received with significant silence and, I am afraid, suppressed smiles. He evidently noted this fact, for he immediately began to expatiate upon the virtues of his ubiquitous friend, than whom, he declared, there was no better fellow breathing. He had especially a way with niggers, he said, that nothing could stand up against—certainly not the niggers. At the same time, Smith was goodness itself, and he had known him give a black man, who possessed neither shirt nor collar, a favourite neck-tie, simply because the fellow had expressed admiration for it.

The goodness of heart of the absent one having thus been vindicated, Sir Donald proposed to go out and have a look around before lunch. We separated to do as we individually pleased until then.

After lunch the General and I sat with Mrs Taylor on the verandah while Jack and Maitland

strolled away to examine the many novelties, to their eyes, in the garden round the house. Presently the General caught sight of Madge, with a bridle dangling over her shoulder, disappearing into the bush.

“Good gracious me!” he exclaimed. “There’s Madge going off by herself.”

Mrs Taylor glanced round.

“She’s off to the paddock to catch a horse, I expect.”

“To catch a horse? Haven’t you a man about the place to do that for her?” he demanded.

“Oh, you don’t understand our bush ways yet, Donald,” she answered, laughing. “We prefer to do things for ourselves rather than be waited on.”

“Bush ways or not,” returned the General, “I cannot see her go off by herself like that when there is a man about the place to catch her horse for her. Here, Parker!” he shouted, as he saw the ex-cavalry trooper loitering among the palms.

Parker came up at a trot.

“Miss Madge has gone over there to catch a horse. Double after her and catch it for her,” the General said, and Parker turned on his heel and set off at a trot towards the point indicated.

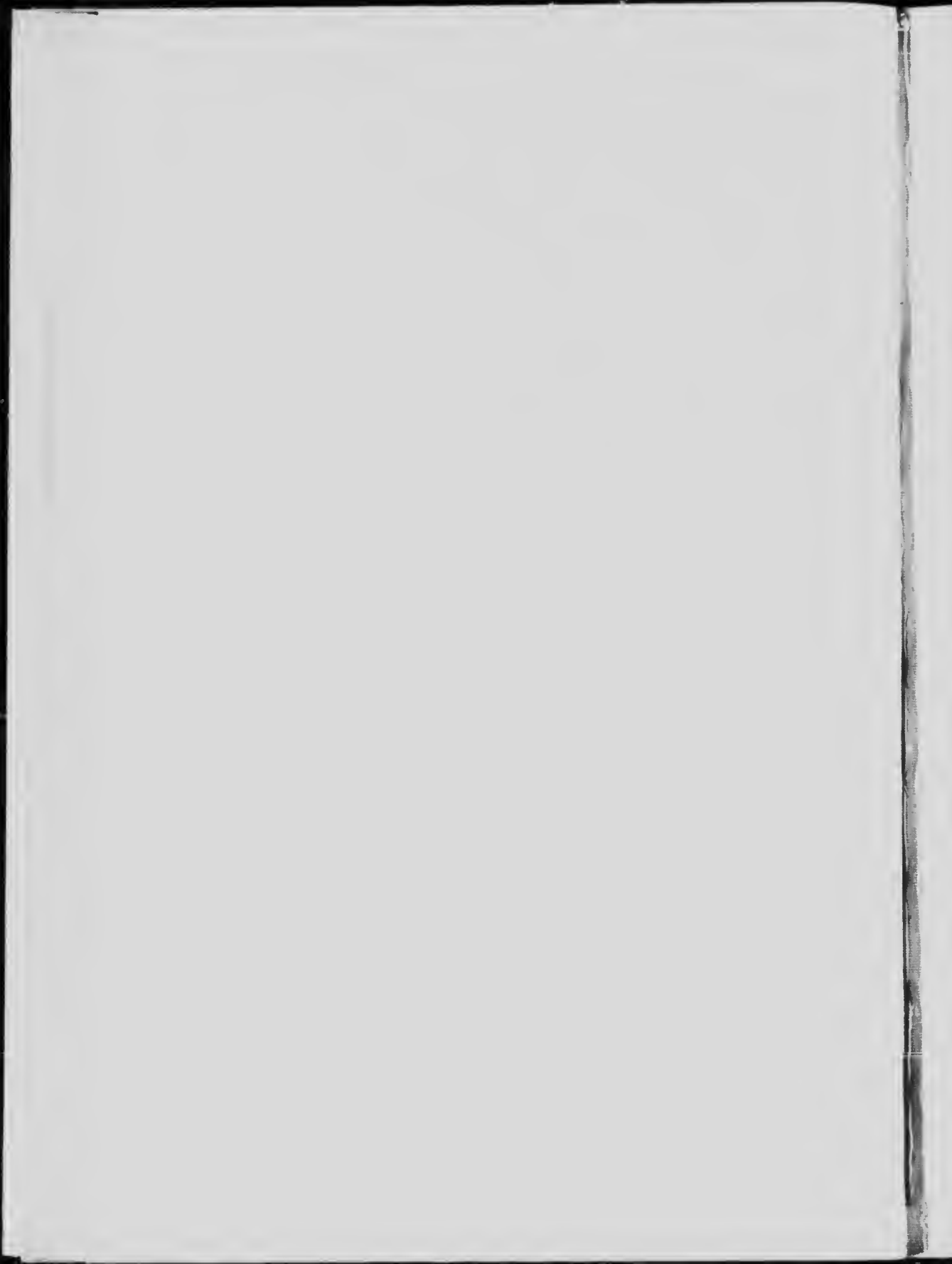
So it was that there came to my ears the story of Parker’s first adventure in the bush, and of his first meeting with one who was to play no unimportant part in our experience during the next few months. Reconstructing the incident and putting the details in their proper order, the story is as follows:—

Madge had taken her bridle and set off to a



"Hello, Crocodile," said the girl, "what you want here?"





paddock that lay about half-a-mile from the station buildings in order to get her favourite horse, Barney, a half-broken thoroughbred that would allow no one else to approach him. It was her intention to ride half-way back to Burketown with us in the evening—that was to say, if we insisted on going back. She had taken a short cut where a track led through a thick clump of wattle, and had nearly reached the paddock, when, noiselessly as a shadow, a thick-set and evil-looking black fellow, wearing only a dingy pair of moleskins, came on in front of her. In one hand he held a short thick club called a nullah-nullah. His forehead was low and receding, his nose broad with wide nostrils like the tops of air-shafts looking to the front, and his mouth big and thick-lipped, all significant of the primitive warrior and hunting instincts.

“Hello, Crocodile,” said the girl; “I thought you’d gone to the bush again. What you want here?”

“Me wantun that one yaraman, horse. Gif me bridle,” he demanded insolently.

“All right,” said Madge with apparent indifference; “supposing you catch and ride my horse, me gif him you.”

The black fellow snatched the bridle from her.

Barney hearing her voice had come up to the slip-rails, and now stood with his head over them, his ears pricked up and his eyes showing the white freely as he snorted at the black fellow, who, like all his race, shed a subtle musky aroma around him. While the black fellow crept through the fence, the horse stood quite still save for a restless tossing of

his head. Pausing for a moment to sort the bridle, Crocodile passed, as he thought, out of the range of Barney's eyes and turned in his stride so as to come up under the horse's flank. He had come near enough to reach out his hand ready to grasp Barney by the mane, when that astute animal expressed his views on the subject. With a propping jump on his forelegs and a swing of his hind quarters, Barney had his victim well within reach of a lashing kick. The black, intent only on the movements of the horse's head, took a step forward; the off-side hind leg shot out and Crocodile measured his length on the ground.

Scrambling to his feet he shouted out: "Baal that fellow any good; my word, me plenty soon gif it what about."

Madge, leaning on the slip-rails, warned him to be careful, and Parker, who had come up, stood in the shade of a thick-growing wattle, awaiting developments.

They arrived rapidly. Crocodile made a rush at the horse, and was again caught by a flying hoof which struck him fairly in the chest. After Crocodile had been twice kicked in the ribs by Barney, and had once been within an ace of having his skull fractured, he managed somehow to secure the discriminating animal. Two minutes later, when he had let down the slip-rails, and vaulted on the captive's back, he felt as if the end of the world had come. He was sent flying through the air and to Mother Earth again. No white man could have survived that smash, but a black, like a cat, takes a lot of killing. As Barney galloped off round the paddock,

Crocodile staggered to his feet. He saw Madge smiling. It was his turn to experience the addition of insult to injury.

“Baal you catch-um that horse,” the girl cried. “You gif it me bridle.”

Crocodile gave one ugly look into her eyes, muttered a deep imprecation in his own tongue, and sprang at the girl. He seized her round the waist with his sinewy arms and swung her off her feet as though to dash her to the ground. Then Parker took a hand.

A well-placed left under the jaw, and right on the lower ribs, caused Crocodile's arms to lose their tension for a moment. Madge, angry but self-possessed, freed herself and stood back.

Crocodile, his eyes glistening beneath his low, scowling brows, his white teeth showing as his lips parted in his gasps, his ugly nostrils quivering, stood facing Parker, with vicious intent showing in every feature. The Cockney trooper, with one quick glance into Madge's face, squared up to his coloured foe, his weight thrown forward ready for a back spring, his arms ready to fight or wrestle, and his eyes alert for either a blow, a trip, a grip or a kick.

The black's eyes blinked for a second, then he rushed in and closed with his enemy. Backwards and forwards they staggered, now one, now the other gaining a slight advantage. While it was strength for strength, the match was fairly even, too even, indeed, for the black, who saw that he would have to outwit his adversary in some way. His quick eye caught sight over Parker's shoulder

of a thick-set thorn-bush, a shrub that is a veritable vegetable porcupine with the additional faculty of producing an irritating sore wherever the flesh is wounded by one of the thorns. He gave way a little, and Parker, seizing the opening, put forth all his strength to force his man to the ground. With a quick sideward lurch Crocodile had Parker off his balance, and the next moment the white man was swung backwards into the thorn-bush.

Madge sprang to Parker's assistance, for Crocodile was already stooping to grasp a stone. The trooper had hardly risen to his feet when it caught him in the chest, leaving a bruise that lived for weeks to rankle as a reminder of the black's strength. Missing a second tumble into the thorns by barely a foot, Parker pulled himself together and settled down to business.

Five minutes only elapsed before Crocodile, very sore and very sad, hung over the three-rail fence like a wet rag on a clothes-line.

"'Ad enough?" demanded the trooper triumphantly. "If not, there's more waiting."

Crocodile looked at him out of the only eye he could get open; then he sank to the ground, wriggled under the lower rail of the fence, and painfully dragged himself to the shelter of a patch of scrub. At the edge of the scrub he regained his feet.

"By-en-by, white fellow, by-en-by. My word, you catch it plenty!"

A stick he had picked up whizzed through the air straight for Parker's head as the black vanished into the scrub. Fortunately it struck the branch of

a tree before hitting Parker, but it made him see stars all the same.

At that moment, Barney came up to the fence and neighed.

"Come on, old boy, I want you," Madge exclaimed as she turned towards the horse.

In a few minutes more she was leading him towards the station buildings.

## V

### THE THRESHOLD OF THE NEVER-NEVER

“**C**ROCODILE is a very bad lot,” said Madge to Parker as they walked homewards together. “But please don’t say anything about this at the station. You see, I want to go on with your party to the head-waters of the MacArthur River. An old school friend of mine, called Millar, has gone there on a trip with her father to fix on the head station for a new run, and I want to visit her. They went round from Port Darwin by boat to the MacArthur, so saved the greater journey overland.”

Parker promised. He was a chivalrous man, and anyhow he thought the party need not trouble about any number of hostile niggers. He would, however, from a sense of duty, drop a hint to his master about the attitude of Crocodile, but not until the expedition had started.

Then Madge thanked the manservant for his timely help, and expressed the hope that the thorns did not hurt much. Parker’s reply was vague, although his sensations were the reverse. He promised himself the pleasure of a settlement with Crocodile on the first available opportunity.

Before we left the cattle station that day, Madge had won her point that she should go with our party

## THRESHOLD OF THE NEVER-NEVER 43

as far west as the head of the MacArthur River, where, judging by letters from Port Darwin, it was certain her friends must be. Roughly speaking, we would have to cover several hundred miles of new country. To an Old Country person such a trip must seem almost as great an undertaking as going to the North Pole, but to an Australian bush-bred girl, practical, self-reliant and resourceful in a way it is necessarily difficult to realise at home, the journey was nothing out of the common. From the MacArthur we would strike south-west into the unexplored country, and after having found the elusive Smith we could pick Madge up on our return journey. There would be a married woman with the party, a Mrs Bailey, whose husband would be in charge of the teamsters, and who would be company for Madge. Sir Donald at first had raised objections in regard to his niece accompanying us, but seeing she was only going as far as the MacArthur River, he at last gave in.

We returned to Burketown, and within a week had made all necessary arrangements, effected our equipment, and were ready to start. The cool season—it was April—had hardly commenced, so that travelling would be comparatively pleasant. We formed quite a respectable cavalcade with two large waggons, each drawn by twelve horses, with a driver and off-sider to each team, and a hooded, light spring-cart which was given over to Madge and Bailey's wife. The latter was a cheerful, active and resourceful woman. Madge had her own horse, and always rode in preference to travelling in the spring-cart.



We had plenty of spare horses, which were put in charge of a couple of semi-civilised black boys we had brought with us from Normanton. These boys—black men are always called “boys”—were from the Gilbert River, and so, being out of their own country, could be depended upon for loyalty. The Australian blacks are even more ready to kill blacks belonging to another tribe than they are to kill whites, and that is saying a good deal. Their safety, therefore, lay in our safety.

We menfolk were always in our shirt-sleeves—the latter rolled up to the elbow—with felt or cabbage-tree hats, and moleskin trousers. No one dreamt of wearing such things as collars, coats or waistcoats. A clean handkerchief tied round the neck made one feel quite fashionable. Each of us was armed with a Colt's revolver, and when we got farther out into the wild country, a short carbine, or sporting rifle, was carried by a gun-bucket strapped to the saddle. Even Madge never neglected this precaution.

Our first stage of sixteen miles was perhaps one of the most trying in the whole journey, for it lay across a parched, treeless plain, on which the heated air-waves danced, playing all sorts of weird tricks with the horizon. At one time Maitland and I looking back, were considerably astonished to see Burketown, with its galvanised-iron buildings quivering in mid-air, literally without any visible means of support, and twisted into all manner of fantastic shapes. At other times we could see a gigantic tree loom up ahead, which, when we approached, would, to our utter bewilderment,

## THRESHOLD OF THE NEVER-NEVER 45

dwindle to an insignificant shrub, or tuft of coarse grass.

Our pace was slow, and what with the dust and the heat, we were all very glad when, well on in the afternoon, a dark belt of trees, which had kept appearing and disappearing tantalisingly for the last hour or two, now showed up substantially and refreshingly green. It marked the Gregory River, and the spectacle of clear water flowing over a pebbly and sandy bed, in a beautifully wooded, palm-fringed dell, was indeed a sight for sore eyes. Strangely enough, the Gulf country, as it is termed in Australia, although one of the hottest places in the world, is remarkably well watered. This beautiful little valley, with its limpid pools shaded by graceful palms, and greenest foliage shot with varicoloured blossoms, hardly less brilliant than the plumage of the birds, seemed to us a vision of fairyland. Its beauty, indeed, was beyond description.

The butterflies, some of them as large as one's hand, were masterpieces of design and colouring. The greatest genius the world ever produced could not have conceived anything so exquisitely beautiful. It was here Madge showed us some of the many wonderful things in Nature that opened to us realms, the like of which neither Grimm nor Hans Andersen had at their command.

She took us down to a shallow pool, told us to look into it, and asked us what we saw. I could see nothing unusual, but Maitland remarked the presence of short pieces of grass resembling chopped hay.

"Watch them," said Madge.

When she put her hand into the water and touched them, they were as debris and nothing more. She motioned us back from the pool, and as we watched I confess to having had a suspicion that the girl meditated some sort of practical joke. But as we looked, the little lengths of grass and tiny twigs began to shoot out heads shaped like stove-pipes, and long, spindly legs. In a minute or so the pool was alive with some of the most active and extraordinary aquatic creatures one could well imagine. Madge had shown us an example of the way Nature imitates environment for protection.

She turned to a tree hard by. At the base of it, scattered on the ground, was the usual debris, amongst which were a few tiny dead leaves, though here I may say few leaves in Australia fall—the trees shed their bark instead. Madge regarded them closely, then pointed to what appeared to be an ordinary leaf.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“A leaf, surely, Miss Taylor,” said Maitland.

“Then pick it up and turn it upside down.”

The tutor did so, and to our amazement it became a living thing, and hopped off his hand! When I saw it again on the ground, it was apparently a leaf again. There were, doubtless, genuine leaves amongst them, but none of us could have told which was which.

“Good!” cried Sir Donald. “But now I’m becoming Australian, I want a billy of tea. Let’s go ahead and look out for a camping-ground.”

So this we did. We had some little excitement “double-banking”—duplicating the teams—at the

## THRESHOLD OF THE NEVER-NEVER 47

crossing, the water being up to the axles, and then we left the track and, following the river up about half-a-mile, came out upon a beautiful green space untouched by other campers.

The waggons having been drawn up on open ground, the horses were unhitched, and soon the river for a mile or so up and down was cheery with the jingle and the tinkle of their bells as they went in search of fodder. Our tents were pitched under the shadow of great leafy Leichardt trees, and the sides looped up for coolness. Before many minutes had elapsed there was a blazing fire over which was slung a large camp kettle, while juicy steaks were grilling on the clean glowing charcoal—and, by the way, there is no silver grill in the world equal to the sweet wood ashes of a camp fire.

Our supply of fresh meat on the trip was to be very limited. It would not keep twenty-four hours on account of the heat. We had a store of dried or salted meats, hams, canned mutton and beef, tongues, herring, salmon, lobsters and sardines. We had even some canned vegetables. There were large tins of potatoes, which looked like coarse rough oatmeal until boiling water was poured over them, when they would swell. With the addition of a little melted lard and proper seasoning, they were very palatable eating indeed, and a welcome addition to our meals. I noted on this trip how gradually we all acquired a partiality for vinegar and pickles. As a medical man, I knew it was wise Nature's voice demanding an antiscorbutic in the absence of fresh vegetables. Towards this end we carried lime-juice, and a very refreshing drink it made with the

addition of a little sugar. Dried apples and apricots well cooked were always welcome. Syrups and jams, tinned butter and cheese, were amongst the luxuries. Curry was invaluable. Twice a week we had duff—a plum-pudding made, of course, with the usual currants and raisins and lemon peel. Rice was a great stand-by. Tinned milk was used by some, and, indeed, it was interesting to note how certain foods we had hardly ever heard of or had despised in civilisation, now assumed no little importance in our daily menu. Occasionally we had fresh food in the shape of fresh-water crayfish, which were simply delicious, and many kinds of fish. Kangaroo tails were sometimes got, as well as various kinds of pigeons and quails. Now and again parrots were used to make a stew. Upon the whole we lived well.

Our life in the fresh air and the regular exercise made us as hungry as schoolboys. We older ones began to experience a most remarkable change in our lives. It was as if the processes of Nature had been reversed, and that we were growing younger.

It was a park-like place in which we camped. The river here described a great curve, and the dense vegetation on its banks kept the horses from straying back, or perhaps going down to drink at the deep pools, where they might tumble in or get snapped by an alligator. At night we could hear the peculiar tremulous bellow of those horrible creatures. We pitched the tent in a pretty spot for the women-folk, and rigged our mosquito curtains at given points, with feet always pointing outwards from the camp, so that we might guard against surprise from the wild blacks. The teamsters and drivers formed

a little camp of their own, for no matter how much one would have liked to make all hands on such a trip feel that, for the time being, we had largely to depend on one another socially, there are always some red revolutionaries who prefer to keep to themselves, resenting a show of sociability as patronage.

As we sat some little distance from the smouldering camp fire that night, more by force of custom than from any desire for its warmth, we again discussed the ever fruitful topic of our mission. We were now beginning the last stage of our long journey which we earnestly hoped might be consummated by the recovery of Smith from the wilderness which he seemed, for some mysterious reason or other, unable or unwilling to leave.

That night we enjoyed peaceful and undisturbed slumber. Next morning we reached the Nicholson River, here about half-a-mile wide and with its sandy bed interspersed with long tree-clad ribbons of land, and large still pools of water. We followed up its high, splendidly wooded banks. The day following we reached the Turn-off Lagoon, and left the lonely track that goes on to Port Darwin on our right. We saw a store and bush shanty here. These so-called bush hotels are, by the way, a disgrace to Australia. One might safely call them drinking and gambling hells. They are the death-traps that lie in wait for the bushman and drover with money in his pocket. This one was merely a bough-shed with a tent attached.

On our approach we saw three men hurriedly emerge, mount their horses, and ride off. They were

doubtless "wanted" by the police and were not sure as to our identity.

We steered our way in a more westerly direction, and gradually ascended to the tablelands. The flat country became separated from us by a rocky range of hills. Only perhaps an old dray track or the sodden ashes of a camp fire were to be seen at rare intervals. We had now to exercise the greatest caution in choosing our camps for the night, for this was the country of the wild cannibal blacks, and many travellers had been murdered by them.

I will never as long as I live forget my first encounter with those gentry. It occurred at the last place with a name to it in that part of Queensland, and was called Headley's Lagoon. It gives me a queer turn even now as I write of it. Whether or no Crocodile, who was undoubtedly shadowing our movements, had something to do with this attempted outrage, I will leave it to the reader to decide.

## VI

### THE ATTACK IN THE DARK

**W**E had experienced a long, hard day's journey, and were all very tired when we halted at dusk. The only suitable camping-ground was studded with tall, spire-like ant-hills, twelve or fifteen feet in height and several feet in girth. In the moonlight it seemed as if we had strayed into a vast cemetery crowded with tombstones. The effect was weird and uncanny to a degree.

We could not form our camp as usual, but pitched our mosquito nets in the form of a half-circle some fifty yards from the waggons. I was on the outside, and Sir Donald some few paces farther away on the left. Madge and Bailey's wife slept under the huge tarpaulin converted into a species of tent, close to the largest waggon in the centre of the camp. The teamsters and black boys were camped on the other side some hundred yards away.

It was a warm night, and as I lay with the edges of the mosquito net tucked in under my blanket, and my revolver handy alongside, it was a long time before I could get to sleep. The strange mysterious voices of the wilderness claimed my unwilling attention. There was the mighty chorus of frogs from the pools in the river-bed in every con-



ceivable note—from shrill piping trebles to trumpet-toned basses. Then from far away would come the weird, muffled chant of the rarely seen mor-poke, reminding one of the distant bark of a watch-dog. Every now and again from the river arose the blood-curdling shriek of a species of heron, suggesting some human being in agony. Then came the shuddering croon of a possum from its hollow tree, and all sorts of other sad-voiced calls and echoes that set in with the night from a seething animal and insect life in a tropical forest.

I must have sunk into a fitful slumber, for, on awakening, I could see through the dim gauze of the net that that brilliant constellation, the Southern Cross, had wheeled in the sky. The air had grown chilly, and there was a curious cessation of all sound. Disturbing as the myriad noises of the bush had been to me ere I slept, this unnatural silence was doubly so. Why had all the birds and beasts and insects suddenly sunk to rest? I fancied at first that one of the dogs must have barked, and in doing so had awakened me and startled the bush life to silence. I strained my ears but could not hear any movement in the camp. It was useless trying to look through the gauze of the mosquito net, so I raised my arm and lifted the edge near my head, putting my face to the opening. I had a clear view along the line of our mosquito nets, with the ant-hills rising behind them and—what was it that struck me as strange and out of place in the scene? For the moment I could not grasp it, and then I realised it, while a cold shiver of apprehension ran down my spine.

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In and out among the ant-hills, some near the white of the mosquito nets and some right in the shadow of the waggons, were objects that looked like dead blackened tree-stumps. They had not been there when we made our camp, for the men had had to carry wood some distance from the camp fires. How, then, had they come there, and when? As I looked, my eyes straining, I saw the one standing out against the net next to mine lose the indistinct form of a tree-stump, and change into that of a man.

They were black fellows! While we slept they had crept upon us. They had killed the dogs—in a moment they would have every man covered with a spear, and the moment after the spears would be driven home and each one of us would be gasping out his life, helpless to strike back. I had wakened just in time.

Heedless of what there was on the other side of my net, I gripped my revolver and brought the barrel up until I glanced along the sights at the warrior who stood over the next net, and whom I now saw stealthily raising a long heavy spear. It seemed to me he was giving the signal to the others, and that when his spear fell——

The thought was never finished. My finger pressed the trigger and the report of the shot rang through the silent camp as the black lurched forward and came down all of a heap. A blaze of light surrounded me—my mosquito net was on fire.

To that I owe my life. Behind me a black fellow was standing, spear in hand, ready to strike. The suddenness of the revolver shot startled him, but it

was the burst of flame, which enveloped the dry inflammable net in a moment, that unnerved him. With a guttural exclamation he sprang back as I scrambled from under the scorching heat. I brought my revolver to bear upon him, but ere I could fire I heard a shot from the far end of the line of nets, and he fell where he stood with a bullet clean between his eyes. It was a magnificent shot, and in the excitement of the moment I remember wondering how Sir Donald could have got to the end of the line, for I did not think anyone else could have made so fine a hit. But it was no time to wonder.

From all sides came the hoarse cries of the savages, the shouts of the white men, and the crack of revolver shots. I heard Sir Donald giving sharp, short words of command—and I remembered Madge. Springing forward, I dashed to the tarpaulin shelter where she and Mrs Bailey were sleeping. In my haste I ran full tilt into a black fellow flying in the opposite direction. With the wind knocked clean out of my lungs I staggered back—I saw the knobbed club of the savage whirl over me and then a voice, strange and yet familiar, came from towards the tarpaulin.

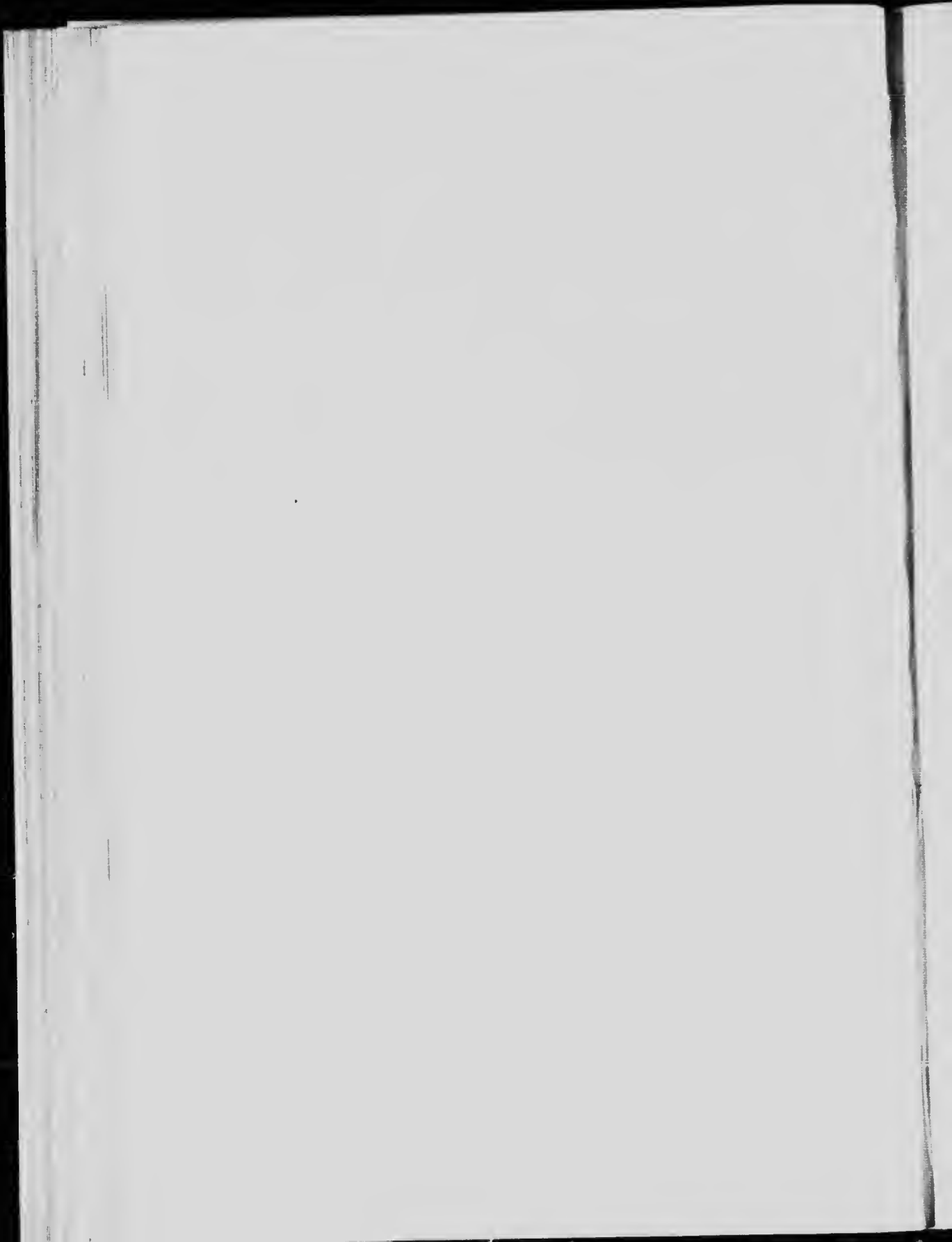
“Don’t move, doctor,” the voice said, and at the same instant there was a flash against the shadow of the tarpaulin, and my enemy fell forward with his arms.

“Oh, well done!” I heard Madge exclaim.

When, after shaking myself free of the black’s body, I reached the tarpaulin, I found Maitland there, slipping a cartridge into his rifle, while behind him was Madge, her eyes ablaze with excitement.



The black dropped in his stride.



"There goes another!" she cried, as I came up. A black had burst from his cover and was running top speed for the bush. Maitland raised his rifle to his shoulder, took momentary aim, and fired. The black dropped in his stride.

Was I asleep or awake, dreaming or in my sane senses? Maitland, the timid, diffident, nervous student, was the man we had hitherto known, but here was a fellow of altogether different make.

At that moment the General hurried up.

"Good practice, sir!" he exclaimed, clapping Maitland on the shoulder. "I had no idea you could shoot. Madge, dear, I was anxious about you, but you're in good hands, I see. You safe, too, doctor? Good! Madge, you'd better get into your tent while we clear up the camp. We've beaten those fellows off—Maitland here seems to have picked off the last pair. Where did you learn to let off a gun like that?" the old soldier inquired of the tutor.

"I shot for Oxford against Cambridge," said Maitland in his mild way.

"Capital!" cried Sir Donald. "You'll get plenty more practice before we come to the end of this trip, I can see. Doctor, you might come with me and see how the men have got on. I'll leave you on guard here, Maitland."

We went over to where the men were camped. They had not come off so well as we had, though no one was seriously hurt. One or two had rather bad bruises where they had been hit with the nullah-nullahs, or clubs, of the natives, but there were no spear wounds. My revolver shot had evidently been fired at the exact moment to upset all the schemes

of the black fellows. At the men's camp the shooting had been terribly wild, for not one savage had been killed, though it was evident several had been struck. The horses had also escaped.

Some people might imagine that in an alarm of this kind the women of the party would only have made matters worse by undue panic. On our expedition I found that, on several occasions, Madge and Mrs Bailey were really as level-headed as any of us.

We did not go to sleep again, as it was close upon daybreak, but, after a pannikin of tea, hitched up the teams and resumed our journey. I was very glad indeed to leave that camp.

There is no time in the day so pleasant and delightful as the early morning for travel in the bush. The dew then sparkles on every leaf and blade. The noisy, bright-coloured bird-world flashing by gives a delightful sense of life, and the cool fresh air filling one's lungs makes one glad to be alive.

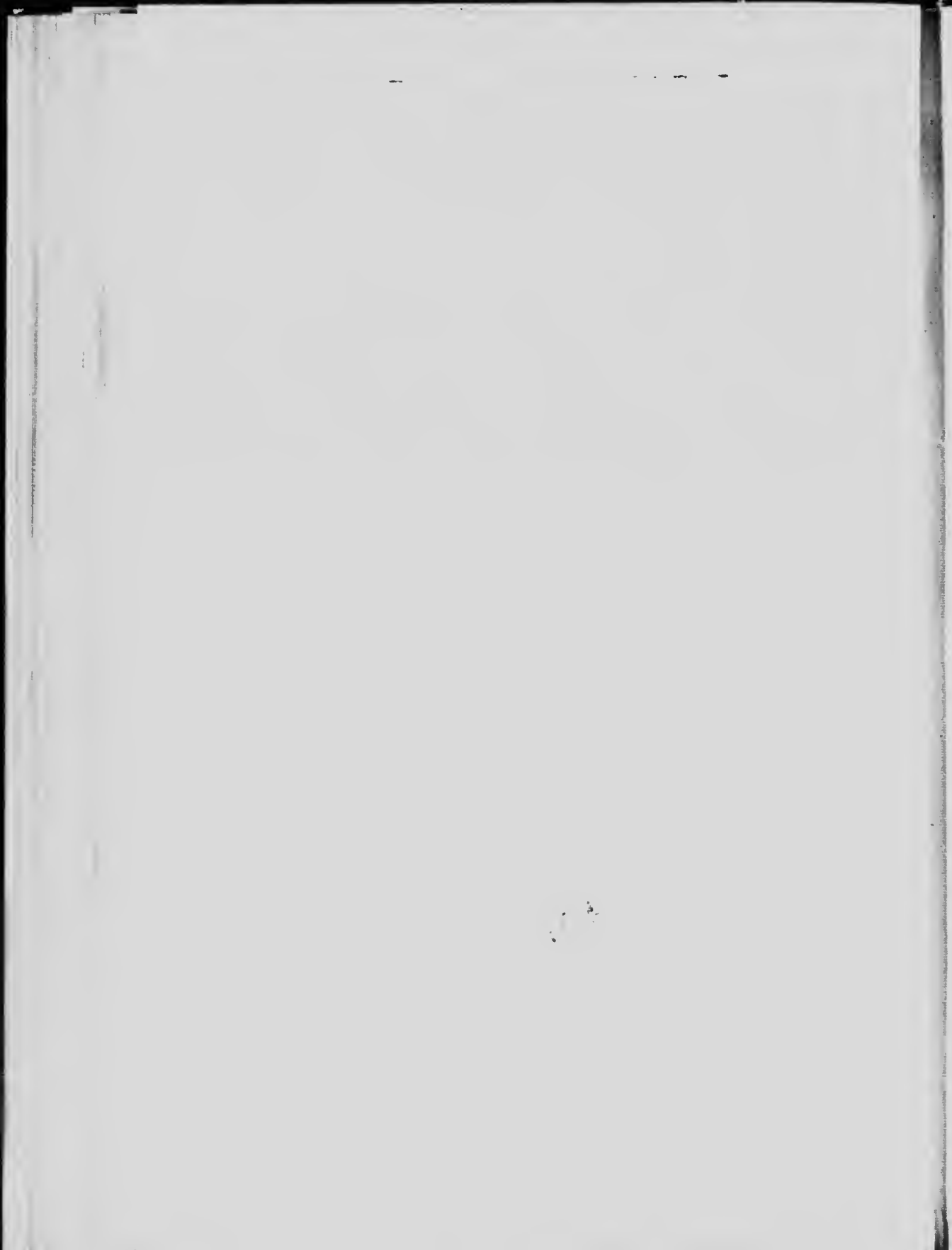
Madge, Sir Donald and I rode on ahead, as was our wont. We could see no signs of the blacks, who took very good care not to be caught in the open in broad daylight. The Nicholson River, whose banks we skirted, was still a great sandy waste with here and there long, calm pools of water. A river which runs under its own bed for all but a few weeks in the year, when it swells into a raging torrent in which nothing can live, must be something of a paradox to people of the Old Country.

It was a matter for congratulation to Sir Donald to note that if Maitland had hitherto proved a somewhat unpractical member of the party—one on



An incident in the fight.





whom we menfolk had to keep an eye lest he should stroll off fifty yards into the bush and get lost, or perpetrate something equally disastrous—he had qualities that more than counterbalanced these defects.

He had also grasped Jack's backward educational condition, and saw that it sprang from the want of proper guidance and encouragement. Here was work for him at which few could teach him anything.

He took his pupil in hand, and during the many spare hours spent in camp at midday he managed to secure Jack's interest in those studies most essential for the coming exams. He explained things to him in a way that invested them with a fresh interest and impressed them on his memory. There could be little doubt that Jack was making unlooked-for progress. At one time Jack had looked upon Maitland's inaptitude for sport with a species of pitying contempt. Now he began to realise that the scholar's qualities were of a higher order than his own. His changed attitude showed itself in many helpful little acts when he saw his tutor wrestling with temporal matters. Maitland's materialistic view of things was in turn being assailed. He was beginning to realise how one-sided his life had been, how theory without a full knowledge of life was merely chasing the shadows and neglecting the realities. Moreover, he began to realise how much more ennobling and comprehensive is the mental outlook of a man when face to face with Nature, compared to his views of life and that which lies beyond, when his vision is restricted by conventions and bricks and mortar—man's work only. The few

startling facts in natural history which Madge showed him, set him thinking. The soul within him had never before been stirred, and therefore was an ungauged quantity. It was an unexpected and somewhat humiliating state of affairs, and he felt his former self-efficiency oozing, as it were, through his finger-tips.

Still, he had run too long in a groove, and the habits of years, like a man's methods of thought, are difficult to change. He was too much of a gentleman to assert himself rudely or press his views on others, yet he resented those influences which were at work to disturb his equanimity.

And a girl with a strange, original personality, had set those influences in motion. He would have liked to conjure up a healthy dislike to her, so that he could have lain in wait and crushed her with argument.

But the curious thing was, he had never before known that a man cannot always shape and control his likes and dislikes.

## VII

### MADGE AS SHOW-WOMAN

**I**T was Sunday, and, as usual, we did not travel on that day. Apart from the moral side of the question, it is foolish of any one to imagine that he or she can successfully steal a march on the laws of Moses. After a week's constant travel, a day of rest is not only a necessity for man and beast, but a welcome respite.

It was a beautiful spot in which we were camped. A goodly-sized creek with large water-holes lay on our right, and beyond it a wooded range of hills. On our left was a dip in the tableland, well grassed and dotted with fine specimens of bloodwood-trees, white gums, ti-trees and an occasional pine. Ahead, to the west, lay some low, rocky ridges on which grew bauhinia-trees, golden wattle, tree-ferns and feather palms. Some of the gums were festooned with most gorgeous flowers and creepers. From occasional giant boles there sprouted great parasites, some of them green and some of them orange, and most of them for all the world shaped like the great antlers of moose and deer. Indeed, some of them are named Stag's Horn !

Gay-coloured birds, from crimson and purple parrots and green and gold parakeets to white

cockatoos, darted through and over all like shuttles in a loom. It was, indeed, a primeval Eden.

We were somewhat to the north of the Calvert or Van Alphen River, and our horizon was limited by great rugged pale-blue mountains that rose from glaucous-green valleys, either abruptly or by gradual terrace-like sweeps. Some of the teamsters with us seemed to find a peculiar interest in these distant hills, for, like most of their kind, they had besides many other things done some prospecting for precious metals. We had to find a route round by the right of those hills if we were to drop Madge near her friends' camp on the head-waters of the MacArthur River. After she and the Baileys left us we should have to steer south again.

The General and myself were writing up our diaries under the tarpaulin. Jack had an hour or two earlier taken a spare horse from the mob, and gone out alone into the bush to get a view, as he said, from the top of a high ridge that showed a few miles off. The cook was busy stoking-up an ant-heap which he had converted into an oven in which to bake the usual supply of bread, and those who were not sewing on buttons and mending their clothes were reading the well-thumbed volumes that went the round of the camp.

I noticed that Madge had put her revolver in her belt and was preparing for a walk. In one hand she carried a stock-whip, which would be useful in the event of an encounter with snakes. I saw Maitland reading, but he slipped the book into his pocket as he noticed her approach. But he made no move.

"Doctor," said Madge, addressing me, "get your

light rifle in case of accidents and come for a walk."

"I'd be delighted, Madge," I said, "but I'm finishing this diary. There's Mr Maitland, I saw him sewing on buttons some time ago. Take him for a walk."

Maitland was already on his feet.

"Come, doctor," he said to me, "let's all three go. Perhaps Miss Taylor will point out a few more natural history marvels to us."

"They don't need much showing," remarked the girl. "They are everywhere if you only look for them. I don't like posing as show-woman, but since we are on the subject I can show you something quite near at hand."

Maitland and I carried our revolvers, and in addition I took a light sporting rifle, for in that wild country a surprise attack by blacks was always on the cards. We had not to walk far for Madge's show.

It was a colony of soldier ants. Being under the shelter of a bank, the sun did not interfere with their movements. We stood a few paces off and watched.

"Hello," exclaimed Maitland, with a growing look of interest on his face, "there are two colonies of ants, and—by Jove! yes, just look!"

A pitched battle was being waged between two factions of those wonderful insects which Solomon held up to sluggard man as an example of method and industry, and which latter-day scientists have studied with even greater benefit. They were fighting much as men fight. There was, on each side, a fight-

ing line and a supporting body. They had out their scouts and flankers. They advanced by units, companies and battalions. They had their leaders and commanders, and they grappled in deadly strife. Whenever a combatant was wounded he was borne off to the rear by the ambulance corps. Their pertinacity and method were astonishing. They charged each other vigorously, and the tide of battle rolled now this way and now that. And while all this was going on, a score or so of busy little raiders were bodily carrying off a large black beetle, feet uppermost, under cover of the fighters. Doubtless, this was the bone of contention, the Port Arthur of all the trouble.

Maitland's face was a study, and he muttered something about instinct and the inscrutability of evolution.

"You may call things by whatever fancy names you like," said Madge quietly; "but somebody has taught these ants what to do."

"It is evolution," said the atheist, regarding the girl with unwonted earnestness.

"And granted evolution," rejoined Madge. "Whose wonderful law of life is that but God's? Surely order and progress must be the outcome of the Supremest Intelligence, and not of caprice? Caprice would end in chaos."

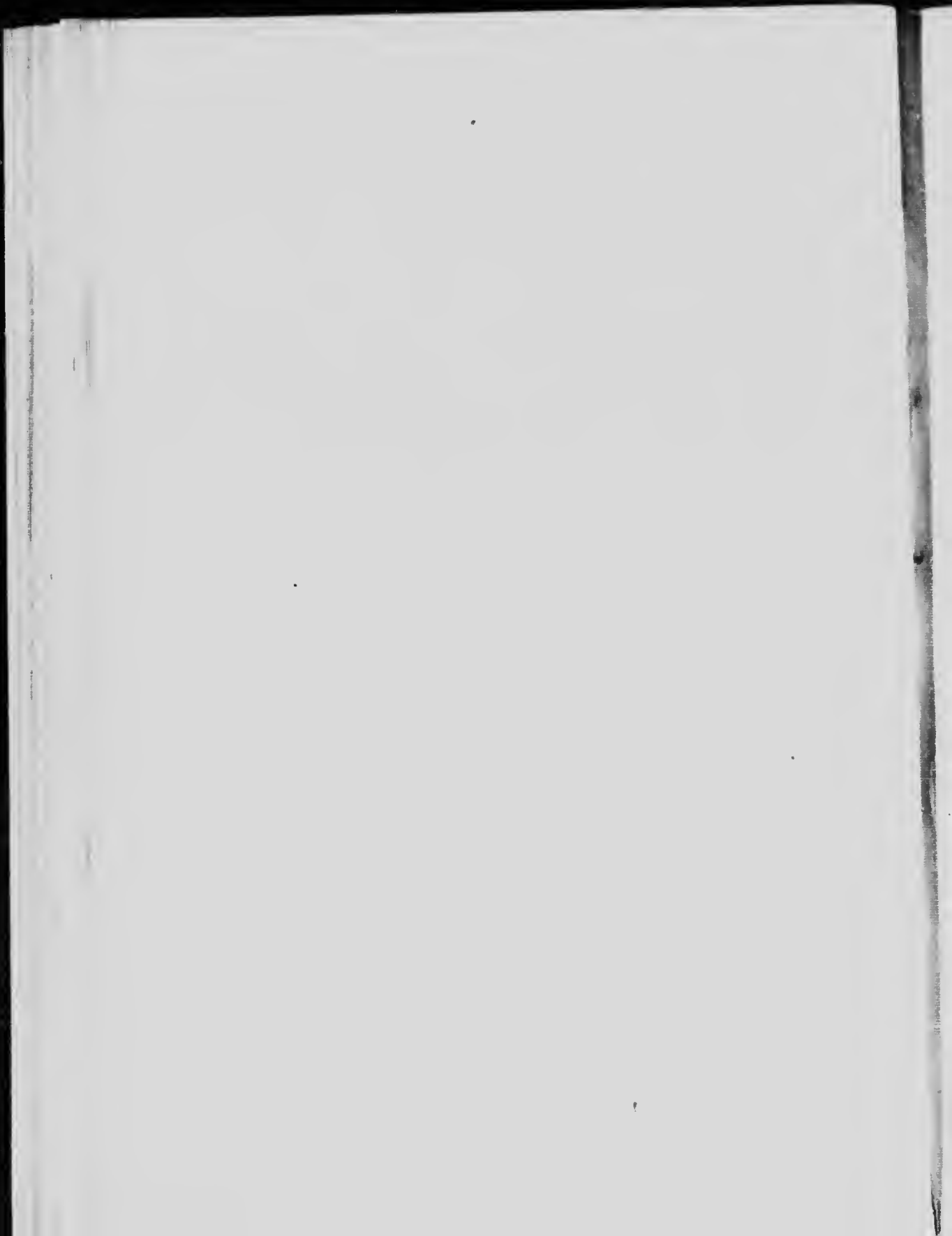
And then the two had an argument, but despite the man's superior skill in fencing with words, the girl had undoubtedly the best of it.

"Miss Taylor," he said, "you are the first person who ever put the case before me like that. You must give me time to think."



"Somebody has taught these ants what to do."





Then, as if to close the subject, the girl plucked a dry pod from a shrub, tossed it lightly into the air, and split it open by one stroke of her long whiplash before it reached the ground.

"That is only anticipating Nature," she explained laughingly, "but I can't scatter those seeds anything like as well as the pod itself can, when at the right time it splits open with the heat, and throws them clear of the mother plant. God is the soul and brain, and Nature is His hand."

"Amen," said I, and though there could be no one more averse to making a parade of his religious convictions than myself, I took off my hat.

I was very glad, indeed, to hear Madge speak as she did. I had admired her from the first as a fine, high-spirited girl, who, despite her unconventional, and at times rough ways, had an honesty of mind and a fearlessness in championing the truth that made her stand out as a distinct and sterling individuality. That she should have thought so deeply made me realise that I had hardly done justice to her character.

Madge showed us a species of wild cherry, the one half of the stone of which grew outside the fruit. She pointed to a large, bell-like flower that was a veritable fly-trap, and had the additional faculty of eating the flies its innocent-looking sweetness attracted. It got rid of the wings and other uncatable parts of its victims as the bars of a grate sort out the ashes. And amongst many other curious things which she pointed out there was a far-seeing plant which carried its own water-supply. To find one beautiful flower exhibiting omnivorous pro-

pensities, and another provided, like a camel, for all emergencies, were surely startling and significant facts.

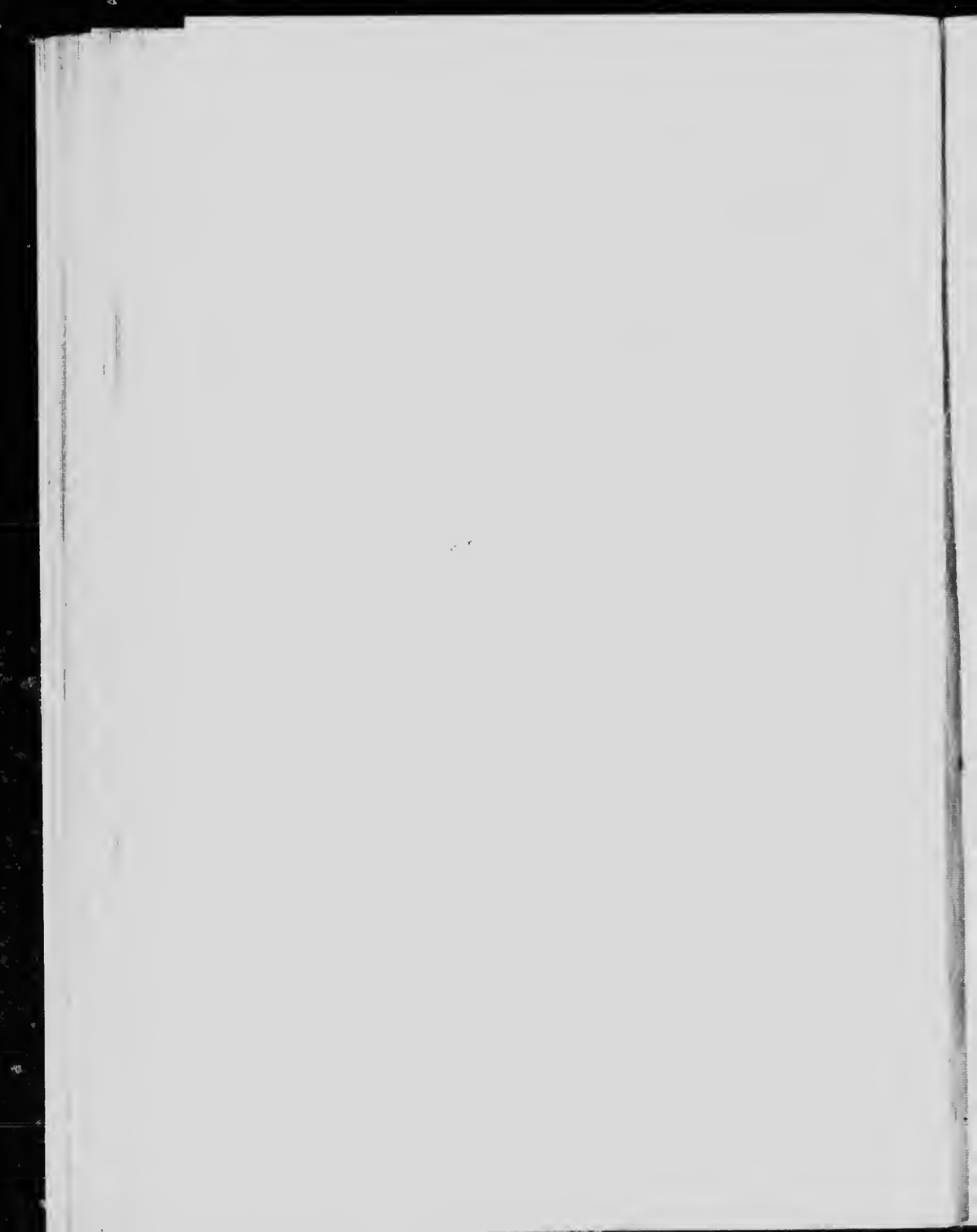
We had a merry and interesting walk, and it was with reluctance that we at length turned our steps campwards, for it was now somewhat past the dinner-hour.

Suddenly, as we ascended a ridge a mile or so from camp, we heard a couple of shots in quick succession, and then a third. Looking in the direction from which the sound came, we saw something that considerably surprised us and aroused our speculation. Far out on the open and lightly-timbered level, two horsemen were riding parallel to each other and at break-neck speed—for no apparent reason that we could see, unless it were that one of them was trying to head off the other.

“There is something queer about those two,” said the girl, watching the retreating figures with hand-shaded eyes. “I think the sooner we get back to camp the better.”



In the shadow of a ledge of rocks was a bark hut.



## VIII

### A DISTURBING INTERVIEW

**F**ROM the account that we subsequently received of his adventures, we learned that, after riding a few miles from camp, Jack ascended what he thought to be the top of a ridge, only to find another still higher behind it. He was picking his way up an old watercourse when he caught sight of three horses standing, ready saddled, in a little clearing. Whoever could it be in such an out-of-the-way place? Jack knew that in the Gulf country all sorts of badly wanted fugitives from the law were living like black fellows in the bush, ostensibly as wild-horse hunters, but in reality because they dared not show their faces in civilised parts. Was he in the neighbourhood of any of these gentry now?

He would have turned and gone back, seeing that he was single-handed, had he not at that very moment ridden upon the men who owned the horses.

In the shadow of a ledge of rocks was a bark hut, open in front, and two men were standing before it. A third lay just inside the hut with a blanket over the upper part of his body.

One of the two men standing was Sam Holt, one of the teamsters. He was a big man with a face

weather-beaten and lined like that of a Maori chief. He usually addressed Jack by his Christian name, or as "Chummie," in the most paternal and free-and-easy fashion imaginable. But in spite of a discomfiting cast in one eye, he was capital company and always had something of interest to tell. The second man, who turned his back upon him and walked away the moment he became aware of his presence, Jack made sure was another of the teamsters called Bird, a little, dandified and somewhat supercilious individual.

"What ho, Jack! What cheer, my hearty!" Sam called out as soon as he saw Jack. "Been hevin' a trot 'round?"

"I saw the horses, Sam," said Jack, "and thought I'd just find out whose they were. Not going back to camp, are you?"

"No, Jack, sonny," replied Sam in his friendliest fashion. "You see, Billy Brooker, an old mate of mine, has the fever and is layin' down there on 'is blankets mortal sick-like wid the shakes. He's bin doin' a bit of wild-horse huntin', an' I jist dropped across 'im by axydint. Hev' a drink of tea, sonny?"

"No, thanks, Sam. I'm off if you're not coming," Jack said. There was an odd sinking at his heart, and a nervous, jumpy feeling all over him as he took over the reins preparatory to starting. "By the way, Sam," he added, "if your friend is short of flour or anything, tell him to come over to the camp—and the doctor might give him some physic."

"You're a right good sort, Jack, my boy," observed Sam approvingly, and the man under the

blanket nodded. Sam came over and stood close to Jack's horse.

"There's one thing I would like to know, sonny," he said. "Your father didn't go a-tellin' of the crowd where these 'ere gold-reefs was, did he? That rummy cove—Smith, you calls him—as lives 'way out in them goodness-forsaken parts like a cannibale has played his cards well, and now you're goin' according to agreement to help him and to take up prospector's and other rights. If the crowd get on to it they'll spile your game."

At once the situation flashed upon Jack. These men believed that the mission was not to find Smith, but to locate gold. They imagined that the eccentric Englishman in the Never-Never country was merely prospecting in a misleading if foolhardy fashion. The General's party, they concluded, was going out to the relief of the venturesome one. By this time he had, doubtless, made some great discovery of gold. It had been whispered from time to time that somewhere in the heart of that chaotic mountain-land was a "leader" of pure ore, for specimens of the same had been found in the decorated arbours of that picker-up of fanciful odds and ends, the Bower Bird, in the neighbourhood of these very mountains. Here was a situation full of momentous and sinister issues if Holt and Bird had joined with the idea of having a share in the discovery. The man under the blanket might be a scout from the main body of prospectors following the expedition.

"Seems as how ye're surprised," the man in the hut called out. "You toffs are mighty slick, and



you've worked and kept this lay pretty dark, but you ain't agoin' to scoop all the pool this time, you can bet on that."

"You're out about the gold," said Jack quietly. "I don't suppose there's one of our party would know a gold-reef if he saw one, unless it produced sovereigns ready made."

"Bully for you, Jack, my son," broke out Sam with a show of merriment. "Billy Brooker"—he addressed the man in the hut—"don't you be a-thinkin' as how you can bluff Jacky here. He's as flip wid his tongue as you are. No, my son, I ain't sich a fool as to suppose you're agoin' to give the show away and let us put our pegs down afore yours. Who finds, keeps, I sez."

"It beats me how a man like you can believe in such cock-and-bull yarns," Jack said. "My father is out here to find his friend Smith, the man of whom you speak, Sam."

Sam turned to his friend, and slapping his thigh triumphantly, exclaimed:

"There now, didn't I tell you that the old cock warn't one of them sort as looks for sunbeams in cowcubers? Of course, he's no galoot, is the old snorter, an' if that chap Smith, as seems to me to 'ave a tile loose, has managed to spot gold, why, we can all 'ave a look in."

"Of course you can, Sam—that's to say, should there be a show at all."

"Well, chummie," observed Sam graciously, "seein' as how you wants to go, we'll not keep you. So-long, an' I'll be follerin' arter a bit."

## IX

### SURPRISES

**J**ACK started forward, and his horse, Barney, made straight for a low screen of scrub. Swish, crash, and the undergrowth was up to his neck, while his mount, with vigorous leaps, was plunging through it. It was as if some panic had communicated itself to the dumb brute.

Jack was out of the scrub now, and tearing along on the crest of the ridge. There was an avenue of trees on either side which would not permit of his descending the slope. But here was an opening to the right, and next minute he was galloping across and along one of the hollows that had deceived him when climbing the range. It was a place of giant ant-hills, and there was imminent danger of being unseated by the side leaps and dodging of the horse to avoid them. Moreover, the hollow seemed to wind about in a most unsatisfactory manner.

As he rode along Jack realised that it was no simple one-crested ridge, but a very network of ridges, with a series of artless-looking depressions that kept spreading out in all directions like the ribs of an old-fashioned gridiron. He was hopelessly bushed. The first quarter of an hour was a weird experience for Jack. It was as if he were in the throes of some peculiarly tantalising nightmare in

which, while the unfortunate victim is most desirous of putting space between himself and some intangible horror, his feet are glued to the earth and he cannot make headway for the life of him.

Crash ! Crunch ! Crash ! The horse plunged again into that exasperating undergrowth which seemed to be weaving a very devil's coil around them. Nature seemed to conspire to entangle and hold them in her toils. Jack lost his hat, and his shirt was being torn to ribbons. The horse was all of a quiver and plunging as if possessed. Now, surely, he was through that labyrinthine thicket, for there was a clear space in front, and he had reached the open ground at the foot of the main range at last.

Then all at once he was confronted by a dead wall of riotous straggling undergrowth, and he reined up in order to pull his senses together. He had lost his way with a vengeance, and was making an utter idiot of himself. He got off his horse, and walked.

Suddenly he heard a man laugh on the other side of the scrub. Jack recognised the voice at once. It was Sam's.

How it had happened Jack could not imagine, but he had obviously ridden in a wide circle while supposedly making his way back to camp, and was now within a short distance of the spot where he had left Sam and his companions. Dismounting, Jack left his horse and managed to push through the scrub for a few yards. He wanted to ask which way he ought to take. The scrub was terribly thick and difficult to penetrate, and he was on the point of turning back when he overheard a sentence that

made him stand rigid. He must have been nearly through the dense patch to judge by the clearness with which he heard the voice.

“Get Crocodile to set the blacks on 'em, and you chaps sneak the ammunition. There's enough tucker with that mob to last us a year, long enough for us to knock some reg'lar Bobby Dazzlers of nuggets out of the find before we get back to the coast to sell.”

“Look 'ere, Hawker,” he heard Sam's voice reply, and the mention of the name took Jack so much by surprise that he omitted to mark what else was said. He had heard of Hawker—heard while in Burketown that a big reward was on offer for the capture of the ruffian who had lately added murder to the long list of crimes he had committed. The police had warned the General that Hawker might be hiding in the district whither they were going, and also warned him not to be chary about shooting if the desperado was encountered and capture was impossible. The full significance of Sam's questions about the gold-mine burst upon the lad. He had accidentally stumbled upon Sam and Bird in conversation with the outlaw, and now chance had sent him back to the spot to learn the danger which threatened the expedition.

He must get away; he must ride back to the camp and warn his father of the traitors who were with them. To be discovered where he was would mean a bullet through his brain and a riderless horse finding its way back to the camp. No one would ever find him. The men he had unmasked would take care of that.

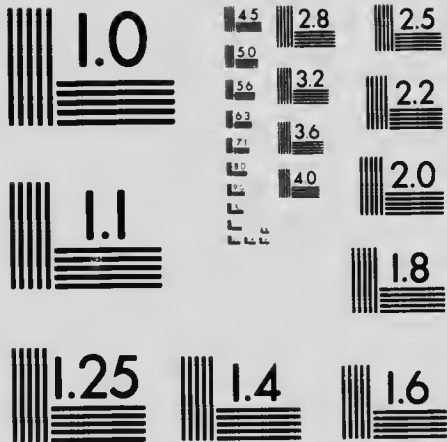
As silently as he could he turned and crept back towards his horse. But for his struggles with the tangled vines he would have noticed that the voices beyond the scrub were now hushed. He scrambled out at last, and, seizing his horse's bridle, leaped into the saddle. At the same moment there came a flash from the scrub, the report of a rifle echoed among the gullies, and something nipped his ear with a searing, burning touch.

The horse leapt sideways, nearly unseating him ; then, taking the bit in its teeth, wheeled to the right and fairly bolted. *Bang ! Bang !* and as Jack crouched over the neck of his horse, he realised that he had not done so a moment too soon.



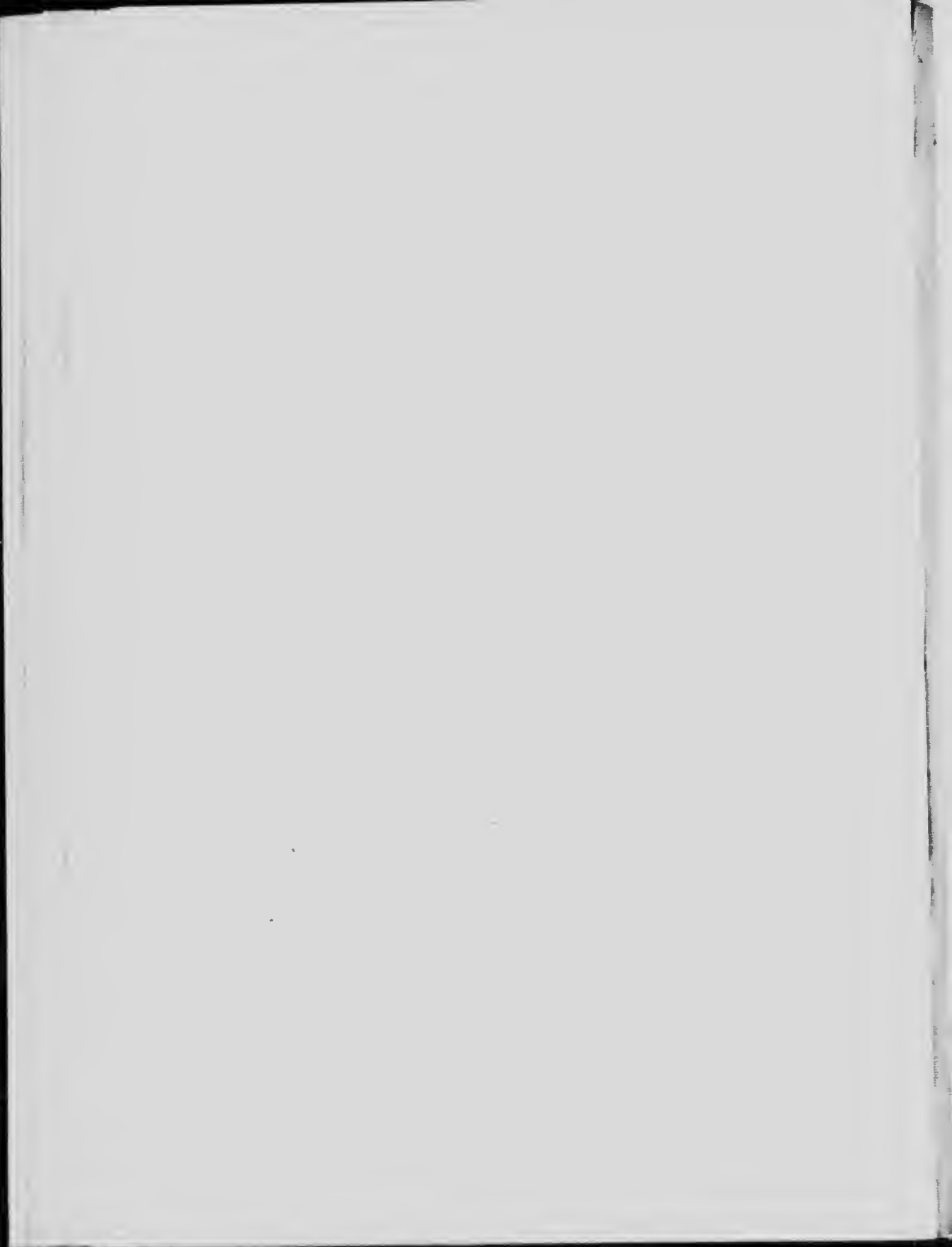
It dashed through the tangled undergrowth





MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART  
 NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS  
 STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a  
 (ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)





## X

### TABLE-TURNING EXTRAORDINARY

**I**T might only have been fancy, but for a moment it seemed to him that he had caught a glimpse of an ugly, evil face glaring at him from among a broken screen of leaves.

There was no time for locating impressions, for the horse had bolted with the bit between its teeth, and it was all Jack could do to stay in the saddle. Much to his surprise, the horse had headed in the last direction he would have chosen. It dashed through the tangled undergrowth, just missing low overhanging branches, and dodging tree-stems in its gallop, until at last Jack found himself in open country some distance from the range. He was in a terribly dilapidated condition, and his horse was in a lather. He reined up and made it walk. The bush was quite open now, and he could see a full hundred yards or so ahead. He could not be more than a mile or so from the camp he told himself, for the horse bells were now quite audible. Then a voice that made him jump hailed him from a clump of bushes alongside.

“What ho, chummie!” it said. “What cheer, my hearty! Was that you a-firin’?”

Jack could hardly believe his eyes when he found

himself alongside Sam Holt. Sam had dismounted, and his horse was grazing near.

He drew his revolver and levelled it straight at Sam's head.

"You blackguard!" he cried, "you shall pay dearly for this. Get into camp before me, and if you make a move to escape I'll shoot you dead as a herring!"

Sam was either a much-injured man, or the very best actor in the world. He pulled up and gazed at Jack in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Jack, sonny," he observed slowly, "I thought as how you looked a bit excited. What can be the matter wid you, or is it play-actin' you are, and a-havin' a game wid poor old Sammy? Now—which on 'em is it, I beg?" So saying the teamster walked up to his horse, and, climbing into the saddle, returned to Jack.

So genuine seemed his air of mild wonder, which under the circumstances was almost dignified, that Jack was nonplussed. Sam's rifle lay across the pommel of his saddle, kept in place by one hand, and as the teamster held Jack with those snake's eyes of his, his horse fidgeted until the muzzle was in line with Jack's body.

"Sam, point that rifle the other way, or I'll blow your head off as sure as Fate!"

Sam did not move a muscle, but his horse fidgeted sideways until Jack was out of the line of fire.

"Well, Jack, sonny, you do surprise me!" exclaimed he. "I'm darned if I didn't think for a minute as how you meant it!"

And to Jack's increased bewilderment he burst



He drew his revolver and levelled it straight at Sam's head.



## TABLE-TURNING EXTRAORDINARY 75

out into what seemed a hearty laugh. Still, Jack felt that the teamster had meditated that old treacherous Indian trick of shooting him; but Sam surely would not be such a fool as to attempt a patent murder so close to the camp! However, Jack knew that the information he possessed carried very serious consequences for him. Again, was it possible he was misjudging Sam, and had become the victim of his own fears?

"Sonny," continued the awry-eyed one with a hint of solicitude in his smile, "I think you'd best git to camp. You're just a bit put out like, an' seein' Billy Brooker and that other gent——"

"Hawker, you mean," interrupted Jack boldly. "Do you think I didn't recognise him, and the police bills about him all over the country! What is more, I heard you call him by name!"

For just the quiver of an eyelid he thought a gleam of apprehension or anger flickered in the watery eyes, but it was gone as quickly.

"Chummie," said Sam, "if it's a game yer havin' wid me, jest say so. I've knowed Billy Brooker since the two on us went to old Dame's school down Sydney way. You've 'lowed that face o' Hawker's to grow on your 'magination, sonny, an' now you're ready to see it in everything you sees. As fer hearin' me name him, that's one of the commonest delusions goin' when one's 'xcited and thinkin' on a name." Sam's face wore quite an air of philosophic speculation and injured innocence.

His manner as much as his words seemed so sincere that again the bogey of doubt assailed Jack, and the uncomfortable suspicion suggested itself

that it was just possible he had lost his head and was making an ass of himself.

Then he felt that his right ear was wet and hot, and putting up his hand, withdrew it covered with blood. There was no imagination about that anyhow.

"Jack," exclaimed Sam before the lad could open his mouth, and with a look of interest on his face, "I think as how you've ripped your ear with that 'ere lawyer vine, the Wait-a-bit. It's the very deuce of a thing to claw one, an' your clo'es be all chawed up wid it, too."

His cool effrontery and plausible if outrageous explanation, fairly took Jack's breath away.

"I thought you were going to tell me that there was nothing the matter with my ear," the boy retorted fiercely. "Do you think I'm an utter idiot, Sam? Do you think I don't know the difference between a scratch and a rifle bullet?"

"Well, Jacky, sonny, I'll admit it looks bad," said Sam with a show of patience and indifference truly artistic. "But jist you come over to this 'ere water-hole in the creek an' wash it, an' if it ain't a scratch jist you tell pore old Sam Holt he's the blankest ole fool you've iver sot eyes on. Now, jist you do it, sonny."

Jack went down with Sam to the pool indicated and washed the ear. It fairly staggered him when what he had firmly believed was the effect of a rifle shot turned out to be a mere scratch, apparently done by some thorny bush.

"I told you as how you was a-fancyin' things," Sam remarked. "An' you'll be madder than I

thought you was s'posin' you go back to camp an' get sayin' Billy Brooker is Hawker, an' all that tarnation rot. You'll only get pore little Billy into trouble, and sure his lone mother—an' a widdar at that—is dependin' on him down Sydney way. He swetted a horse, I'll admit that same, an' so have I in my time, an' so might you, Jackie sonny, s'posin' you was stony-broke and stuck. Now, if your father, the ole rip-snorter—an' meanin' no offence—knows he's there, he's bound to arrest him. Seein' as how he's kin' o' J.P. or beak. So take ole [unclear]'s advice and don't say a word as how you've [unclear] soul—jist think of Billy's pore mother, the widdar!"

Afterwards, when Jack looked back upon the way Sam Holt not only made him disbelieve the evidence of his own senses, but raised serious doubts in his mind as to whether, after all, he was not the most fanciful fellow in the Australian bush, he came to the conclusion that either Sam Holt was a much cleverer man than he had led them to suspect or that—and what was more than likely—he, Jack, was a bigger fool than ever his inner consciousness had suggested in his most pessimistic moments.

What with the knowledge that he was now quite safe, and with all his apprehensions and dangers explained away, the natural reaction set in, and Jack was not only angry with himself for having behaved like a fool, but hastened to assure Sam that it was not likely he was going to say a single word to anyone about having met his friend Brooker in the bush.

"Bravo, chummie!" commented Sam, "I'm



glad you're a-comin' to your senses, an' I knows as how you're a real gent as I've said before, an'll keep your word, so lemme put a bit of red gum to that ear of yourn and to-morrer there'll be no scratch there at all."

He went to a bloodwood-tree and, taking a piece of red liquid gum from the stem with a piece of stick, applied it to Jack's ear. It dried the scratch and stopped the bleeding in a moment.

Sam had no sooner done this than someone hailed them. They turned, and there was the supercilious Bird, who had evidently strolled over from the camp to meet them. He was hatless, bare-footed and cool as a cucumber.

"Well, gents, where have you been?" he asked with a yawn. "You might have told a chap you were going for a ride. Loafing round here all day doing nothing has given me a fit of the blues."

This was the last straw. Jack simply gaped at them.

## XI

### THE MAN ON THE GREY HORSE

IT was while Jack was still staring open-mouthed at that plausible old villain, Sam Holt, and the tricky little bush dandy Bird, that Madge, Maitland and I cantered up. From the ill-concealed look of annoyance on Bird's face, and the momentary glance of malignity Sam allowed himself, I do not doubt now that had we not appeared upon the scene just then, those two utterly callous and cunning schemers might possibly have made a bold and probably successful attempt to secure Jack, and carry him straight off into the inaccessible scrub and ranges where his fate would have been sealed. But I knew nothing of what had occurred. I was only suspicious that some sort of villainy was afoot.

We joined the group, and I realised that Jack was full of something he ought to tell, but whether he would do so or not was another matter. Jack was terribly stiff-necked.

"Hello, Jack!" I said, "what was that shooting going on some little time ago?"

Jack looked at me, but before he could speak, Sam Holt chipped in:

"I s'pose that must ha' bin me. Jack here heerd it, too. I was firin' at bandicoots. They're mighty tender eatin', they be."

And surely enough there hung a couple of those dainty little creatures at Sam's saddle-straps.

Jack did not look at us and mounted his horse again. I could see Madge glance at him curiously.

"Jack," she asked suddenly, her eyes resting on his overheated steed, "have you and Sam been trying conclusions with your horses?"

Jack shot a resentful glance at her, and muttered something that was unintelligible. It was Sam Holt who again rose to the occasion.

"That we have," he said feigningly. "I seed him comin' across the range an' tried to catch 'im up more'n an hour ago, but bust me if I cud do it until I cut across country an' meets up on 'im some three miles or so back."

Jack slightly turned his head and looked at the speaker. If Sam was the guileless person he professed to be, why was he so very far out about the matter of time and distance?

We all turned and walked our horses slowly in the direction of the camp. I noted the girl was now walking alongside Sam's horse, and that she was looking at the bandicoots tied to his saddle.

"Sam," she asked, "when did you learn to kill bandicoots by shooting them? You must show me how to do it? I seem to have been wasting my time rooting them out with a stick—as most people have to do!"

"Wooa there!" growled Sam, and I could have sworn by his action that he was provoking the startled career of his horse which he appeared to check.

With a side step, and reaching across, Madge

put a hand upon the bandicoots and turned them over.

But this was evidently too much for the usually imperturbable Sam. As if accidentally he roughly brushed her hand aside, at the same time interposing his own body between her and the horse. He gathered up the reins, and sprang into the saddle.

"I guess I'm off arter my mokes," he said. "I'll fetch in yours too, Bird, while I'm at it."

"Old Paramatta's with the mob, I fancy," shouted Bird after him. "I ha'n't seen him since mornin', but he's sure to be all right."

Again I noted the angry look Jack bestowed on the consequential little bullock-driver. I did not find out till some time afterwards that Jack had recognised Paramatta tied up on the range with the horses belonging to the desperado Hawker.

As we came near the camp Bird left us to go over to his own mob. Jack was strangely silent, as if turning over some conflicting problem in his mind. Under the tarpaulin, reading, we found Sir Donald. He welcomed us in his usual cheery and hearty way, making no remarks about our being late. The cook being over at the men's waggon, Bailey's wife and Madge soon made a billy of tea, cut the duff or plum-pudding into slices, placed them in a frying-pan, and served them up in a very appetising fashion indeed. But first we had some particularly tender cold corned meat, and this with some fresh Johnnie-cakes and preserved potatoes hot and steaming, gave us a most enjoyable meal. I thought of the time, not so long ago either, when I had sat down to a dinner at the Savoy with a sense of having

made a martyr of myself because some hospitable friend insisted, and marvelled at the change. Then I would gladly have paid a waiter—had that been possible—to have eaten my dinner for me, and I had even thought it a nuisance that people should have to eat at all. Now—well, I believe I would have growled like a dog over a bone if I had thought anyone meant to have that last slab of heavy-looking suet pudding, dotted with currants and orange-peel, from my plate. And it had been warmed up in a frying-pan!

For the time being I tried to dismiss the disquieting suspicions that were haunting me. There was something very far wrong indeed in camp, and my instinct rarely played me false. That there was treachery at work, and that Jack had discovered it, but had somehow been coerced into silence, was taking hold of me. It was my positive duty to arrive at the truth and do something. Still it would be dangerous to act rashly. To communicate my fears to Sir Donald might only be disastrous. The summary court-martial and investigation which he was accustomed to would not do here. Simple Tommies under strict supervision and discipline were not like cunning old bushmen who were doubtless wanted by the police, and were, moreover, in a wild country where they could wage a guerilla warfare with disastrous effects.

It was evident that Madge also suspected something. With her knowledge of that class of bushman, and her keen instincts, there was not much that escaped her. I would have to consult her in the matter, although it seemed strange for a middle-aged

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man to take counsel with a girl. I was aroused from these thoughts by the most ordinary and prosaic happenings around me. It was Madge who was speaking.

"Have some more pudding, Mr Maitland," she was saying, and I noted that she balanced a very substantial slice of pudding on a knife over the frying-pan from which she had lifted it. She regarded the tutor in a matter-of-fact way as if he could not dream of declining. But Maitland's wits at that moment were wool-gathering. He had already eaten a helping of pudding that six months before might have proved fatal, and he now leaned back against a waggon wheel with an expression of supreme content on his sun-burned face. He indeed looked a very different man from the one time pre-occupied and dyspeptic scholar that had set out with us. Madge had to repeat the question, and the word "more" seemed to arouse Maitland. He looked undecided for a moment.

"No, thanks," he said soberly, "I prefer to bide the Lord's time."

After supper I had an opportunity of speaking to Madge alone. She had a tomahawk in her hand and was engaged in cutting sticks in order to rig her mosquito net. She looked up at me inquiringly as I approached her.

"Madge," I said, "I would like to talk to you, and I don't want the others to overhear. Will you give me five minutes?"

We strolled into the bush as if searching for a stick.

"You're going to speak to me about Jack, and Sam Holt and Bird," she suggested when we were out of earshot.

"Yes," I said, "something evidently happened to Jack to-day, and somehow he won't say anything about it. You know what you saw. Have you anything to suggest to me before I speak to Jack myself?"

"Only that the firing we heard was not Sam Holt shooting bandicoots. He must have thought we were very ignorant indeed about such things! Besides, I took the trouble to examine them—I daresay you saw me do it. They were killed by a stick. Why did he lie about it? And Bird, though we found him with bare feet in camp, had only just come back and turned out an overheated horse. I took the trouble to find out that."

"Good!" I said; "and the question now is, is it discreet of us to continue our journey with such men as Holt and Bird in the party? And we've got to find out what happened to Jack to-day. You see, at present we don't know enough to trouble Sir Donald about it."

"Give Jack till to-morrow," said Madge. "He may see things differently then. In the meantime, I would not say anything to anyone, but we can keep a sharp look-out."

I could see the advisability of this, and we said nothing more on the subject. I felt certain that there was a traitorous element in camp, but why there should be I could not for the life of me make out.

We had a peaceful camp that night, and next morning our party hitched up and started out as usual. There was only a very old and faint dray track now to guide us. But Bailey had been this way

## THE MAN ON THE GREY HORSE 85

before, when he had gone on to the head-waters of the MacArthur River, and as he was a splendid bushman, we knew he could steer us through that wild country with certainty. Madge and I allowed the others to ride on ahead, and then followed in front of the first waggon. But somehow, the teamsters were slower than usual, and it was not long before we had left them several hundred yards behind.

We were now in somewhat rolling and broken country, and to the north of us the hills were rough and precipitous.

Indeed, it would have been impossible to have kept more in that direction. Madge and I also noticed that there were many points *en route* from which a hostile party could easily have surprised us with dire effects. The Robinson River lay to the north, forcing its way through the defiles to the Gulf of Carpentaria, and we knew that in a day or two we must make the head-waters of the MacArthur River, where Madge's friends, the Millars, were supposed to be located.

It was a charming day, and Madge and I rode briskly along. There was a vitality in that clear tableland air which put one in the very best of spirits. Here are two verses from Adam Lindsay Gordon's poem "The Sick Stock-rider," typical of life in the Australian bush, and more or less known to every man and woman in that vast island-continent :

"'Twas merry in the glowing morn, among the gleaming grass,  
To wander as we've wandered many a mile ;  
To blow the cool tobacco cloud, and watch the white  
wreaths pass,  
Sitting loosely in the saddle all the while.



“’Twas merry in the backwoods, when we spied the station  
roofs,  
To wheel the wild scrub cattle at the yard ;  
With a running fire of stock-whips, and a fiery run of hoofs,  
Oh, the hardest day was never then too hard !”

Talk of the power of local colour ! If there is any one who knows aught of bush life in Australia whose pulses do not quicken when he hears these lines, I have yet to meet him. When Madge at my request repeated them, I realised how prosaic my life had been.

We rode in silence for a few minutes after that ; then Madge reined in her horse, and said :

“ Did you notice this morning how Sam Holt kept behind the others in starting out ? He generally takes the lead. It’s an odd fancy, and I daresay you’ll laugh at me, but what do you say to making a circle in the bush and coming up again in the rear on his tracks ? We can’t miss them.”

It seemed an odd proposition, and I could not exactly see what we were to learn or gain by it, but I acceded to her suggestion. A mile or two more or less mattered little.

We cut off to the right, and made our way back in a north-easterly direction so as to describe a half-circle, and come in again in the rear of the waggons. Both Madge and I carried our rifles slung in gun-buckets on the off-side, so as to be handy in case of necessity. We were well within the country of the wild blacks, and it was dangerous to be unprepared for these gentry.

Half-an-hour later we threaded our way through a wide hollow between two high, broken ridges.

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Madge suddenly reined in her horse, and shading her eyes with her right hand, looked fixedly at a distant hill-top.

"Look over there," she said. "Don't you see him?"

I looked and saw on a distant ridge, but against the grey of elfin-dyke—an outcrop of rock—the figure of a man on horseback.

"It must be one of our own men," I observed, and unbuckled the Zeiss glasses I generally carried strapped to my saddle.

"We haven't a grey horse in our mob," observed the girl. "Let's get behind that bauhinia-tree and watch him."

## XII

### DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

**M**ADGE and I moved to where there would be the least chance of being seen, and fixing my glasses, I soon had the horseman under observation. He was at least a couple of miles off, but I could see him fairly well. A rough-looking fellow he seemed, with a tattered cabbage-tree hat on his head, a full beard, shirt open in front, arms bare to the elbows, and rifle slung across the pommel of his saddle. His horse was a fine upstanding grey.

“He looks interesting,” I observed; “but he’s not in any way different from most other bushmen I’ve seen. He may be a prospector, or even a stockman from your friends the Millars.”

“Would you mind letting me have a peep?” asked Madge, dismounting. “He looks as if he had been a long time out of civilisation,” she observed at length. “Had he come from the Millars his shirt wouldn’t be in rags. Even a prospector would own a spare one, and it is more than likely he would carry a prospector’s outfit—a light pick and other thing—with him. He’s not a stockman or he would have a stock-whip. And it’s not one station hand in a hundred who could afford to ride such a splendid animal as that man has.”

"Anything more?" I asked amusedly, but wondering at the girl's observant remarks.

"Yes! If he were a stockman he would probably have dogs with him, but I can't see any, and he's got a bandolier as well as a belt filled with cartridges. I never saw or heard of anyone wearing both save a police trooper or a new chum or——"

"Well?" I asked as she paused.

"A bushranger," she added quietly.

"Better say it's the great Hawker at once, Madge," I said. "He seems a picturesque sort of villain, and I've no doubt would be an awkward customer to tackle."

"That's just what I was going to say he was," rejoined Madge.

"Hello, he's gone!" I exclaimed, for almost as she spoke the subject of our conversation had turned his horse and disappeared over the range.

Madge turned to me with a smile on her lips and a flash of excitement in her eyes.

"If I'm not mistaken," she remarked, "our friend on the grey horse is going in the same direction as ourselves. I don't think he has seen us, though, of course, he has noted our waggons. Let us be the early birds who get the worms. We've got a good start, and we can make for the point where we left our lot this morning."

She put her horse to a canter, and I followed. I noticed that her eyes were always looking beyond the distant tree-tops and noting the configuration of the ridges and ranges. She was, while recognising some, impressing fresh features on her memory, in

case she might require to use them again, for she looked back on several occasions as if to see how the land lay should we require to return hurriedly in that direction.

Within twenty minutes we struck the waggon tracks near the spot where we had left them to go on ahead an hour or two earlier. We followed them at a good trot. Madge kept a very sharp look-out on either hand, even peering into thick clumps of bushes, and observing the forks of trees. At last, at a little dry channel, we came to a tree from which a strip of bark hung down. It had been blazed by a tomahawk.

"Now," said the girl, "we're getting warm."

The next moment, happening to look in the fork of a gum-tree a few paces distant, I saw a box about eighteen inches square. It was one of our ammunition boxes.

The girl said nothing but looked into my eyes as I lifted it down. It was heavy, and pulling up the stout tin-lined lid, I found that it contained the usual packages of rifle and revolver cartridges.

"This is from Sam Holt's waggon," said Madge, "and it was left here by arrangement."

"Quick, empty out the cartridges. We must clear off before the man on the grey horse comes."

I did as she directed, and we stuffed our wallets and pockets with the cartridges the box contained. I don't know how we could have stowed away any more. But there was also a large flask of coarse powder, and I didn't quite know what to do with that.

"Stuff the box with sand, or stones, or anything,"



I put a match to the fuse.



Madge said hurriedly; "and we'll prepare a surprise for Mr Starlight."

I did as she directed. She stepped to a dead tree close at hand, and unloosed from it a ribbon of dry rotten touchwood several inches long. She took out her handkerchief, and poured into it the contents of the powder-flask. Then she folded it up and placed it in the box. Into the powder she inserted the spigot of touchwood.

"Now light one end," she said, "and please make haste. If he should come it would spoil all."

I put a match to the fuse, and laying it flat, closed the slide all but the sixteenth of an inch or so—just enough to give it sufficient air to burn. There would be no smoke from the dry fuse. Then I placed it in the fork of the tree again.

"Now right into the bush," cried Madge. "There's a ridge running parallel with the way the waggons have gone, and we can get behind that and watch."

As I was fixing the fuse, Madge scribbled on a piece of paper the words, "*More to-morrer—SAM.*" This she fixed to the tree below the box.

We followed the waggon tracks for some twenty yards to a gravelly piece of ground, then made straight for the ridge. We came to the other side, followed it for some little distance, and halted at a spot where we could still see the tree where we had left the box.

"Madge," I suggested, "what if it kills the fellow?"

"It might save valuable lives and some trouble if it did," she replied with a slight flush on her sun-browned cheeks. "But I'm afraid Mr Hawker won't



have any such luck. It will only warn him off the grass and make him think his worthy friend has been having a game with him. Don't you see what a good thing that will be? *More to-morrer.*"

"Yes; I can fancy it setting him and Sam by the ears," I observed musingly. "That's to say, if he survives the ordeal."

"When rogues fall out then honest folk are safe," commented Madge, modifying the old saying.

"If only he comes up in time and finds the box," I suggested with some anxiety.

"Here he comes," said Madge, "the villain on the grey horse."

"He sees the blaze on the tree," I exclaimed. "He's got the box."

"Then look out for squalls!" exclaimed Madge.

Madge had hardly finished her sentence when, happening to look at her I saw her gaze grow fixed, and the colour fade from the warm brown of her cheeks. She put out a hand, and caught me by the arm.

"Look!" she cried. "Don't you see him? Oh, can't you stop him or do something?"

It was Jack who had cantered up unseen by us while our whole attention had been centred on Hawker. He had pulled up his horse, and sat facing the desperado who was still some ten paces away.

I pulled my rifle out of the gun-bucket, jumped off my horse, ran to a tree, and using a branch of it as a rest, covered the desperado.

"I've got him covered, Madge," I cried.

But the girl had not waited for my example. She had done the same thing. The next two or three

minutes were like an eternity. Would that fuse do its work? Jack would surely be safe at that distance.

Then I was startled by a cry from Madge.

"He's going to give Jack the box," she cried.  
"I must fire."

## XIII

### CHECK TO HIS KING

**A**S we afterwards learned, Jack had been riding ahead of the waggons when he missed a knife he usually carried, and remembering that he had left it in the previous night's camp, he rode back to get it. On his way, and just as he had passed some undergrowth, he came unexpectedly upon Hawker carrying that extemporised infernal machine which rested on the saddle in front of him.

Jack's first impulse was to draw his rifle from its gun-bucket and cover his man. But what Sam Holt had told him made him stay his hand, and he recollected how the bullock-driver had utterly disproved his suspicions and allegations. But there was that evil-grinning face of his assailant as he had seen it peering over the wattle bush, and he remembered the blinding flash and thunder of the shot. Could all that have been a delusion? He really did not know what to think.

Hawker caught sight of Jack at the same moment. The soft sandy soil had deadened the sound of the horses' hoofs. Jack pulled up and gazed with astonishment upon the sinister-faced bushman. He had no time to draw his rifle, and he realised that if he tried to, the older man would be the quicker of the two.

"Hello!" exclaimed the desperado, "you seem to be mighty bent on looking me up, mister."

His left hand and arm held the box in position in front of him while his right held the reins. It would be an easy matter to drop them, and draw his revolver strapped on his right hip. He was a dead shot, and he could afford to be cool with this stripping.

"I suppose the bush is free to us both," retorted Jack, affecting an easiness he was very far from feeling. "But Sam Holt told me about you, and I can quite understand why you don't want to meet more strangers than you can help."

"What ho!" exclaimed the satyr-faced one with a grin that was disquieting to say the least of it. "I hope old Sammy didn't peach on me. Did he tell you who you had the honour of bein' interduced to?"

Jack likened the odd fishy glitter in the desperado's eyes at that moment to the light in the eyes of a snake when it is poised motionless just before striking.

"He told me your name was Brooker," replied Jack boldly, "and that you were in some sort of trouble about a horse."

"Oh, he told you that, did he?" was the sneering comment. "Did you think it smart for one mate to give another away like that?"

"I don't see that it mattered much," replied Jack; "and I don't think that even Sir Donald would interfere in an affair of the kind. The public would only make a mess of things if it constituted itself a police officer. If I caught you in the act of

stealing my horse it would be quite another matter." And Jack grinned in spite of himself.

"Mighty good of you both, I'm sure!" and the hard, cynical expression on the man's face became satirical. He was doubtless wondering how he was going to get rid of this inconvenient youngster who, by always turning up at the wrong time, promised eventually to utterly ruin his plans. He was losing patience with him, and he had half a mind to kill him there and then. How the fellow was eyeing the box of ammunition! How stupid of him to have forgotten about that! Yes; he would have to kill him.

"I see we've dropped a box of ammunition off one of the waggons," said Jack. "It must have been carelessly put on. I think I'd better relieve you of it."

"All right, gov'nor, you can take it," and Hawker's manner became wonderfully subdued. Only a strange gleam awoke in his shifty yet watchful eyes as he prepared to pass the reins from his right hand into the one that held the box.

The action was not lost upon Jack, neither was the murder in the fellow's face.

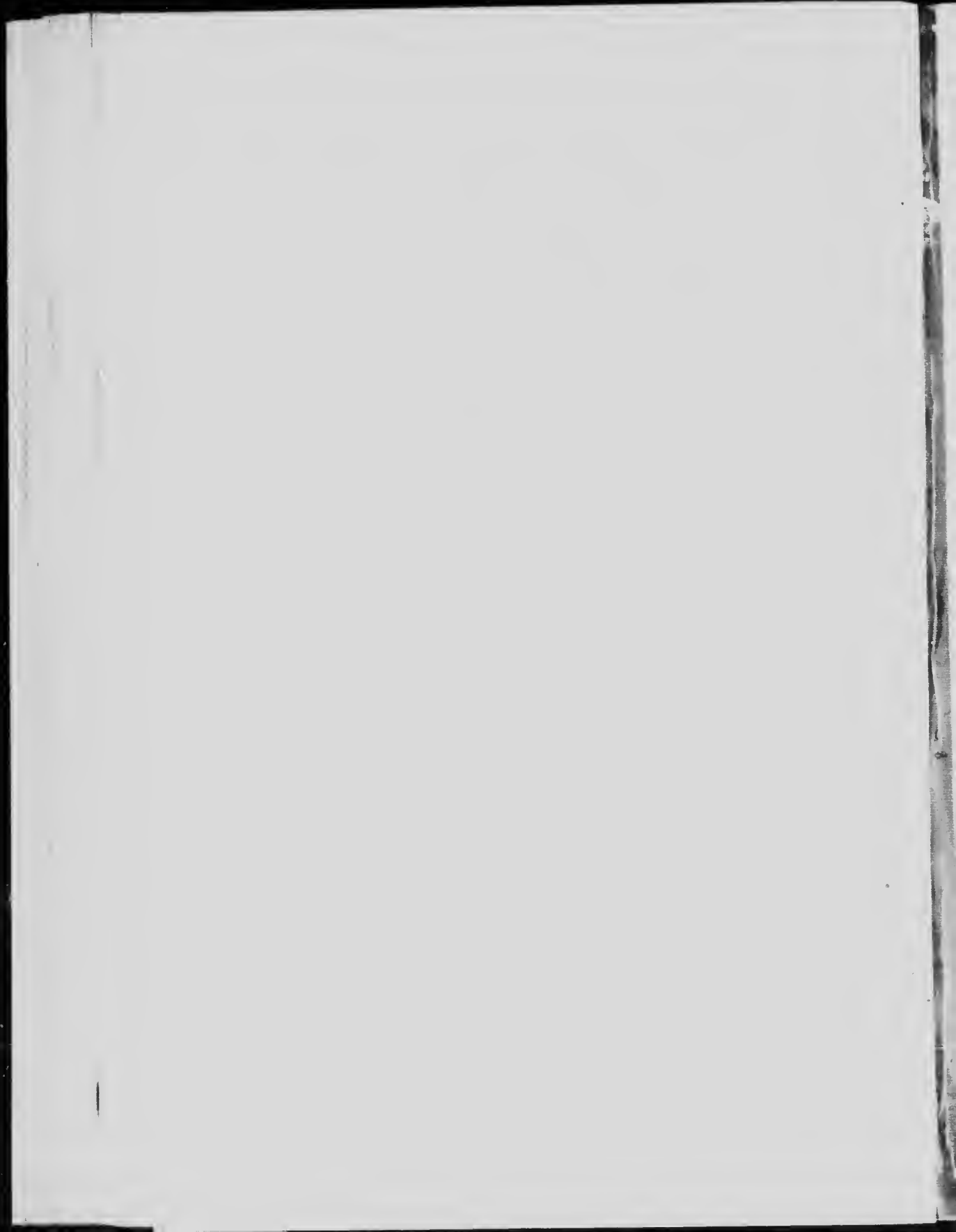
"No, you don't!" cried Jack, and his rifle was whipped from the gun-bucket.

Like a lightning-flash Hawker's hand went back to his hip. At the same moment two rifle shots rang out like one from a neighbouring ridge, and a couple of bullets sang out perilously close to their heads. Before Jack could level his rifle, Hawker's pistol was in line with his face.

There was a flash and a roar. The ammunition



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box in front of Hawker seemed to be convulsed—the lid was forced out, and a great column of flame and smoke shot into the air. The desperado was hurled backwards over his horse, and the scared animal galloped off into the bush.

Jack was untouched. His antagonist had fallen heavily to earth, his feet, luckily for him, clearing the stirrups. He lay like a bundle of limp rags, all anyhow, upon the ground. Surely there could not be a sound bone in his body!

There was a dull tattoo of horses' hoofs, and in a minute or two Madge and I galloped up. We had only missed shooting Hawker because with a perversity that was maddening, Jack would somehow keep in the same line as his antagonist. In the course of my professional career, and especially when I have been called on unexpectedly to perform some touch-and-go surgical work, I candidly admit having had some painfully anxious moments. But never in the whole course of my experience did I pass through such a period of uncertainty and anxiety as on this occasion. It had been an exceptional situation, one that could not be forced, but luck had been on our side.

I noted the girl's face was very pale, and the dark of her eyes was in strange contrast. If she had shown concern for Jack before, she showed none for him now. Like a woman, her concern seemed to be for the man whom three minutes before she had shot at. When Jack greeted her she promptly snubbed him.

"This is the man you met yesterday?" she said uncompromisingly, pointing to the apparently lifeless body on the ground.



"Yes," said Jack, flushing slightly.

"And you kept it to yourself!"

"As I was the party directly concerned, I didn't see it was anyone else's business—and don't now." He looked her defiantly in the eyes, and his lips were drawn tight. Whatever Jack's faults might be, any hesitation in taking his own part was certainly not one of them.

I had jumped off my horse and was turning over the limp and senseless desperado. He was slightly scorched about the face and neck, and I was searching for broken bones. Even while engaged in this important task, I could not help overhearing the little passage-at-arms between Madge and her cousin. There could be no doubt that the latter did not show in the best light.

"Jack," said Madge after a pause, and I thought just a trifle more gently, "don't you think it would have been safer for all concerned to have told us that this man was in the neighbourhood?"

"I wasn't sure as to who he was," replied Jack; "and to tell you the truth, I'm not quite sure that I'm not dreaming now! How on earth did that box happen to bust up just as he was going to shoot?"

In a few words Madge told him, and Jack whistled. Then he in his turn briefly narrated the events of the previous day. But it was no time to comment on same.

"I can't see there's much the matter with this man," I said. "He's only stunned. We'll have to make a prisoner of him, but he'll be a dreadful nuisance. I don't know at all what we can do with him."

Then there was the difficulty of Sam Holt and Bird being doubtless in league with him, and I realised in what a dangerous fix our party was. Could we proceed? and was Sir Donald going to be compelled to turn back and abandon his search for his friend? It was indeed a critical and extraordinary situation. Sir Donald must be acquainted with the circumstances at once, but at the same time, Sam Holt and Bird must not know of the affair until we were ready for them. It was Madge who suggested the only hopeful feature in the situation.

"He'll probably think," she said, indicating the senseless desperado, "that Sam Holt and Bird played him this trick, and that may prevent any concerted action on their part. It's exactly the sort of monkey-trick Bird would play on a mate anyhow."

"It was a monkey-trick," observed Jack, with a side glance at his cousin, and grinning like a school-boy.

"It saved you anyhow, Stupid!" retorted Madge, flushing and trying to keep a sober face.

It was strange to see the man who was undoubtedly the notorious bushranger Hawker lying so still and so helpless in our hands. I could not help being moved for a moment with the tragedy and pathos of the thought that this wretched man, for whom the gallows waited and who was now an out-cast and an outlaw amongst his fellow-men, had doubtless at one time been all that was most precious and dear in life to someone.

But we could not delay while the rest of our

party was forging ahead. Definite plans must be made and action taken at once.

"Jack," I said, "will you catch this man's horse—you'll see it over there amongst the trees, it hasn't gone far—and I'll remain on duty. Then you and Madge will ride on to the waggons. Tell only Sir Donald of what has occurred, and send Bailey back with the covered spring-cart.

Jack hastened to obey. Madge would fain have stayed with me, but I was obdurate. As the two turned away there came the sound of the drumming of hoofs along the track, and to my no little surprise and relief, Parker rode up.

He sat stiffly at attention as was his wont. He was too much the soldier to be distracted by the prostrate stranger on the ground until he had reported himself. He addressed me.

"The General would like to see you, sir," he said. "There's a ridge in front, an' 'e don't quite know which side to take. Been 'urrying up, sir, as I thought I heard a young earthquake somewheres in the neighbourhood."

Jack by this time had caught Hawker's horse, so I lost no time in determining what was best to be done. In as few words as possible I explained the situation to Parker, who merely remarked that the prostrate desperado didn't look like giving further trouble.

"Parker," I said, "you'll remain here with this man, and I'll go on with Miss Taylor and Mr Jack. You'll have to keep your weather-eye open, and we'll send back the covered spring-cart for him."

"Very good, sir," said Parker.



"And remember, Parker, we'll have to be careful in regard to some of the others when we get back to camp. I'm afraid there's a good deal of trouble ahead of us."

"If it's trouble they're looking for, sir, I'll take 'em on with pleasure," said Parker, visibly brightening up at the prospect. "I 'aven't 'ad a right good scrap for some little time now."

Madge wanted to stay behind, but I would not hear of it. If Parker were not able to look after himself, who could?

Left to himself Parker took up a good position with his back to a tree, where he could keep the now uneasily moving desperado well under observation, and enjoy a smoke and a good think at the same time. Jack had caught and taken away Hawker's splendid grey, but Parker's mare stood hitched up to a convenient blue gum in case of emergencies. The manservant as usual when left to himself lapsed into soliloquy.

"'E is a beauty an' no mistake!" he said, regarding his prisoner critically. "If 'e showed hisself down Mile End way 'e'd 'ave all the 'tecs in London arter 'im."

A little green lizard with beady eyes, palpitating sides and generally wide-awake air, took courage, descended a tree, and perched itself on a flat stone within a few feet of them. It cocked a glistening, shapely head on one side, and looked the very embodiment of curiosity. Before settling down to watch the curious humans it refreshed itself by vigorously scratching a cheek with a tiny forepaw.

When Parker had finished his smoke he was

rejoiced to find that his prisoner had regained consciousness. The latter indeed tried to rise, but his jailor peremptorily, though not in an unkindly way, forbade him. If he moved, he said, he would be obliged to handcuff him.

The desperado shut and opened his eyes again. He took one long look at Parker, and, as the latter afterwards described it, it was as if someone were pouring cold water down his back. Then the eyelids closed upon the wicked and inscrutable grey eyes once more.

"That's right," said Parker, "'ave a snooze. I ain't the sort of chap as cares to kick a cove when 'e's down, but if you takes my tip, mate, when you gets in front of a jury, don't look at 'em like that or your name's Hooky-Walker, sure!"

The little lizard pounced on a fly with a lightning-like dash, and the next moment was all attention again. The crickets and grasshoppers in the immediate neighbourhood were unusually garrulous. A bird shrieked resentfully some hundred yards or so away as if it had been disturbed.

Then the desperado seemed to wake up again, and in a strangely quiet voice asked Parker for a drink.

The manservant gave him one from the canvas water-bag he had with him, then asked him how he felt.

"Mighty bad, mate," said the desperado; "but if I could find the man as packed that box of cartridges so mighty careless, I'd die happy."

"I fancies you'll eventually find Sam Holt in a place we needn't mention now," observed Parker; "but Sam 'as allus bin partial to playin' wid fire-





works. Don't distress yersilf, sonny, we'll 'ave the shay 'ere presently an' won't shake you up more'n we can help."

Parker wondered how long it would be before the light cart came for them. He felt somewhat sleepy and took out his pipe again. The grasshoppers suddenly ceased their erratic din. The little lizard scuttled off the flat stone and ran up a tree. Parker again lapsed into soliloquy.

"We seem to be gettin' ahead of things a bit," he said. "I'd like the Ginyril to find that chap Smith, and next to that I'd like to meet that feller Crocodile agen. My! I'd square up accounts wid him for that thorn bush he chucked me inter."

A shadow fell at his feet. He sprang up in alarm with one hand over his head as if to shield it.

"*Crash!*" and something came down on his head felling him to earth.

He *had* met Crocodile again.



## XIV

### ANOTHER MOVE

**M**ADGE, Jack and I rode back in a circle to pick up the party again, and send the cart for our prisoner. What we were to do with him was somewhat of a puzzle. If we could leave him with Madge's friends, the Millars, on the Mac-Arthur River while we went to find Smith, it would be all right. But even if we found the squatting party, was it likely they were going to burden themselves with a notorious desperado to oblige us? It would be asking a little too much.

We took a southerly direction so as not to alarm the suspicions of Bird and Holt, and struck the first waggon which the former was driving. I remarked :

"Well, Holt, you've been making good time. Close on midday camp now, isn't it?"

I thought Sam looked oddly at me as he spoke.

"Yes, doctor, time for grub-pile, I fancies," he replied. "Where hev' you bin? Did ye hear that there big row like a canin going off in the bush 'bout an hour ago?"

"Yes," I answered, with an irresistible desire to give the cunning old fellow as bad a time as I possibly could. "I thought that the heat on your tarpaulin had been too much for one of our boxes

of ammunition, and had bust it up. There's some loose powder in one of them, you know, and I'm rather afraid something else that shouldn't have been left in the box at all, and which is highly explosive. We'll have to see to it."

For a moment I saw a look of anxious speculation on his face, and then the old villain actually grinned. I have no doubt his fertile imagination was conjuring up the possibility of the ammunition box exploding while it was being carried off by his worthy friend Hawker.

"Ye don't say so, doctor!" he exclaimed, and as he turned his face away to needlessly expostulate with one of his horses, I noted it was distorted and puckered in a way that made me realise how mobile was the human countenance. Then, as the consequences of such a contingency as his friend's destruction came home to him, a wicked, thwarted expression wrinkled up his old features till they were very unpleasant and disquieting to look upon indeed. He shouted to the horses and cracked his great whip as if to relieve his feelings.

With a sense of satisfaction that I was paying him back in his own coin, I rode ahead, and found Sir Donald. In as few words as possible I told him what had happened.

"Will the fellow, this man Hawker, live, do you think?" he asked.

"I am sure of it," I replied. "You see, the explosion by forcing open the lid of the box saved a more serious one. I examined the man thoroughly. There were no splinters, and he has no bones broken. He is merely suffering from shock and the fall from

his horse. By the time we get back for him I expect Parker will be using the sort of moral persuasion he understands best to keep him quiet."

"I've no doubt on that point," said Sir Donald.

He turned to his niece and regarded her with what was meant to be an official expression. This was the one that always seemed to amuse Madge.

"Madge," he observed, "that was your idea of doctoring the box. I know it was, so don't deny it. It was an extremely dangerous thing to do."

He paid no heed to my statement that I was the one responsible for the affair.

Like the wise General he was, he deemed it best to remove the traitors in camp as far as possible from the scene of the accident, and to keep them, for the meantime at least, in the dark as to what had taken place. His plans were quickly made.

He waited for Bailey who was riding alongside the spring-cart, and told him quickly what had occurred. He ordered him to get his wife's riding-horse from the mob, saddle it and with her ride on for a few miles to where there was good camping-ground. They would not turn out as usual for the midday meal, but make one long stage instead of the usual two. This, he said, would meet with as much approval from the men, and the horses would be none the worse for the unaccustomed journey as they would have a longer rest afterwards. Then he told Jack to get into the spring-cart and drive.

We struck off into the bush to make back to where we had left Parker and Hawker. Madge had been told to stay where she was until Bailey returned with his wife's saddle-horse. Nothing was

to be said to the teamsters. Maitland was to remain with Madge and the others. They were cautioned to look well to their firearms, and not to excite any suspicion by unguarded remarks.

Sir Donald, Jack and myself rode and drove back by a circuitous route so as to avoid the waggons. The travelling was good, and by having taken the most careful observations of the most prominent physical features of the hills, we soon drew near the place where the lively proceedings of the morning had occurred.

"Here we are," I remarked to Sir Donald. "There's the box that did the damage. I can't see their horses though. Hello! here is Parker. What on earth has happened?"

It was Parker—but such a Parker! Staggering like a drunken man, hatless and with streaks of clotted blood rendering his white face ghastly in the extreme, he tottered towards us. He seemed half dazed. A look of troubled apprehension was dawning on his face that was pathetic. He was just coming to, after having lain unconscious.

I jumped off my horse to steady him, and see if there was anything I could do for him. Hawker was not there. The situation was plain enough; but how a wide-awake man like the old soldier had allowed himself to be surprised by one whom we had left helpless and in his charge, was beyond my powers of imagination. Parker, forgetting that a soldier does not salute when his head is bare, feebly raised a hand to his forehead, as Sir Donald rode up to him.

"Well, Parker," said Sir Donald, "what has happened to you. Where is your prisoner?"

"Gone, sir," said Parker with a world of misery in his eyes, "and I can't make out how, unless it was the other chap took him. He was just a-comin' to when I got knocked out from behind."

"Oh, I see!" exclaimed Sir Donald, and at the same moment the situation dawned upon us both. It hardly needed explaining.

"So a friend of your prisoner's crept up from behind and tapped you on the head!" said Sir Donald. "It's a wonder they didn't kill you when they were at it. But I'm surprised at a man like you being had like that." Sir Donald turned to me: "Just have a look at his head, Payne, like a good fellow, and I'll have a look around."

In point of fact, though both Sir Donald and myself were disappointed, there was a feeling of relief that now we were not to be hampered with the custody of such a dangerous customer as Hawker. Had we been on the return journey to civilisation, it would have been a different matter. His presence in camp might only have precipitated a mutiny, and our quest for Smith would be ended, if, indeed, nothing of a more serious nature occurred. But the misapprehension that Sir Donald and myself were evidently under was plain to Parker.

"It warn't a white man, sir, as did it," he explained. "It was a naked black chap as sneaked up behind and did it with a stick. I twigged his shadow."

"Ah! your old friend Crocodile, of course," I said. "But why he didn't pay off his old score properly gets over me. He must have thought he had done the business with that one blow, and he

didn't give you credit for possessing a skull as generously formed by Nature to resist attack as his own."

Sir Donald, despite the gravity of the situation, smiled, but seeing I had pronounced Parker's injuries only to be what a man of Parker's stamp might be safely depended upon to bear with becoming dignity, it was perhaps excusable.

"Never mind, Parker," observed Sir Donald, "I don't suppose you'd have let a white man get the better of you like that, and I know that the savage of the bush is the wildest and most elusive thing in creation. It will be your turn next time."

Parker's thoughts went back to the first occasion on which he had met Crocodile, and he recollected when the resourceful savage was taking his departure after his chastisement, he had unexpectedly thrown an awkward cudgel at his head. That came of being merciful to such as Crocodile. It was quite evident that the savage, only for his belief in the efficacy of that blow from behind, and the necessity of getting Hawker speedily out of the way before help came, must assuredly have made a more effectual job of him.

We enlightened Parker as to the state of affairs in camp, according to the strange story that Jack had been obliged to make known to us, and then we made for a water-hole a couple of hundred yards away. I insisted on Parker riding my horse, as I declared I was simply dying to walk. Arrived at the water-hole, and having poured several pannikins of water over his head, Parker recovered in a most satisfactory fashion. Save a nasty lump, and piece

of broken skin on his well-thatched scalp, there was nothing seriously the matter with him. Moreover, the imperfectly suppressed ejaculations he gave utterance to, when he thought of Crocodile, bore eloquent testimony to his hopeful condition.

The worst feature of the situation in Parker's eyes was that Crocodile had ridden off with his horse. He really suffered when he thought of that. He gave Crocodile no credit for not having killed him outright—he knew how that was. He also knew there was nothing heroic in the black fellow assisting Hawker to decamp. Both were at war with the whites, and, moreover, Crocodile, doubtless by reason of his own devilries, not being too sure of the temporal integrity of his life among his own people, looked to the assistance of the white desperado to protect him. It was a splendid partnership from the point of view of expediency. They were a well-matched pair, and doubtless their acquaintanceship was not one of recent growth.

Having told his story, Parker submitted a scheme to us that at once commended itself to our intelligence. It was that he should ride back to camp, get a pick and shovel from one of the waggons, and communicate our plans to Bailey. The latter would then keep Holt, Bird, and the others employed in camp till we returned. Later on, it would be easy to hint in answer to their inquiries that a strange man had been found killed by a mysterious explosion, and naturally Holt and Bird would imagine that Hawker had met a well-deserved fate, and we had gone with the tools to bury him. When we rejoined them, we would be able to avert their felonious

intentions. It was not likely these would develop until we had reached the gold-mine they imagined Smith had discovered. They probably thought that after annihilating us, they would be able by means of confederates to sell the mine to a syndicate before certain facts leaked out, and they could get clear away. Their intentions were surely obvious.

"Good!" exclaimed Sir Donald when Parker had communicated his scheme. "You'll live to get even with Crocodile yet, Parker. Now that you're all right again, be off with you, and take another direction this time, so that Hawker & Company don't see you. We'll wait here until you come back. Take my horse; it's fresh."

Parker needed no other bidding. He was off on the track within two minutes. Strangely enough, Crocodile had not robbed him of his belt and revolver. The desperado had doubtless been too sick and dazed when put upon the back of his horse to trouble further about him. He had thought he was dead, and that was enough.

The brief twilight was coming on apace before Parker returned with a light prospecting pick and shovel strapped to the saddle of a led horse.

"It's all right, sir," he said to Sir Donald. "They saw me take the pick and shovel, and Bailey would tell them the sad news after I'd cleared out. He'd keep them busy so as not to follow me."

"Now that you've got the necessary tools," said Sir Donald, "we'll do a little superficial spade work. You take a rest, Parker. I know how to handle such tools."

In a few minutes we had dug a long shallow hole,



scattered some earth about and left a mound-like heap behind us. It was for all the world like a newly filled-in grave.

We rode back to camp slowly, and the stars were shining brightly when we got there. Bailey told us how Sam Holt had sat with staring eyes incapable of speech, when in reply to his question, he—Bailey—had told him that we were gone to bury the mutilated remains of an unknown man whom we had found in the bush. Sam Holt and Bird had crawled to their mosquito nets immediately after supper, and it was noted by all that they were unwontedly quiet and subdued.

## XV

### A NIGHT OF HORROR

IT was nearly full moon and the Southern Cross gleamed coldly in the blue. Midnight, and the quaint pre-Adamite Australian bush instinct with the seething life of a nocturnal world. Crickets trilled and carolled, tree frogs played strange ventriloquial tricks with their hollow voices; possums crooned shudderingly from white-limbed gums; a species of night heron every now and again startled one with its blood-curdling shriek; that ghostly bird the mor-poke, with hoarse regular notes imitated the barking of a distant watch-dog; while at regular intervals there arose a veritable sirocco of sound from the amphibious world down by the lagoon—a medley of trumpet-toned basses and shrill-piping trebles. Surely in this weird land of topsy-turvydom the night is the real day.

On foot and threading their way along the top of an iron-stone ridge, like men who know where they are going, are two evil-looking figures. One has his old slouch hat pressed tightly down over his long hair, his ragged shirt turned up to the elbows, and a carbine slung over his back. The other, though in strange contrast, is still a fitting companion for his sinister mate. He is a thickly-set

savage with a shaggy mop of hair. He is bare to the waist, and carries a club in one hand and a cruel-looking spear in the other. His ebony chest is strangely marked with raised ribs of black flesh. He has no shoes to his feet ; his great dark eyes look out restlessly ahead as if to pierce the furtive shadows. His forehead slopes back like an animal's ; his cheek-bones are broad ; his nose is squat, with nostrils set to the front like a bloodhound's—in short, the typical, primitive savage. The white man is Hawker, the black one Crocodile.

And now they descend the ridge, keeping in the shadow of a thicket of golden wattle, the blossoms of which gleam coldly in the moonlight, and stop to reconnoitre. Out in the open, some fifty yards from the banks of a lagoon, they see the ghostly sheen of canvas and the black bulk of waggons in the clear moonlight. Beyond them again, feeding out on an open flat, are the horses, hardly distinguishable at that distance. The two evil ones have caught sight of an uncertain mounted figure on the far side, and they know it is a teamster keeping watch over the mob.

Hawker looks long and carefully. It is not difficult at that distance to determine where sleep the teamsters, and where sleep their masters. But it is not with the latter Hawker has business just at present. His business with them will come in due season when he has them in some narrow gully at his mercy, and his tried rifle deals out death unerringly while he himself is unseen among the rocks.

It is Sam Holt he must see and speak with, and

if it were not that he had only that rascally savage, Crocodile, with him, whom he cannot trust, he would be inclined to interview Holt in a very different fashion from what he must needs do now. Sam's confounded carelessness in packing that box of ammunition had nearly been the death of him some twelve or fourteen hours earlier. It had exploded just at the moment he was going to settle that confounded boy who seemed always cropping up just when he was not wanted. . . . He had made a wonderful escape. If he thought there was any truth in what that officer's servant had hinted at—that Holt had purposely played him false, he would shoot him as dead as a herring that very night, if it were to end in him having to swing for it. But there were so many things, and mostly swinging ones, down against him on the slate, that it was silly to speak about swinging at all. . . . If he could only trust that beggar Crocodile ! But the thing was impossible. If it were not that that gentleman was in imminent danger of his own life being cut short by whites and blacks alike, he knew that he, Hawker, would have to keep a jolly sharp look-out every time the savage happened to lag behind him. But Crocodile had killed that razor-faced Tommy who was so handy with his fists, and that was one point in his favour. He wondered what they had thought when they found his lifeless body. Of course, they must have imagined that he did it. He was getting quite a reputation for smartness. Only a few hours before, something had drawn him back to the scene of the explosion, and he had seen the manservant's newly-made grave. They had not wasted much time over

the burial. But he must see Holt and speak with him. He recognised his mosquito net. It had a dark top to it, and could easily be distinguished among the others. Besides, the old bear was an unsociable sort of brute, and generally camped somewhat apart from the others.

Noiseless as a shadow, he crawled down the banks of the lagoon, and skirted it till he was abreast of the camp. He had posted Crocodile in the shadow of a gum-tree with strict injunctions to spear the first man who sprang up in the event of his presence being discovered. At the same time the savage was to take particular care that he did not spear him by mistake. Holt's mosquito net was the one on the edge of the group and nearest the banks of the lagoon. He hoped no beastly dog would see or scent him, and give the alarm.

A night heron suddenly flew past him like a ghostly thing shrieking like a human being in agony. Hawker started and cursed it heartily in a voice that was louder than he had intended. Luckily the frogs had begun a fresh chorus, and the basses and falsettos were strong enough to drown the human voice. He peeped over the bank. Yes; there was Holt's net! He hoped the old crank, if he were not already awake, would not wake up with a start when he got alongside.

The mournful cry of a curlew sounded clearly through the bewildering mosaic of sound that fretted the tropical night. Twice again it rose, but there was no sign or acknowledgment from that mosquito net with the dark top. Like a wild cat, and with a suggestion of feline cunning and stealth,

Hawker, crouching, went swiftly towards the net. A low screen of bushes and long grass came in handy just then. And now he was alongside it ; actually in the camp of the enemy.

He paused a moment and looked around. Was it only fancy or had he really seen a dark figure moving near that waggon over which a huge tarpaulin was rigged ? Fancy, of course, for he knew from previous experiences how prone the imagination is to conjure up bogies innumerable on critical occasions. Was he never going to get over such childish fancies !

He lifted up the corner of the mosquito net. But in his nervous condition, doubtless owing to the severe shock he had sustained on the previous day, he did not notice that it was not the one he had intended to invade. The one with the black top lay some paces farther away. Probably owing to his crouching approach he had not observed that.

And then with beating heart he seized the arm of the recumbent figure, and gently shook it. His eyes glared fixedly into the wide-open ones that were staring wildly into his. " Sam, Sam," he said in a louder voice than prudence dictated. And then a horror seized upon his soul as he saw that the staring eyes, the half-raised head, and the smooth white face made ghastly by the moonlight, were not those of the man he thought he was addressing. *It was the man whom Crocodile had knocked on the head on the previous day, and whose freshly filled-in grave he had actually seen !* With a wild cry of horror he turned and fled headlong.

But in taking the most direct way back to cover and where he had left Crocodile, he had to pass that

waggon where he thought he had seen the shadowy form of someone. He was just passing it when the slim figure of a woman stepped out into the moonlight and called on him to stand. He noted that she had a rifle in her hands. He tried to disengage the one he carried slung across his back, but found there was no time for that. His enemy saw the action and in another moment had put the gun to her shoulder. *Bang!* and a thousand pealing echoes awoke the slumbering camp. Hawker felt a burning touch on his well-thatched scalp, and his old hat went spinning from his head.

At the same moment a spear whizzed through the air; but instead of reaching the woman at whom it was aimed, it caught the desperado on the fleshy part of the shoulder. With a roar Hawker sprang into the air and continued his mad career. Someone sprang up from behind a mosquito net and made a grab at him. But the desperado hurled his assailant to the ground and kept on. (Afterwards we learned that it was Maitland.) In another minute and before Madge, whose bullet it was that had cost him his old hat, could get another fair shot at him, he had dived into the shadow of the golden wattle. Two, three shots more into the clump where he had disappeared, and the enemy was as good as lost.

"Take care, men, and don't shoot until you know what you're firing at," and Sir Donald with a rifle in his hand stood near the waggon, and endeavoured to bring the alarmed camp into some sort of order.

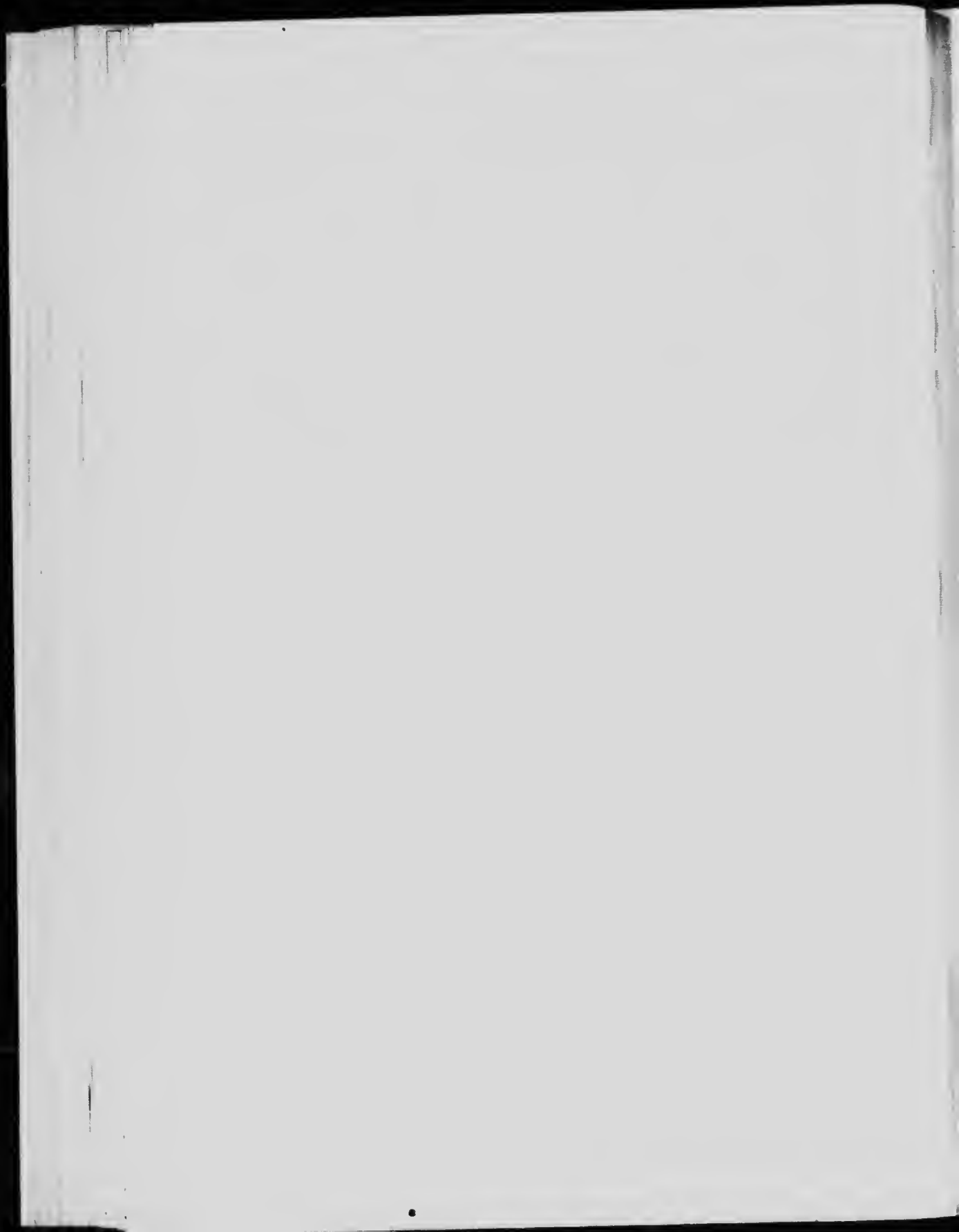
In another minute two or three of us stood in the shadow of the waggon alongside him.

"Now, send a volley into that wattle," he cried.



Bang! and a thousand pealing echoes awoke the camp.





"It will hasten them out of our immediate neighbourhood anyhow."

We searched the thicket with shot after shot, and it is pretty safe to say that no one tarried there from a matter of choice.

Sir Donald then sent Parker, Bailey and myself off to the right to cut the ridge at an angle, and if possible intercept the intruder or intruders as the case might be. We were not to go beyond a certain distance. We were to remain as much as possible in shadow. "Keep not more than twenty paces apart, and take no risks. First fire and then inquire" were our orders.

Gripping our rifles we went off so as to cut the long ridge about a mile off. We had a shrewd suspicion that even with our advantage the camp's assailant would take very good care that we did not sight him again. As we jogged along together we heard a shot fired from somewhere on our left and then another. There was an answering fire from the camp, and then silence again.

"Cricky!" observed Parker; "that's that chap Hawker come to 'isself, and taking a shot at the camp."

"Rather bold thing of him to do," I observed, "but I fancy his shooting won't be exactly first class. His nerves must be a little jumpy."

"Gewhitaker!" exclaimed Parker after another pause; "but I niver saw a face like that fellow's in all my life. He looked as if he'd seen a ghost, and, to tell the truth, I'm blowed if I didn't think I was dreamin' when I spotted his ugly mug lookin' into mine."

“You see, he probably thought you were dead and buried, Parker,” I said. “Possibly saw your grave earlier in the evening. I suppose he expected to see someone else under that mosquito net, and when he found you—well, I’ll wager he got one of the grandest old frights he ever had in the entire course of his wicked, pyrotechnic life. By Jove, that shriek of his made my blood run cold!” I felt that we had scored.

It gave the honest fellow intense satisfaction to recall that blood-curdling shriek of Hawker’s. It was worth the rap he had got on the head twelve hours before.

We struck the ridge and travelled back along it. There were no signs of the enemy, and we knew it was exceedingly unlikely that any would show up again. I had something to say to the others, and I hoped that if Madge had recognised Hawker she had kept the news to herself, or at least only communicated it to those who already knew that Hawker was still alive and at large. Sam Holt, Bird, and possibly some of the others thought he had met his death by misadventure, and it was desirable that they should continue thinking so.

We reached the camp again, and I at once proceeded to Sir Donald. In shadow of one of the waggons we held a brief council. Fortunately no one, save, of course, Madge and Parker, had recognised Hawker. The others merely thought the camp had been attacked by blacks. Of course, the news had gone round the day before that the bushranger Hawker had been found dead by misadventure, and we had gone to bury him. They would be

allowed to think so while we pushed on to find the badly wanted Smith, whose happy hunting-ground was still some considerable distance to the south-west. On the morrow we must strike the headwaters of the MacArthur River, and find Madge's friends the Millars. We would then determine what was to be done. The main point now in our favour was that Sam Holt and Bird supposed Hawker dead and buried, and would possibly on that account consider their schemes knocked on the head. They might do the whole journey without giving us further trouble, though, of course, it would be a risk to take them with us.

These conclusions being arrived at, Sir Donald gave orders to light the fires, boil the billies, and make an early start.

Oh, those beautiful bush dawns when the noisy nocturnal world has sunk to rest and everything is still! While as yet the harbingers of the fervid tropical day have not asserted themselves, and that other world which loves the light, still mimics death. There is a wan, watery gleam trembling in the eastern sky. The moonlight fades, the stars pale, a ghostly grey creeps into the forest aisles, and a faint lemon glow silhouettes the tree-tops to the east. Then all suddenly a laughing-jackass springs his noisy rattle on a drowsy, feathered world. A little bird among the boughs calls sleepily to its mate. There comes the answer. Then another wakes, and still another, until there is a glorious burst of song. Then the sun peeps over the tree-tops like a great molten ball of fire, and the dew sparkles on every leaf and blade as if a shower of fine diamonds

had fallen in the night. A flock of gaudy parrots fly screeching overhead to water ; a great kangaroo comes bounding along and disappears again in the dim of the trees like some grey ghost. There is a growing buzz and hum from a million living things. The tropical day has begun.

## XVI

### IN NO MAN'S LAND

**W**E made an early start that day, and as the horses were fresh, late in the afternoon we stood on a ridge and looked down upon the valley of the MacArthur River. Away to the north we could see where it flowed through the mountains before reaching the great wooded plains. We recognised the difficulties of taking transport through that broken country should we require to return that way.

We pushed on, and where a goodly-sized stream from the east joined the larger body of water we found the Millars' camp. Nothing could have been more fortunate than thus striking it, but as if in mockery of our somewhat premature congratulations we found it was deserted! And there, on a great white gum-tree with a square of at least a couple of feet from which the bark had been stripped, was the ominous word:

“DIG.”

With a sense of keen disappointment and curiosity someone took a spade and attacked the soil. Not more than eighteen inches from the surface we found an old pickle-bottle, tightly corked. We opened it and abstracted the paper it contained.

On it was written in ink: "To those whom it may concern," and the message went on to say that the Millars had taken up all the grazing country in that valley, and had been obliged to return to Boorooloola, the embryo township near the mouth of the MacArthur River, to await fresh supplies by boat, and the mob of cattle that was on its way up by the coast route to stock their new country.

The document also warned travellers to keep a sharp look-out, as the blacks were particularly numerous and dangerous in that valley. Several horses had been speared by them. They hoped to return some time in August—about the end of the cold season. On one occasion, on a prospecting trip to the south, and about fifty miles distant from that spot, they had caught sight of a most peculiar white man on horseback on top of a range. Through field-glasses they could see that he wore a battered old pith helmet, and that his shirt was in rags and sleeveless. He had evidently a revolver in his waist-belt, and a bandolier across his chest. On the saddle in front of him he carried a long rifle. Strapped to the saddle he also carried a prospector's pick and a shovel. When they had signalled to him by firing, he had disappeared. A roving stockman had caught a glimpse of him on another occasion, but this mysterious stranger had made himself scarce, and disappeared to the south.

"That was Smith—Smith for a certainty!" exclaimed Sir Donald. "Any other man, unless he were a madman or a bushranger, would have been only too glad to see white men, but Smith was always one of the most stand-offish and independent sort of

fellows under the sun—that is to say, until you knew him, and then he was one of the best.”

“If he keeps out of our way as effectually as he seems to have kept out of the Millars,” I observed, “it doesn’t look very promising for our obtaining an interview with him.”

“I’ve got this whistle,” said Sir Donald confidently. “When we see him I’ll sound the *Recall*. He knows it well. That will wake him up, I fancy.” And here Sir Donald produced a whistle which he carried in a little pocket in his belt, and, putting it to his lips, produced such a weird and excruciating series of noises that Maitland put his fingers into his ears and looked very unhappy.

But Madge was the difficulty, and there was a world of anxiety on Sir Donald’s face as he turned to look at her. Before he could open his mouth, she said :

“You’re not sending me down the river, Uncle? Don’t for one moment imagine I’m not going with you. You see, there’s Mrs Bailey who was to have been left here, and that would mean Bailey too, and I daresay another man, and you know better than I do that under existing circumstances you want every man you’ve got. You can’t risk failure now by breaking up your party, and as you see by that note, Mr Smith has been seen in the neighbourhood. You may fall in with him any day now. I haven’t been a drag on you, have I, Uncle?”

There was no getting away from “existing circumstances.” We could not help ourselves. Scheme as we might there was nothing for it but to accept the risks or go back in a body, and that was not to



be thought of. To divide our party might only mean disaster to both parties.

"We've got to change front," said Sir Donald, with his characteristic promptness in making up his mind. "We've got to take you on, Madge, and the Baileys too, so there's an end of it. I only hope Smith won't take it into his head to lead us a dance right across the continent. It's just the sort of thing he would delight in. Now we've got to strike due south into No Man's Land."

Next day we found ourselves well out of the valley and on a plateau that sloped slightly to the south. Everywhere there were numerous signs of blacks, but we never came in actual contact with them. We took extra precautions at night, and Sam Holt and Bird bestirred themselves and seemed as anxious as any of us to push on. Still I knew they were scheming, and I realised that their machinations were only limited by the extent to which they could corrupt those around them. I rode alongside Madge and discussed the outlook with her. I was anxious, I said, that she should be careful in her movements, and take no risks by straying away alone. It would be awkward if she should happen to be some distance away from the others, and chance to run against Hawker.

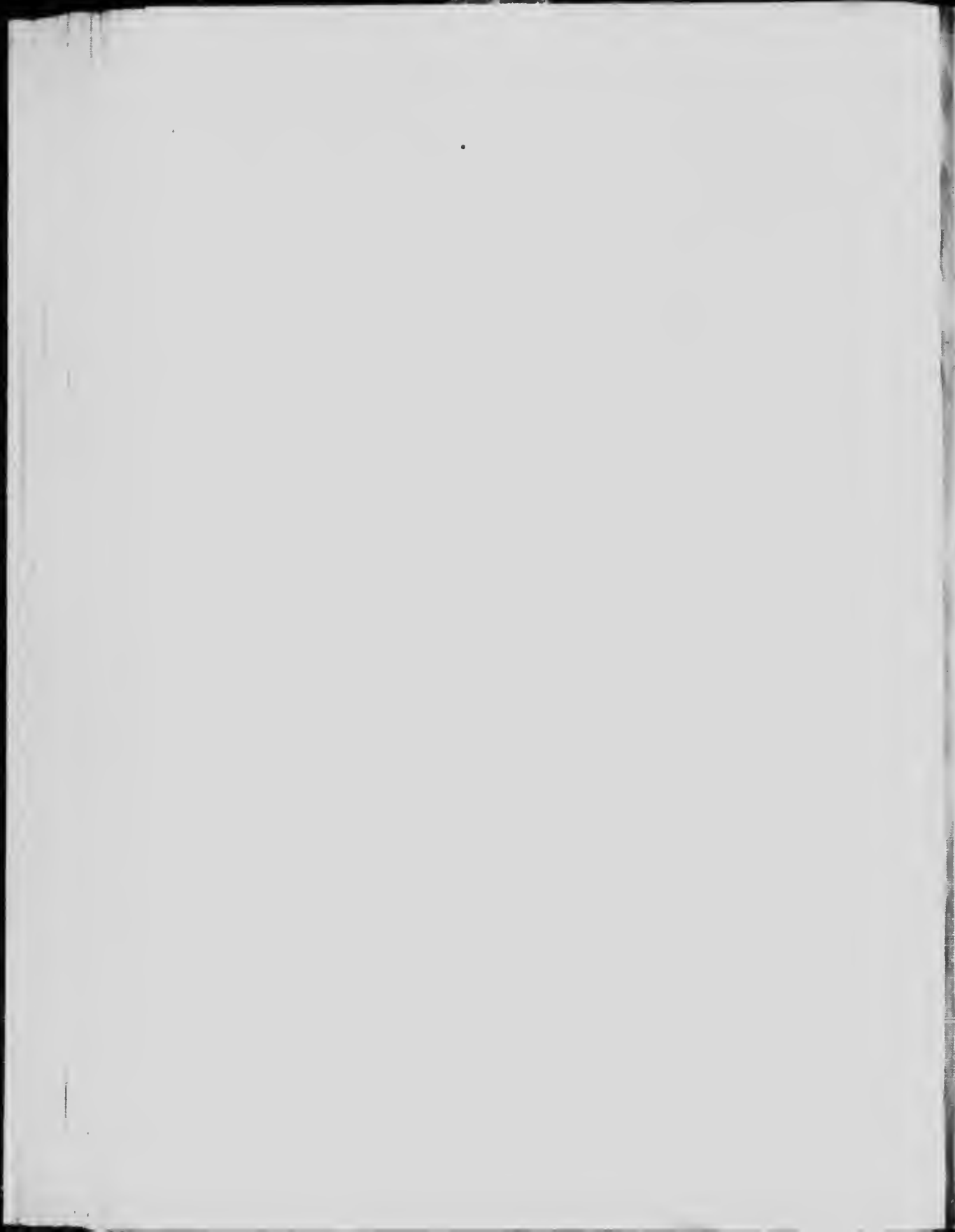
"It would be terrible," she replied, with an unwontedly grave expression on her face, "but I've always got my rifle."

"And he has always been accustomed to taking the initiative," I suggested.

"But just fancy what Holt and Bird and perhaps some of the others will suffer if they should chance



Bill Smith: Farthest North.



to run across him." she said. "You know they think he's dead and buried. I'd like to see Sam Holt's face if he did. There's only one thing on earth such men fear, and that's anything savouring of the supernatural. They're the biggest cowards under the sun. Hawker must think he saw Parker's ghost the other night."

The girl laughed, and I could see she anticipated some entertaining developments.

The following morning we observed great hills looming up away to the south-west. These were the Never-Never Mountains, our *Ultima Thule*, and the headquarters of Smith. I was riding along with Sir Donald and Madge when suddenly the former stopped and pointed to a large tree bearing an inscription. We rode up to it, and found cut into the soft bark the somewhat suggestive and grandiloquent notice:

"F. JONES,  
FARTHEST SOUTH" (and here the date followed).

And then as if to give utterance to our mixed if speculative thoughts concerning this enterprising if bumptious stockman's announcement—obviously the work of one of Millar's men—Madge pointed to a tree a few feet farther north bearing a notice of apparently more recent date. This one negating, and as if ridiculing the announcement of the other, ran:

"BILL SMITH. *Farthest North.*"

"That's Smith, by Jove!" exclaimed Sir Donald;

“and if the world were full of Smiths I’d know it was our particular one, for I never in my life knew him to miss his little opportunity.”

“He must have a lively sense of humour,” said Madge when she had done laughing. “The pity is that Mr Jones isn’t here to appreciate it.”

Part of Smith’s mission was evidently to reflect in a practical fashion on the limitations of others when they were in danger of forgetting them.

All that day we followed down a lovely creek which more than anything else resembled a chain of lagoons. The banks were fringed with picturesque pandanus and cycas palms and tree-ferns. In some of these long deep rocky pools we saw a great number of small crocodiles. Some of them we could only detect by their glittering eyes as they floated basking on the surface of the water. It was here that Maitland asked a question of Sir Donald that, to tell the truth, had been suggesting itself to me.

“Sir Donald,” he said, “this stream seems to be increasing in size without any visible means of support, but it’s flowing the wrong way to run into the Gulf of Carpentaria. Where on earth is it running to?”

“Madge, tell Mr Maitland what becomes of this stream after it has become a goodly-sized river,” said Sir Donald.

“I’m sure Mr Maitland doesn’t require telling,” said Madge. “He knows so much more than I do about most things.”

“If you had said that at the beginning of this trip,” rejoined Maitland candidly, “I’d have agreed with you. Now, it seems to me that it’s only the

things that don't matter I know. I seem to have missed the most interesting things—the things that directly concern the world I live in.”

“But the fact that you've asked the question shows that you are improving,” laughed Madge. “But I think I'll leave the lecturing to you, Uncle.”

“Well, the truth is, Maitland,” began the General, “one has to go back about a million years to find the explanation of why these rivers run into the interior. But that is a detail. If we were to go far enough, and at the proper season, we'd see mighty rivers flowing into the interior. But long before these rivers get there, they divide and subdivide. Then some of them have a trick of disappearing altogether, evidently into the earth, while others run underneath their own beds and never come to the surface again.”

“Well, that's queer!” exclaimed Maitland. “I don't mean to say I've never heard of that before, but didn't quite take it seriously. How do you account for it?”

“Australia once probably consisted of two islands,” said Madge, “the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Great Bight probably met. Then the land gradually rose and changed the narrow sea into low-lying sand plains with occasional ridges of hills. The result is that now the central portion of Australia is in many parts lower than the coast country. So a great many rivers still run into what is now the interior, and having no outlet to speak of, disappear into the dry sandy soil. But some form great lakes such as Eyre, Sylvester, Amadeus and others that appear and disappear according

to the seasons. More than one explorer has called another explorer a—well, something very unparliamentary, because he couldn't find a certain charted river or an alleged sheet of water where the other had located it."

"It is all very fascinating," observed Maitland as if to no one in particular. "Differential calculus is not in it compared to this."

All along the banks of the stream we encountered great piles of mussel shells, the remains of fires and black fellows' camps innumerable. The remarkable thing was that we never caught sight of any black fellows themselves. To Sir Donald this fact seemed to be full of significance.

"When an enemy lies low, and doesn't show up occasionally," he remarked to me, "you can be pretty certain he has something up his sleeve, and is preparing a surprise."

It was quite evident that somewhere in that neighbourhood there must be immense numbers of blacks. The food supply seemed so good, and that we knew regulated their numbers. All the laws relating to the Australian blacks are purely Levitical or sanitary in their character, and of a complex but wonderfully suitable nature to the blacks themselves. Indeed, they would considerably astonish those stay-at-home philosophers and reformers if they could only grasp the fact that for the aboriginal's present primitive stage in man's gradual development—in accordance with an All-Wise Design—and considering his scanty physical advantages—for there is not a single indigenous plant or tree in Australia that is capable of improvement by

cultivation—he is actually governing himself on the best lines suited to his surroundings. He is not yet ready for a high civilisation, and, therefore, the failures that ensue when well-meaning people bring a Twentieth-century civilisation to bear upon him. It is like bringing a man, who has been blind all his life, and who has suddenly recovered his sight, all at once into the full glare of the sun. He is dazzled and blinded, and the last state of that man is worse than the first. This, of course, should not interfere with a Christian-like and practical legislation on their behalf.

The weather was now delightfully cool, it being mid-winter in the land of topsy-turvydom. That is to say, people who live in Australia would have considered it cool—to an Old Countryman it was delightful summer weather. As we advanced, the mountain range lay ahead and to our right, while away to the left was gently rolling country as far as the eye could reach. Away out there some explorers had solemnly averred there was a lake so large that it resembled the ocean, for one could not see to the other side. Others again declared they had followed by that identical route and could hardly find enough water in the native wells for their horses or camels. It surely was a weird and mysterious land.

We kept to the right, and again entered the hilly country. We would soon be close to the main range of the Never-Never Mountains. Ten days more and we were literally under their shadow, and they loomed black and grim before us. Fantastically-formed mountains these, with vast frowning bas-



tions, overlooked by domed summits, jagged crests, or spire-like pinnacles, a phantasmagoria of gigantic and startling effects. We skirted the base of this seemingly impenetrable land looking for an opening. At length we saw a break in the range, which at a distance for all the world resembled Sydney Heads. At the close of a long day's journey we camped on the banks of a creek within two miles of the frowning gateway referred to. It surely must lead into the mysterious inner land—the Mecca of our hopes.

It was Sunday morning, and as usual no one was very early astir. At least we menfolk thought so, until we were awakened from our sense of security by a very startling discovery indeed. It was Mrs Bailey who sprang it on us. She came over to Sir Donald's tent, and calling to him, inquired if Madge were there or if he had seen her lately.

"No," he called out. "Isn't she with you? Surely she can't be far away. When did you see her last?"

"She got up two hours ago," was the reply. "She told the herder she was going to have a look at the great cliff from the outside. I thought she might have returned and been with you."

"She hasn't been here," I heard Sir Donald declare. And then a moment after he cried in a loud voice for Bailey and myself.

In two minutes the whole camp was discussing Madge's disappearance. It was two hours at least since anyone had ~~seen~~ seen her.

We fired a volley from our rifles and breathlessly awaited a reply. But there was no acknowledgment—nothing save the echoes.

“Something may have happened to her,” cried Sir Donald. “She is too good a bushwoman to lose herself. Doctor, and you Maitland, and you Jack and Parker, get your horses at once. We’ll take a black boy with us to track her. Bailey, you’ll wait in camp and look after it while we’re gone; and, Bailey, keep your weather-eye upon Holt, Bird and Brock. They want watching badly.”

## XVII

### THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF MADGE

**W**HAT had become of Madge? Why had she gone out alone in such a wild and dangerous district, knowing, as she must have done, that there was just a chance of meeting with either wild blacks or the desperate Hawker? True, neither blacks nor Hawker had been seen for several days, but then creatures of prey generally dog the movements of their intended victims, and do not show themselves until the fatal pounce is made. Surely Madge, although hitherto in the habit of going out by herself, ought to have considered the feelings and responsibilities of others. Such were some of my thoughts as I saddled up.

Within an hour, and after having lost the tracks of Madge's horse more than once owing to the rocky nature of the surface in places, we followed them to that great break in the high wall of cliff that rose up precipitously from the wooded plain. I rode with Sir Donald while one of the black boys went ahead at an easy jog, his great dark eyes fixed keenly on the ground, reading signs there that were either invisible or meaningless to his civilised fellows. A bruised tuft of spinifex grass pressed in a certain direction, a pebble turned on its side, any natural

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object whatever that had been disturbed recently in an unnatural way, was at once detected and interpreted by the lynx-eyed savage. The face of Nature is to him an open book. Through countless generations, in order that he might live, his life had been one long hunt which had so developed his perceptive faculties and certain senses, that the bloodhound itself was hardly a match for the human.

Right into that mighty pass we rode where the cliffs rose sheer up without a break for several hundred feet over our heads. We noted that Madge had evidently steered clear of clumps of bushes and rocks behind which an enemy might lurk. Once Yarry, the black boy, stopped and, pointing with a forefinger to the ground, remarked :

“ 'Nother fellow track belonging to white fellow here ; that one old, three, four days ago. He been lead-um yaraman, horse.”

By which he meant that a white man leading a horse had passed through that gorge some days before. Still, look as we might, neither Sir Donald nor myself could see anything but the most indistinct blurs upon the soil. But these blurs to the observant black fellow resolved themselves into the correct foot and hoof prints of a man and horse, both of them walking. It was a chain of evidence to him of which not a single link was missing.

At times the pass would contract until it was not more than fifty yards in width, the greater part of it being occupied by the river-bed, and then it would open out until it was a hundred yards across. At intervals great isolated columns of rock stood out in solitary state, or spire-like pinnacles jutting

from the cliff itself, suggesting the ornate and graceful façade of some mighty cathedral. Here and there, from narrow terraces great cypas and feather palms flung out their feathery and magnificent fronds of darkest green. At one place the effect suggested Nature's altar screen.

The tracks we were following were lost in the stony bed of the creek, that now stretched from cliff to cliff. The gorge took a turn, and then all at once a mighty valley with an inclined plane in the centre, the sides of which were also precipitous, burst upon our astonished gaze. It was as if we looked upon a vast, waterless, land-locked harbour, with a grass-clad island in the centre, one end of which rested on the plain, while the other rose gradually to a height of several hundred feet and then fell sheer away. It was as if the rock upon which the castle and old town of Edinburgh are built rose up before us, grim and bare as when the Romans first saw them, and a mighty wall-like crag resembling that of Salisbury with a regal circling sweep hemmed in the whole. It was such an impressive and totally unexpected sight that we instinctively reined in our horses, and gazed as if spellbound.

It was Sir Donald who was the first to realise the importance of that plane in the centre, and grasp its strategic position as a base from which the search for Madge might be conducted. True, she had only been gone a few hours, and was certainly somewhere in that great circular valley, but here was the spot that commanded it in its entirety, and no time must be spared to at once seize upon and take advantage of it.

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"Yarry," said Sir Donald, turning to the black boy, "quick; get back to camp at once and tell Mr Bailey to make the men hitch up both waggons and the spring-cart, and come on here. Wait, I'll give you a note to take to him."

He drew a small notebook from a pouch on his belt, and scribbling a few lines, was about to hand them to Yarry when his action was arrested by an exclamation from the aboriginal. The latter was gazing fixedly at a bare patch of ground that just showed through the tree-tops some few hundred yards to the right. Only a black fellow could possibly have noticed it at all.

"What do you see there, Yarry?" demanded Sir Donald.

"White fellow bin diggum post-hole!" disgustedly replied the son of the bush, who had a supreme contempt for manual labour of any sort.

"Let's have a look before I give you the note," said Sir Donald.

We rode through a sparse undergrowth for a few hundred yards and struck a slight ridge, ascended it twenty or thirty yards, then stood still, gaping at what we saw and at one another.

A great quartz-reef had been laid bare, and someone had been working on it quite recently. It was at least twelve feet thick, and of that rusty gap-toothed sort that even the comparatively uninitiated realise as being richly gold-bearing. A pick actually lay on the ground alongside it; some loose specimens lay scattered around, and some white dust was sprinkled over a heap of mould showing that a specimen of quartz had been

recently dollied or crushed and, after washing, had been thrown aside.

“Prospectors! and they’ve found a jolly fine reef,” exclaimed Sir Donald. “But off you go, Yarry; we can’t stop now for all the gold in the world.”

Sir Donald took a whistle from his belt and blew a peculiarly ear-piercing note on it. I felt glad for Maitland’s sake that he was not in the immediate neighbourhood.

“If the man or men who own this claim are in the neighbourhood,” he said, “they ought to hear that.”

I could suggest nothing. So many strange ideas took possession of me at that moment, and I imagined Sir Donald might only consider me taking leave of my senses if I told him all I thought.

“Let’s go up that hill,” I said. “We’ll be able to have a good look around, and, anyhow, Madge will have a much better chance of seeing us.”

“Right, Payne,” assented Sir Donald, “and by skirting the edge of that rise, we’ll be able to command the valley. We’ll fix on a camp at the same time. I hope there’s water.”

“I’m sure of it,” I said. “I noticed a watercourse right down its centre. There’s most likely a spring some little distance up it. But we’d better look.”

We galloped nearly a mile through the lightly-timbered valley to the foot of the rise, which here was not more than a hundred yards across. Down the centre of it was a tiny watercourse containing pools of clear water. The hill itself was richly grassed. We ascended it for a few hundred yards,

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and then saw that the watercourse seemed to come down from the summit.

“That’s all right,” said Sir Donald. “It will be comparatively easy for the waggons to go up there, and there’s any amount of grass and water. This hill gains in breadth as it goes up. The horses will be all right for pasture. I’m glad I told Bailey in that note to go right up to the top. We shall be comparatively safe in case of attack. And now let’s skirt the brink; we surely must be able to see something of Madge from this crag. I wonder where Maitland has got to. I hope he won’t go and get lost, too.”

When Yarry, the black boy, was sent with a written order to Bailey to hitch up and proceed to that natural fortress in the centre of the valley, he mused as he cantered along on the absurd ways of white people. What a game they were having with one another! The big white boss, his master, might be very clever, and the white gin, Mary (to semi-civilised blacks all white women are Marys), perhaps more fully realised the value of observation as practised by his black brethren than any other of the party. Still, how imperfectly they all understood each other! For instance, he had only to look at the faces of Sam Holt and Bird and Brock to read treachery and murder in them. Not that there was anything wrong in the mere fact of killing as understood from the moral standpoint of a black fellow. It was the unexpectedness and inconvenience of it that troubled him. He more than suspected they meditated annihilating his white master, and young mistress, and the other members of the party in



order that they might seize the horses and waggons and have unlimited tucker all to themselves. A superabundance of food was the most powerful reason Yarry could think of that would induce the disaffected ones to resort to extreme measures. But he hated those common men. They had frequently called him a blooming nigger and other things which, if he could not exactly understand, he knew were of an unflattering nature. It was a great pity his big master would not permit him to quietly spear them on the first auspicious occasion. Some whites had absurd scruples about such methods.

But he had an idea. He had often noted the strange value some white men put upon that dirty-looking yellow stone, a large crop of which he had just seen on the hill-side. According to the big boss's own declaration the possession of it was of no particular value to him just then. If he told Sam Holt, and Bird, and Brock about it, they might be induced to stay behind and take possession of the absurd yellow stone. The party would then be well rid of a dangerous element. True, the find doubtless already belonged to someone else, but that little difficulty could surely be got over in lonely parts where there were no police. He had slipped a lump of the white stone, heavy with the gleaming yellow stuff, into the breast of his shirt. He would show it to Sam Holt when Bailey was not looking. Oh, yes, he certainly was a long-headed black fellow and knew how to bring things about without unnecessary fuss.

He regained the camp, and found Bailey ostenta-

tiously cleaning his rifle, while at some little distance Holt, Bird and Brock were pretending to be deeply engrossed over some strands of green-hide. He noted they were engaged in earnest conversation. Every now and again they glanced at the second in charge in a peculiarly sinister fashion. Yarry thought Bailey was not such a fool as most whites. He gave Sir Donald's order to the latter. Bailey's wife had taken a horse and gone out with the others the moment she realised that something must have delayed Madge.

"Get in the horses and hitch up at once, boys," cried Bailey. "We're going to shift camp."

"Where to?" asked Bird with unmistakable insolence in his voice.

"I'll tell you that all in good time," replied Bailey.

"You might answer a fellow civil," remarked the little bush dandy sharply.

"Then don't ask unnecessary questions," snapped Bailey. "I get my orders, and give you yours. That should be enough for both of us."

"Blowed if I know!" retorted Bird. "It strikes me you're just a little bit independent, guv'nor. Perhaps you won't be quite so fresh afore you're done with us."

"Bird, I'll settle that with you again," said Bailey, with difficulty restraining himself. "Under the circumstances you ought to be ashamed to waste time. As it is, say another word and I'll give you the hiding you've been looking for for some time back."

Muttering to themselves, the three men went to

hitch up the horses which the black boys had rounded up. Bailey had loaded his rifle, and was ostentatiously carrying it across his left arm. His eyes were now fully open to the mutinous attitude of the men under him.

The tents and other articles lying around were flung on the waggons, the horses were hitched up and a start made. Bailey sent Bird ahead to lead the way up the gap. He himself, still nursing his rifle, followed the rear waggon. He was taking no chances with such a crew. Yarry, who had stayed to help his mate Snowball catch the horses for the teamsters, now rode on to rejoin Sir Donald. When he came up to Sam Holt, who was driving the first waggon, he hailed him in that informal manner peculiar to his kind.

"Hello, Sammy," he said; "you likum yellow-fellow stone?"

"What the blazes d'ye mean, you chunk of Wallsend?" inquired the perspiring horse-driver, in no very amiable mind, and somewhat out of breath.

"Plenty blazes you, Sammy!" retorted Yarry. Then looking behind to make sure he was not overlooked, he withdrew the specimen of gold-bearing quartz from his shirt, and tossed it lightly to the wicked unwashed one. "Boss bin findum plenty more like that," he added. "Me secum all same like that one as big as a humpy, and boss he no wantum and go away."

The horses were in some little danger of lagging, Sam was so fascinated by that lump of quartz he held in his hand. It was fairly plastered over with

dull red gold. In it he saw freedom from the laborious and monotonous life he was leading, and boundless wealth which meant to him all those things his soul had hungered after vainly through the wretched sordid years. It meant Melbourne and Sydney or, better still, the Old Country, with limitless money to spend in the saloons, on horse-racing, and gambling, and on other things. Goodness, what a time he would have ! It fairly staggered him to think of all it meant.

He was roused from his dream by Yarry shouting to one of his horses.

“ Yarry,” he said, looking up at the black fellow in a way that made that gentleman’s flesh fairly creep. “ Where did you git that ? You’ll show old Sammy where, won’t you, Yarry ? Old Sammy’s bin a bit rough wid you at times, he has, but he’s nct a bad sort at heart, he isn’t, and it’s a bally right lot he thinks of you, my son. Oh, yes, you kin bet on that ! ”

To the semi-civilised boy the protestations of the old sinner were as transparent as glass. His instincts had not been blunted by civilisation. In Sam’s eyes he read avarice, cupidity and wholesale murder. Yarry determined to keep a discreet eye on Sammy. The old villain must be induced to leave the camp at any cost. That big holeful of the yellow rubbish would do the trick. It never occurred to Yarry that other people might want it very badly, too. The main thing was to get Sammy, and possibly Bird and Brock, to clear out without any unpleasantness. His lot could get on all right without them.

Sam Holt, like one in a dream, but still keenly alive to the possibilities of the present and the future, contrived to keep Yarry beside him until he had pointed out the reef on the hill-side, and then enjoining him to secrecy by extravagant promises and vague, horrible threats, he allowed him to depart.

When he had gone, Sam Holt felt as if he were walking on air, and the various murders he contemplated in his heart weighed on him not at all. He regretted that Hawker was dead and buried, killed by the explosion of that box of ammunition which he had left for him on the tree. Of course, he did not actually regret him as a friend and a brother, only as a man who would have been extremely useful in the murderous work that gold entailed. After all, the hangman had been saved trouble, and he and Bird and Brock would have all the more to themselves. His boss, the General, had taken the matter pretty coolly, merely sending back that chap Parker to the waggons for a shovel to bury Hawker. He must have thought that the ammunition box had fallen off the waggon, for he never said a word about it. However, that was just like the old bloke. Parker had said the corpse was an "'orrible sight!" Yes; he imagined Hawker would be rather messy.

## XVIII

### WE STEAL A MARCH

IT was midnight, and only for the fact that we knew it would add to the already heavy burden of trouble and anxiety weighing on Sir Donald, I do not think any of us would have returned to camp without having found some trace of Madge. Her loss was an overwhelming blow to our party, and we only dismissed one wild theory regarding her incomprehensible disappearance to start another. Had she been a town-bred girl and unaccustomed to finding her way about in the bush alone, we could have understood it, but she was a good bushwoman, and had a splendid head for locality—which, as may be accentuated, is nothing more than the exercise, practice and application of the powers of observation to physical features, whether they are the streets of a city, the windings of a mountain range, the more difficult characteristics of a forest on the level, or perhaps most difficult of all, an open prairie.

We had ascended the great inclined plane until we were at an altitude of three or four hundred feet. Here it narrowed, only to open out again on an extensive circular plateau some three or four hundred acres in extent. On this we turned out the horses. We camped at the narrow neck, which was

not more than seventy yards or so across. On all sides, save, of course, the one by which we had ascended, the approaches were either precipitous or so steep that it would have been a more than risky thing to attempt scaling them. The waggons were placed behind some huge boulders. It was an ideal stronghold. In case of an attack by blacks or renegade whites a few men could hold it.

Sir Donald himself had just come in looking so tired and careworn that I almost feared to speak to him. I had erected a large fire of the broken timber that lay around on the highest point of the plateau, so that it made a blaze which might be seen for miles round.

"Now that you're here, Sir Donald," I said, "I suppose you'll allow some of us to go out again. Maitland, Bailey and I came in about half-an-hour ago. We've had supper so we're quite ready to start."

"Just wait a minute, Payne," he replied, and the subdued sadness in his voice filled me with a great pity for him. "I've something to say to you. But first you can send out Jack, Bailey and Martin, and tell them to look to their firearms. Let them follow the cliff to the left. Later we'll follow it round to the right. See that they've had a good supper first."

I did as he directed, and after he had eaten a few mouthfuls and drunk a pannikin of tea—for I would not allow him to speak until he had taken something—he spoke again.

"It's a mystery to me," he said, "where Madge could have got to. This valley can't be more than

fifteen miles in circumference, and unless she found a way out, of course, she must be in it."

"Something may have happened to her horse," I suggested, "and perhaps being in scrub she can't see this rock, for rock it is."

"But there's the firing—she must have heard that?"

"In a valley like this, describing a huge circle, I've just been wondering whether our firing so much, and at different points, may not have served to confuse and lead her aimlessly from one place to another. And as for the echoes—well, you can't fire a shot without hearing it repeated in two or three different places."

"That's very true, Payne. But put it to yourself, do you think that Madge is the sort of girl to get lost? Why, she could give the best of us points in bushmanship."

It was all so true, and my heart sank within me. I had such faith in Madge being able to look after herself that, despite the ominous circumstances of the case, I had been trying to make myself believe all day that she would turn up and explain her absence by some unthought-of accident.

"She has a good horse," I said, "and she has her rifle, and none of our party could use both to better advantage in case of emergency than she."

"You're thinking of the wild blacks," said Sir Donald in a strange hard voice. "But do you know, Payne, I've been thinking of something worse—bad as they are."

I could see by the fixed grim look in the old



soldier's eyes as they caught the glint and flicker of the burning logs that what he thought was a greater hell to him than any he had ever seen on the battle-field. I knew what he meant now, and I put it into words to save him doing it.

"You mean Hawker," I said in a low voice. "But for argument's sake, let us suppose that Hawker did see her, do you think it would suit his book to interfere with her? He is hiding from Justice; the gallows is ready for him if he is caught; he doubtless has some idea of ultimately being able to get out of the country—why should he risk your vengeance by interfering with her now? And besides, criminals of his type have a curious craving for a certain kind of popularity. They will often be chivalrous because otherwise it would not be in accordance with melodrama, and they always play to the gallery."

"Your suppositious criminal is of the same type as the absurd heroes of certain popular novels, mostly written by people who never associated with real criminals," said Sir Donald moodily. "Perhaps if you had some personal knowledge of Hawker, you'd see the brute in all his moral ugliness. But you're a good fellow, Payne, and I understand why you speak like that. Besides, there's another feature of the case."

"What is it?" I asked.

"That gold-reef we found to-day," he said deliberately. "You'll remember when Jack stumbled across Hawker's camp and found Holt and Bird there, they tried to draw him as to what Smith was doing in these parts. They believed somehow or

other that he was prospecting, and had found a valuable gold-mine which we were going to help him to stake out and take up formally. Now, I wouldn't be surprised if what we saw to-day was actually Smith's gold-mine. If so"—and here he lowered his voice—"and if certain members of our party see or hear of it, and I can't see how they can help stumbling across it, then don't you see the rest of us would only be in the way, and they'd endeavour to wipe us all out? If Hawker anticipated he could do this, what would there be to prevent him harming Madge?"

I confess the by no means unlikely nature of his suggestion startled me. It was this new feature—the prospect of untold wealth—that changed the situation so far as Hawker was concerned. Still it was hard to believe that a man who was hiding from the gallows should court further risks by embarking on wholesale murder for the sake of a gold-mine he could not realise, and with mates he could not trust. As to Sir Donald's suggestion about the possibility of Hawker and our disaffected ones coming together again, and probably deciding to murder us, the sooner we brought them to book the better. But how were we to act?

"But I must be off again, Payne," said Sir Donald; "and you'd better stay in charge of the camp, and see that the fire is kept up. It will be a beacon for all of us who are out."

"I'm going with you—you may require me," I said. "I put Parker and Bird on to sentry-go to watch the camp. Hello! here's Parker!"

The trusty fellow, crunching his feet noisily on

the gravel to attract our attention, came out of the dusk of the night and into the glow of the firelight. I could see he had some very important news to communicate.

“ Well, Parker,” said Sir Donald, “ what is it ? ”

It was that he had seen Sam Holt, Brock and Bird, after a long confab together, steal silently out of the camp. What had struck him as strange was that they had taken a lantern with them from one of the waggons. He had seen them fill and trim it, but they had not lit it.

“ I have it,” I said ; “ they have got wind of that reef somehow—probably Yarry dropped a hint, and they’ve gone to examine it. He must have told them where it was. Let’s follow them, and see what they’re up to. It may be our chance.”

“ I never in my life liked watching people,” remarked Sir Donald ; “ but in a case of this kind we’ve got to think of the safety of others as well as ourselves. Come on. I think I know the way. But first we’ll have to tell Maitland to keep a sharp look-out on the camp.”

We found Maitland busily feeding a regular Ben Nevis of a bonfire some hundred yards away. He was working in his torn shirt-sleeves like one possessed, piling up rotten tree trunks and huge decayed limbs, of which a tropical forest is prodigal, till I marvelled at the strength and industry of the man. The high pile blazed fiercely and great shafts of flame shot up fiercely for twenty feet and more into the air. It must have been brilliantly visible from any part of that immense natural arena.

“ Well done, Maitland, keep it up ! ” said Sir

Donald. "We came to tell you we are going, and will be away till to-morrow forenoon at least. Keep a sharp look-out on the camp."

And then he briefly communicated to him the gist of what has been narrated concerning the conspirators.

"Sir Donald," said Maitland, "I've been a rather unpractical sort of fellow in this camp, but when it comes to squaring up accounts with Sam Holt, I wish you'd let me have a hand in it."

Despite the very serious trend of our thoughts just then, neither Sir Donald nor myself could suppress a smile at the bare idea of a man like Maitland trying conclusions with an old savage like Holt.

"Well, we'll see about that," said Sir Donald. "Should Madge return while we're away, I want you to burn a blue and a red light. You'll find them on my blankets."

In the fairly clear night we picked our way carefully in the direction of the ridge where we had seen the quartz-reef. We made a detour in order to approach it from the opposite side, so that we should be able to peer over it while we ourselves were unseen.

In about twenty minutes we were close to it, and with every sense on the *qui vive* we ascended the little timbered ridge. We noted with satisfaction that there was a wall of elfin-dyke at the top behind which we could conceal ourselves. Treading as noiselessly as we could, and keeping well in shadow, we cautiously ascended.

Yes; we had not been mistaken, we could already hear voices. Closer we crawled and then made for

the elfin-dyke. The voices were now quite distinct. Indeed, I could almost hear the beating of my own heart, so tense was the situation. We stopped a moment to gain breath. Then in a crouching position we made for the sheltering rocks. We could not be more than several yards from the conspirators. We reached the shadow, and taking off our hats, peered past a gap in the boulders. It was a suggestive and almost uncanny sight that met our gaze.

## XIX

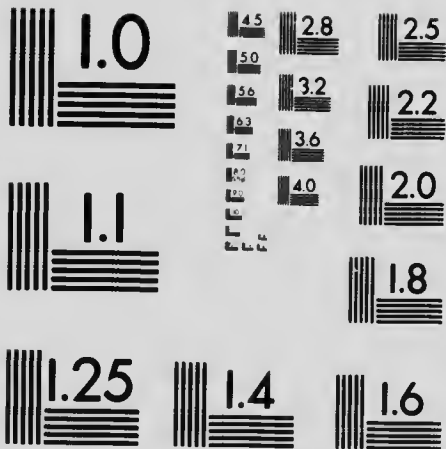
### GRIM CONSPIRACY

**W**ITHIN a few yards of us, and in the trench which disclosed the crown of the reef, sat Sam Holt, Bird and Brock facing each other. A lantern burned brightly under cover of the trench wall throwing its warm light on the faces of Holt and Brock. Bird's back was to us, so we could not see his. We looked right down upon them. Sam held a hammer in one hand while with the other he handled a piece of quartz lovingly, blowing on it to remove the dust and show up the precious metal plastered through it. The other two were also holding specimens to the light. They were an evil-looking lot. Brock's square, stolid face suggested a preponderating animal element. He was a sleepy, stupid man, and unconscionably selfish.

"Mates," Sam Holt was saying, "it's a reg'lar Bobby Dazzler it is. It'll go a hundred ounces to the ton if it goes a pennyweight, an' we'll do the block in Sydney and Collins Street, Melbourne, yet in two-horse kerridges with our feet on the velvit cushions, roses in our tail-coats, and sixpenny ceegars in our mouths. Gewhizz, but we will make things hum!"

There was something like a sneer in Bird's drawling, affected voice as he observed :





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“ Well, we hain’t all got the swagger and ’ristocratic tastes of you, Sam. As for my fancy, it’s a horse for the Melbourne Cup, something in the shape of a nobby tile hat and fawn-coloured Newmarket coat with velvet collar—something, you know, to fetch the swells.”

“ An’ you will fetch ’em, my son,” said old Sam in his blandest manner. “ Yes; you’ll cut a dash among the toffs, an’ the folks in Gov’nment House ’ll fairly run arter you, they will.”

“ You coves ’re all for kid gloves an’ show so far’s I kin see,” droned Brock with a hint of contempt in his voice.

“ Oh! so you have got some sort of an idea on the subject, have you!” sneered Bird; “ and what may your partic’lar tastes be, Mister Brock?”

“ Well, I ain’t exactly like you, Mister Dandy Bird, what you’d call a sassiety man,” retorted Brock, “ so I ain’t hankering after things I hain’t bin accustomed to. Something tasty in the prog line is my size.”

“ Oh, it is, is it? Let’s hear your fancy, Mister Brock, we might learn something.”

“ Well, to start in with in the mornin’, tripe and onions an’ a pewter o’ stout or somethin’ of a like tasty an’ delikit natur’, an’ so on, etceterar, jist as I fancied it.”

“ Pshaw!” sneered Bird. “ That might be all right as a sort of start, but you couldn’t go on all day with that.”

“ Well, I’d have the same for lunch with a steak an’ oyster pie thrown in, an’ long drinks an’ ceegars between times. That’s my idear, boys, of how to

live." And Brock looked as if he had achieved something.

"Pooh!" said Bird. "That ain't much of a menoc, can't you think of something more?"

"Of course I can," replied Brock, who resented Bird's sneers and was determined not to be outdone. "You see, I don't go in for fash'nible kickshaws, like you. Tripe's the thing, says I, and p'rhaps cabbage an' pickles an', of course, more stout an' more tripe."

"And very good things, too, sonny," broke in Sam huskily. He was afraid lest Bird might go too far with the ponderous one. He knew that when men of Brock's type are roused, mad bulls are tame compared to them. But Bird could never forgo his weakness to ridicule anyone when he had the chance. This propensity was continually getting him into trouble.

"Well, Brock," he persisted, "your tastes have at least the merit of simplicity. Now I'd have thought they lay in a different direction—something in the shape of a private chaplain attached to the Castle or Palace of Benjamin Brock, Esquire, something, you know, of a highly respectable, not to say dignified nature."

Brock glanced across at his tormentor sharply, and his small dark eyes took on a very ugly look. He had not quite followed Bird, but he suspected him of ridicule. He felt the muscles in his body twitch and the blood rush to his head. If only he could have been sure of it, he would have been at the dandy's throat like a bulldog. But Sam had seen the threatening squall and hastened to avert it.

“Borack, boys!” he exclaimed, “you will hev’ your little bit o’ fun, but that’s not what we comed here for. You see the case is this, this ’ere claim, as you kin guess, b’longs to that queer cove Smith, though where on earth that Jack-in-the-box hangs out is more’n I kin tell. He hain’t round here that’s sure, but why he should—as one would fancy—be keepin’ out of the way of his pals gits over me. P’rhaps he don’t particularly want ’em—wants to scoop the bally pool hisself—but anyhow he’s a dark horse wid a vengeance, and chance the ducks. Now, the old rip-snorter, the Ginyril, is a leery ole cove, an’ knowing this Smith of old, he intends to have a finger in the pie. Now, what I says is this, what bloomin’ right ’as ’e who’s rolling in spondulux ’lready to come out here and do us working men out of the find? There’s only one thing for it, sez I.”

“I understand,” said Bird, “but what about them waggins and horses? They’re sure to be traced and people would ask questions.”

“We kin take them back part of the way they comed, or out further into the bush, and start a fire and burn the bally lot. Or what would be better still, if we could only arrange them so’s to make out they’d all been massacred by the niggers, an’ that we found them and buried them. By that time, even if they dug up the bodies, it ’ud puzzle them to know what’d happened to them. Whatever we did, we’d take ’em a long way from here.”

“Bully for you!” said Brock, “I owes that chap Parker some; caught me nabbing a bottle of Worcester sarse, he did—an’ not bad tipples it be

when you can't git nuthin' else—out of the Genyral's cart, the hoodoo! And, besides, we'd have all the prog in the waggons. My word, there's a sight o' tinned stuff—tongues, oysters and pears, likewise herrings and tomators and peas, and a box of fizzy drinks in little blue papers, and rice, not to speak of pickles and raisins for duffs, and——” But here his imagination failed him.

“And prayer books for private chaplains,” suggested the ironic Bird.

The heavy-faced one glared ominously at him.

Luckily for Bird, the missing article suggested itself to Brock who trumped it at once: “And that case of bottled beer!” he added triumphantly. “Cricky! just think of it! And there's sardines, too, a whole case of them!”

“Yes, yes, you'd have a reg'lar old blow-out,” Holt hastened to say in order to prevent Bird commenting on Brock's choice. “But what we've got to fix on now is when and how we're to do the trick. We must each take our man. If ole Hawker hadn't gone and busted hisself inter little bits with that box o' kertridges he'd hev' precious soon fixed up this job for us. But he'd hev' wanted the lion's share would hev' old fire and brimstone Hawker, and now he's dead, and buried, and gone to purple——”

“You're absolutely certain?” interrupted Bird.

“Sartin, sure!” snorted Sam contemptuously, “didn't the ole rip-snorter send back for a shovel to bury 'im; and didn't that confounded slick-fisted Cockneyfied Tommy, ole Hyde-Parker tell as 'ow 'e secd 'im wid his own squinting peepers a

mangled corpse. No, ole Hawker's gone below, an' p'rhaps a jolly good job, too."

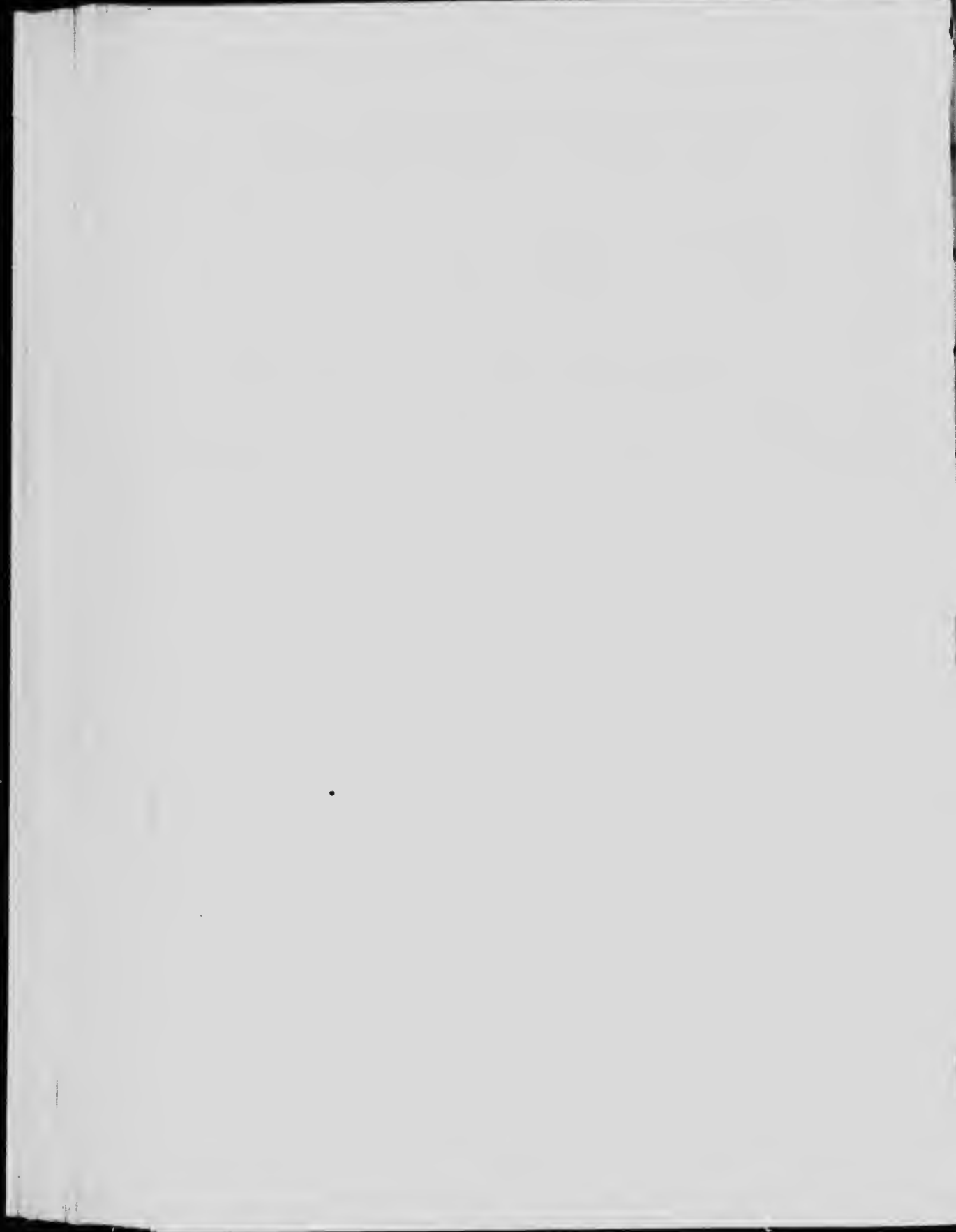
While this illuminating conversation was in progress, I was somewhat apprehensive lest Sir Donald or Parker might find it just a trifle too personal, and perhaps be led to forget themselves in a moment of natural irritation. Had only the occasion been different, I confess that I, Richard Payne, M.D., might have derived not a little entertainment from the situation. Sir Donald took his punishment better than Parker, and the term "old rip-snorter" did not seem to affect him in the slightest. As for the manservant, at first he had borne himself with commendable stoicism, but when Sam Holt drew upon his variegated vocabulary of opprobrious terms in order to specify him, his arms and legs twitched so violently that I thought it only prudent to lay a warning and restraining hand upon his shoulder.

We certainly had now ample confirmation as to the murderous designs of the teamsters, but the one subject upon which we had hoped they might throw some light had as yet not been mentioned by them. Still, we knew they were almost certain to refer to it, and we were not disappointed, for next moment it was broached by Bird. It indicated what was running in his mind.

"What I can't make out," he said, "is where the gal has got to. She's a bobby-dazzler, she is, an' by Jimmini, now I comes to think of it, you chaps can have all the kickshaws you want if I could only have ten minutes straight talk with her. She's always been civil enough to me, I'll allow, but



The look of mortal terror that blanched his wicker . . .



there's always been at the same time such a stand-offish and superior air about her that it has riled me more'n has been good for my health."

"She's a spry 'un," commented Sam Holt, "but I guess she's comed to grief somehow. P'rhaps Crocodile has got on her tracks, an' she's carrying a dilly-bag now like one of his gins. If ole stick-in-the-mud Hawker hadn't been blowed to Kingdom Come, an' cheated the hangman, I'd say he'd dropped across her. If so——"

But here the words froze on his lips, and the look of terror that blanched his wicked face communicated itself to his guilty and superstitious man. He glared into a clump of wattle not more than a few paces from where they sat, as if he had some difficulty in believing the evidence of his senses.

"Sam, Sam," cried Bird, "for goodness' sake, man, what is it?—What's the matter with you?"

But Sam only mumbled incoherently, while his teeth chattered in his head.

Bird and Brock half rose to look at the spot to which Holt was pointing a shaky finger, and when they saw, they both gave a quavering cry of horror. Run they could not, for like men in a nightmare their feet were riveted to the earth. They were a pitiful trio.

As for Sir Donald, Parker, and myself, what we beheld peering from that wattle-bush gave us a nasty turn. It was a human head and face, and as a shaft of light from the lamp shone full upon it, throwing it into relief, we saw that it was Hawker's. I observed Sir Donald's hand go down sharply to his rifle, but I caught it, and whispered to him not



to spoil our chances of learning more, and slowly he desisted.

Hawker's white face, with its straggling wisps of white beard and whiskers fringing it, and the look of malevolence and disdain that gave a truly diabolical expression to his brutal features and small wicked eyes, was enough to unnerve anyone. Moreover, his body being hidden by the leafy undergrowth made his appearance all the more unnatural. Even to us who had known the man to be alive, his presence was disconcerting, to say the least of it. On Holt, Bird and Brock, who had firmly believed him dead and buried, the effect can be better imagined than described. For a minute or two the three conspirators were little better than gibbering idiots.

Hawker, after grimly noting the terror he had inspired, spoke.

"And so old Hawker's gone below, has he?" he cried. "Blown into little bits, cheated the hangman, and perhaps it's just as well for he'd hev' wanted the lion's share, he would! Well, here I am comed back anyhow, and I reckon the grave that the old rip-snorter dug warn't quite deep enough, and no thanks to you, Mister two-faced Sam Holt for not mixing up that box of hell-fire quite strong enough. Hangman's rope, but ye are a lot o' curs!"

Keeping his eyes fixed upon the three he wriggled through the wattle-bush and came towards them. Brock had made as if to pick up his rifle, but Hawker's gun was pointing comprehensively at their three heads.

"Quit that, you fools," he hissed, "or I'll send

you all to the Back o' Beyond in three shakes of a lamb's tail! My sweet colonials, but ye're a putrid, forsaken lot o' measly ribs ye are! But I knowed it, and so p'rhaps its just as well that ye knows I know."

"Hawker! Billy Hawker!" exclaimed Sam, who was the first to find his voice, "and it's in the land of the living ye are, after all, my boy. Well, Billy, if we did think as you were a goner I don't quite see as to how what might hev' bin said could hurt yer feelings so very much, Billy. An' won't ye shake hands? An' gosh, but we are glad to see you agen!"

"You look it," sneered the desperado, ignoring the hand.

"Then who on earth, if I may ask who asks it, was it that the ole rip-snorter buried?" asked Sam with a show of genuine wonder for at least once in his life.

"Well, as you symperthetic and wide-awake jokers would like to know, I reckon it was that hatchet-faced son of a gun, that tenpence three-farthin' cove Parker, as you calls him. I thought Crocodile had settled his hash. An' I s'posed he was buried when I comed back to where I'd had the bust-up, and reckoned I saw his blooming cemetery. And when I comed to the camp that night to see you, Mister soft-soapy Sam, and saw his ugly white mug a-glaring at me, I don't mind saying as how I suspicioned it wur his ghost, so hooked it promiscuous like. Arter'ards, when I comed to think on't, I knowed we had been fooled. Yes, fooled, Sammy dear, the whole rotten dollop

of us, by that big-whiskered, leather-lunged, cock-eyed, right-about-face chap you calls the Ginyril !”

At this point Parker committed the first breach of discipline he had ever been guilty of in his long association with his master. I saw him squirming spasmodically on the ground, and realised he was having a fearful struggle with himself. I promptly administered a sharp kick on the shins that brought him to his senses. I was, however, much perturbed to note that Sir Donald was bordering on a like condition.

## XX

### HOME TRUTHS

**A**S we listened to the machinations and recriminations of the conspirators and the outlaw, a slight breeze sprang up that at times made it difficult to catch what was being said. The waning moon appeared over the edge of the cliff, and we could see our surroundings better. We chafed over the delay. Were they never going to give us an inkling as to what had become of Madge, if they really did know anything about her? But we had not much longer to wait; the dandy Bird evidently had the subject on his mind. He broached it boldly enough in all truth.

“Hawker,” he said, “what have you done with the gal? Now, I don’t mind——”

“Guess you don’t, me lord,” interrupted the desperado coldly, “but ye see I do. I’ve got my neck to think about on this trip, an’ if I holds her as a sort of hostage of war in case of needcessity—which, mind, I’m not saying as I do—is it likely I’m making a present of her to a cove like you!”

What the little dandy said I do not know, for just at that moment Sir Donald gripped me by the arm. “Payne,” he whispered, “don’t you hear that?—a woman’s cooe. That’s the second time I’ve heard it.”

Ignoring the angry voices close at hand we listened with nerves in a painful state of tension. But all we could hear was the uncertain muffled notes of a mor-poke, the weird rustle of the tree-tops, and the moan of the wind as it caught the edge of the cliff top.

It must have been fancy, and we waited with growing impatience to learn more. If there was anything in what Hawker hinted at, then Madge was safe so far. But could the slightest credence be placed upon the words of such a man? We could only listen, and draw our conclusions.

"But where on earth's that ginger-whiskered Punch-and-Judy cove called Smith?" we heard Sam Holt ask. "I reckon he considers this here claim his."

"And that's what I'd like to know," said Hawker. "I only oncet clapped eyes on 'im fair and square! He floats round like a speerit, he does. Never stops still for a minute at a stretch to let a feller draw a bead on 'im—mighty disappointing and pecooliar chap you can bet on that. But I think we'll find a way to fix him after we've fixed the others."

"Can't understand why the wild blacks don't get 'im," commented Bird thoughtfully.

"Well, they can't git me, but then, I sleeps with one eye open—guess he does the same. Can't make out where the niggers have got to jist now. There must be a queer old push of them somewheres. And Crocodile's gone off to join them again. He did me a good turn oncet but that was to pay off an old score of his own. He'd turn on me to-morrow if it suited his book."

"If them blacks had only the savey to combine an' make a bold attack," said Bird. "Cricky, but they'd make a sweep of the whole bally lot of us! They must be somewhere round here. Wish they'd polish off the General's crowd and save us the trouble."

"What sort of a chap is that Sawbones coon?" asked Hawker. "You calls him doctor?"

"Bloomin' ole fossil!" replied Sam ruminatively. "Goes round poking 'is nose inter ant-heaps an' flowers an' sich like. Guess the others take him out no end of a winding. Looks as if he'd come out o' the Ark. Mouches round like an orphaned nanny-goat's kid what misses its nat'ral nourishment! He's dotty, bahlmy on the crumpet, sure!"

It had come to my turn! I confess to having been somewhat amused when the others were being told off, but now, personalities did not sound quite so funny. "An orphaned nanny-goat's kid," forsooth! I glanced uneasily at my companions. Their faces were averted, but their bodies shook suspiciously.

"Confound him!" chimed in Brock. "Call *him* a doctor! A blooming old fraud he is if there ever was one. He gave me a nobbler o' rum one day when I got wet—was catched in that storm just after leavin' Burketown. So 'bout a week ago I feels as if I would like another, an' so I goes to him an' sez, sez I, 'Doc, I've got wet—had to swim the blooming creek and I fears for rheumatiz and fever. That medicin' you giv me oncet before did the trick.' 'All right,' says he, 'I'll fix you.' So to the waggin he gets an' gives me a big dose out of a black bottle.

An' by Jupiter it did just fix me! Thought I'd have to get a new inside before I'd done. It was powerful strong!"

"Hot?" queried the chuckling Bird.

"As the place you're bound for," explained the simple one.

"But," persisted Bird, "you told the Doc you'd been in the creek. Had you been in—were you wet at the time?"

Brock stared at him for a minute with wide-open eyes, and then something dawned upon him.

"Jehosaphat!" he exclaimed, "now I comes to think of it, that's where I made the mistake. I forgot that part of it!"

"You're too cliver, my son, for this world," commented Sam, whose face had been contorted till it resembled that of a Maori war god. "And now, when are we to do the big trick?"

"*Coo-o-ooo!*"

It came in a pause of the wind, faint and seemingly far away, but unmistakable. To the three of us on the top of the ridge it was audible enough, but by those talking below it was evidently unheard. In all probability it could not be heard there.

Sir Donald gripped me by the arm, and motioned to Parker.

"Crouch back out of this," he whispered, "we must let them alone just now. That's Madge. We must get to her first, and deal with them afterwards."

As expeditiously as we could, we withdrew. Perhaps we did wrong in not holding up the conspirators then and there, and thus averting further trouble.

But we thought we could do so later, and besides there surely was Madge calling, and who could tell what vital consequences a minute's delay might mean just then ! Reach her we must without delay.

In a few minutes more we found ourselves skirting the base of the hill that led to our camp, and then we were suddenly challenged by someone in the shadow of a rock.

"Halt, who comes there ?"

"It's Maitland, by Jove !" exclaimed Sir Donald, "and now I think of it, we didn't arrange for a countersign."

But the word "*Friend*" made matters right, and the next moment we found Maitland carrying his rifle in one hand and a coil of rope in the other.

"What is it ?" asked Sir Donald anxiously.

"A woman's cooe," replied the tutor, "and I can see you heard it, too. Mrs Bailey insisted on me going to see. She has taken my place in camp. I fancy the voice comes from one of those terraces on the face of the cliff. I brought this rope in case we might require it."

"You've done well, Maitland, my boy," exclaimed Sir Donald. "Parker, you'd better go and take charge of the camp, you understand the situation now. Maitland can come on with us."

Parker of course obeyed, although he inwardly resented his luck. After all, he quite understood his master's reason for sending him back. He was better up to the tricks of such as the conspirators than the tutor.

Charging Parker on no account to allow the traitors to approach the ammunition waggon, and



to fire on them if need be, we hurried on in the direction of the south cliff.

One might think we had not far to go, but this would be a great mistake. A woman's voice can always be heard at a very much greater distance than a man's. Moreover, owing to the peculiar acoustics of that valley, and the direction of the wind, only those accustomed to mountainous country can realise the almost incredible distance the human voice can carry under certain conditions.

We did not hear the voice again, but we hurried on as fast as we could. Ere we rounded a bend, we looked back and saw the great rock on which our camp was situated, looming up into the wan mysterious moonlight like a veritable Gibraltar. We could see a nimbus of light over the edge of the precipice, and a glare in the sky from the huge bonfire which Parker was now supplementing. It was rough travelling, and tedious work threading the tortuous strips of thorny bush. Gigantic pillar-like rocks rose up everywhere, as if a city of mighty temples had once stood upon that spot. It was one of the finest examples of the process of attrition, or the action of water and the elements upon sandstone, that Australia from its splendid storehouse of many wonders had to offer. At this point we noticed that the character of the cliff suddenly changed, and the formation took a horizontal and upward trend. This at first was seen by a faint cornicing at irregular intervals lining the cliff. Farther on this became more pronounced, until at last it resolved itself into distinct terraces which seemed to lead to the chaotic land far above.

"I really don't think we ought to go farther just at present," said Sir Donald. "The cooees we heard could hardly have come from such a distance."

"Look at the grooving in the great sweep of this cliff," I said. "It's an improved sort of whispering gallery, only on a gigantic scale. Still, I think with you that the cooees we heard could not have travelled farther."

"You don't think, Payne, that we could have been mistaken, do you?" Sir Donald asked in a way that made me sorry for him. There seemed such a piteous appeal for reassurance in it. "You don't think it was other than a white woman's cooe we heard, do you?"

"It was very far away," I replied; "but it was just as I have heard Madge give it at times. I think we're far enough now from Hawker & Company to venture a cooe or two on our own account."

## XXI

### WHAT HAPPENED TO MADGE

**W**HEN Madge rode out of camp that morning to "have a look around," as she lightly put it, the idea of anything happening to her never for a moment suggested itself. She was not unmindful of the concern she might cause others, but for years she had roamed the bush without mishap, and there was no suggestion of danger in what she did now. She would be back in lots of time for breakfast.

The imposing natural portals of the hidden land had attracted her, and with her usual fearlessness she rode through the gap. It is tolerably certain that this wonderful old-world valley, with its striking remains of early stages in the world's history, would have caused many an older head than hers to temporarily forget any possibility of danger.

She followed up the stony bed of the creek, and forded some pools which afterwards accounted for the mystification of those who tried to track her.

What a weird world was this great valley, with its precipitous sides from which jutted gargoyles and griffins in weather-beaten rock, and nodding plumes of ferns and palms! She left the main creek, and

## WHAT HAPPENED TO MADGE 171

followed a tributary almost hidden by dense foliage, and which bore to the left hugging the cliff. What a dense and perfect natural harbour, and would it never come to an end !

Out into the sunlight again, and she saw that the great island-like plateau just within the gorge was left behind, and that she must have made a very near cut in her progress into this fascinating land. On, still on, and the pillar-like isolated rocks and the new species of plants, and even living things that met her wandering gaze, caused her to forget time.

And now the miniature terraces that seemed to lead from the valley upwards into that mysterious country above attracted her. On she went, until at last one ledge in particular excited her curiosity. What harm if she left her horse at the foot and followed it up to explore ! She would be able to judge of the extent of the valley from it. It somehow reminded her of the old story of "Jack and the Bean-stalk."

She dismounted, tied up her horse, and in two minutes more was following up the terrace.

Soon the trees and rocks below were becoming dwarfed in a significant fashion. But it was not all plain walking or even climbing. That ledge had an awkward trick of narrowing, and once when she had stepped somewhat too near the edge, a piece of rotten sandstone broke away and disappeared into the sickening depths beneath. What but woman's perversity impelled her to keep on when she ought certainly to have turned back ! Descending might prove a very different thing. There were honey-

combed passages everywhere. Into one of these she passed. It turned, and led out on to another ledge. And then she stood wonderstruck and with a sense of impending disaster. There were the embers of a fire in this gallery and the belongings of a white man were strewed around. A voice that made her jump and turn round, hailed her. In a moment she recognised the shock-headed man. It was the desperado Hawker.

“ Good-morning, miss,” he said grimly. “ And so you’ve comed to call on Billy, have you ! ”

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## XXII

“ — SAID THE SPIDER TO THE FLY ”

**W**AS ever girl in such a desperate fix as Madge now found herself? Facing her, and with his back to the only point of egress, was the notorious outlaw and bushranger Hawker, the mere mention of whose wicked deeds had sent a thrill of terror through her. And now here he was in the flesh, a species of horrible Bluebeard, and there was no sister Anne. It was an odd thing that he did not seem desirous of meeting her eyes. Perhaps he was aware of the fact that his thoughts showed in his face, for of late he had been under necessity to dissemble. Besides, a man who lives mostly alone becomes imaginative. An animal that skulks and hides does not care to meet the human eye. His manner was hardly that of a sane normal man. For the first time in her life Madge felt like fainting, and for the moment speech was denied her.

“ Good-morning,” he repeated. “ Enjoying the view from my balcony ? ”

He motioned with his head towards the blue space that yawned on one side. Madge stole a glance, and shivered. No hope there.

She found her voice, but her heart beat painfully. When she had last seen this man she had not hesitated to fire upon him, and she remembered

how she had served him over that stolen box of ammunition. The tables were turned upon her now with a vengeance.

“ Good-morning,” she responded mechanically; but her throat was parched, and she could not recognise her own voice.

“ It’s queer,” he remarked slowly, “ how you wimmen will hunt us pore men, and then when anything happens you make such a terrible fuss.”

He spoke with grim deliberation. He blinked, and his gaze seemed to be directed over her right shoulder. To Madge this inability to look her in the face was ominous and discomfiting. He continued:

“ You’ve left the camp unbeknownst, and you couldn’t have left tracks coming here—it’s all stones and water the way you’ve comed.”

“ They’ve got two black boys at our camp who can track mosquitoes,” she said with returning courage. “ That’s why we’ve brought them with us.”

“ Even s’posin’ they could track you through water, which I deny, a regiment of soldiers couldn’t foller you here if I bust up the way by which you’ve comed.”

He paused and stole another glance at her.

“ Well, I don’t see how it would profit you in the end,” she observed. “ I am quite sure the party I am with doesn’t want to interfere with you. We’ve quite enough to do looking after our own affairs.”

“ But I’ve had trouble through your lot all the same,” he persisted.

“ If you scheme with our teamsters to steal our ammunition, and your friends play tricks on you, that is your look-out, not ours.”

“ If I were only sartin of that,” he said grimly, “ there’s some I know would be corpses now if I’d to swing for it to-morrer. But I reckon it was axydint—heat o’ the sun on the tin of that rotten box.”

“ And you scored in the finish,” she suggested.

“ I did that time,” he said with an odd twist of his features, “ but wasn’t it you that fired on me that same night ? ”

“ It was your own fault that you didn’t get the first shot,” she said with a composure that surprised even herself. “ And what else could you expect under the circumstances ? ”

“ That’s mebbe so,” he admitted, “ and, blow me, if I didn’t think it game of you ! But we’ll talk about that when we settle accounts later on.”

There was an awkward pause, and he seemed to be thinking. He rubbed his chin, and his gaze wandered again. He appeared unable to make up his mind about something, and yet of late years he had never hesitated to shoot on sight.

“ Had breakfast ? ” he asked irrelevantly.

“ Not yet,” she replied, “ but whether think the cook at our camp will be blessing me by this time. I think I’d better say good-morning, and get back the way I came.”

“ You don’t seem curious as to what I’m doing here,” he observed, “ and by that I fancies you don’t require an interduction.”

“ But it would be hardly good manners of me to start asking questions without having been properly introduced,” rejoined Madge, ignoring his indirect



demand for information. "But under the circumstances, I certainly think I owe you an apology for intruding."

Hawker ran his crooked fingers through his hair perplexedly, and then something that remotely resembled a human cackle came brokenly from his throat. It suggested the action of one who has almost forgotten how to laugh.

"You are a daisy; blow me, if you ain't!" he declared.

The girl took heart somewhat. Some vague sense of humour evidently survived the man's general moral dilapidation, and it might be possible to temporise. Still, the situation was tragic as that of a nightmare.

"Do you really think you could give me breakfast?" she asked. "I'm afraid you're one of those society sort of people who implore callers to stay, and are all the time hoping to goodness they'll go."

He chuckled grimly. Here was someone the like of whom he had never before met. She was a woman and beautiful, but she appealed to him in a different way from the women he had once been accustomed to. She aroused a something in him—the side of him that very long ago had taken the form of heroics, but which had never had a chance. The novelty of the sensation for the time kept the baser man under. Like most notorious criminals he was an anomaly. Perhaps it was the only situation of the kind that had ever presented itself in his experience, and an odd undefined curiosity prompted him to follow it up. There was time

enough anyhow, only he must put her horse where it would not attract attention.

“ Will ye light that fire while I go for a billy of water ? ” he asked awkwardly. “ I’ll take you at yer word, and I’ll give you a drink of tea.”

Madge hastened smilingly to obey though her very feet felt cold.

“ An’ mind,” said Hawker warningly, looking back over his shoulder, “ there’s only one road out of this here show, so far’s you’re concerned, an’ that’s the way I’m going. If you take that road ”— he pointed to the gallery at the back—“ you’ll fall four hundred feet and more.”

Next moment the man had gone. Here was a situation indeed with a vengeance. She was going to kindle the notorious Hawker’s fire in his own spider’s parlour in order to breakfast with him. Would her friends come to her rescue in time ? She peered over the edge of the terrace, but that yawning abyss was sickening. She ran some twenty yards or so into the far end of the tunnel which was much larger than she had at first imagined, but the darkness and a rush of cold air suggested some hidden terror, and forced her to retreat. She remembered the revolver on her belt.

In another moment she had made up her mind. There was only one possible way out of the fate that menaced, and she did not hesitate. She cocked the weapon, and stole swiftly and noiselessly after the desperado. She could hold him up, and threaten to shoot if he did not let her go. And she might have to shoot him.

She rounded a dim corner of the gallery. A shadow

close to her materialised. A hand closed on the revolver, and wrenched it from her grasp. There was a harsh laugh, and Hawker exclaimed:

“Tut-tut! Jest like the rest o’ them, only more so. Going to shoot her own William, an’ jest as he was a-goin’ to git the water to boil the billy for their first breakfast together!”

In the dim light she could see grim amusement on his oddly wrinkled face, but its callousness struck terror into her heart. She could not speak.

“Thought she’d got the dead drop that time, the pretty,” he continued; “but wimmen allus are so mighty oncertain—allus was. Now, go back and light that fire, my dear, and don’t be contrairy. I’ll keep yer shooting-iron for ye in case it might jest go off by axydint and hurt someone.”

His manner was so masterful that she had not a word to say. Like a child detected red-handed in some fault, she went back to the eyrie-like abode of the outlaw. Taking some sticks from a pile, she prepared a fire. Her revolver, her only means of salvation, had been taken from her. And then another idea suggested itself. She glanced at the yawning space overlooking the valley, and shuddered. Surely it would not come to that.

In a few minutes more her grim host returned.

“Yer nag has gone cavoorting down that old creel-like mad,” he explained, as if pleased with the intelligence. “I jest clapped a burr under ’is crupper, and no dog with a tin can to its tail ever started away in better shape. Guess it’ll be about a hundred miles from here by this time.”

“It will go right back to the other horses,” said

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A hand closed on the revolver and wrenched it from her.  
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the girl, a sense of triumph sharing her indignation ; “and I think, when a man gets down to a low trick like that, it is time he changed places with the animal.”

“ Couldn’t let yer kerridge block the traffic at my door,” he grinned, seemingly in no way put out. “ Ye see, it’s early in the mornin’ to receive lady visitors, and yer horse would be a give-away standing in front of my place. The burr wouldn’t really hurt ’im—jest skeart him a trifle like.”

He bustled about, put the billy on the fire, drew a bush baking-board—a square of leather—from a pack-bag, untied a small bag of flour, and finally turned to Madge.

“ Now, my dear,” he said, “ it’s soon t’ ask ye to begin yer domestic dooties, but I’ve promised myself a treat. Will ye bake some Johnnie-cakes, enough for the two of us ? ”

It was better than being obliged to eat bread that he had made. Moreover, Madge had a healthy appetite despite her distress of mind, and did not feel at all like starving. In a very few minutes, the desperado with a branch in one hand was turning over the cakes she had kneaded and flung on the sweet hot charcoal. He insisted on her taking the only pannikin while he used the lid of the billy. It was an extraordinary sight, the pretty and refined girl, and the grim desperado and murderer seated opposite to each other on that ledge between heaven and earth breakfasting together.

“ I have meat,” he observed apologetically, noting with evident interest the girl’s appetite, “ only it’s

wallaby, and I fancies, you wouldn't much care for that."

"I rarely eat meat so early in the day, and I shouldn't imagine it's in your power to vary your diet much in these parts," commented Madge who felt called upon to make a remark that no exception could be taken to.

"To tell you the truth, I'm sick on't," he said. "You see, kangaroo, snake and iguana—iguana, snake and kangaroo—gets a trifle slow. A right good supper now of cow-heel or grilled ribs of beef and some oven-baked yeast bread with mashed potatoes—but *what's* the use of talkin' ? I s'pose you gets them things so often you don't care a continental about 'em ; ain't that so ? "

"I am enjoying this Johnnie-cake quite as much as the things you mention," said Madge with some degree of truth.

"Gewhizz ! But it's all mighty queer," observed Hawker meditatively. "For instance, there ain't the fun in this sort of life that you'd imagine."

"I never could imagine there was any fun in it," said Madge warmly. "I can't understand the sort of people that would think so. A rabbit in a scrub with a lot of dogs after it must have a better time."

"An' yet I read when a youngster what a high old time them Starlight sort of coves had. I wish to goodness them chaps as writes all that rot could be made to eat their books. I fancies as how they've started many a young fool off like myself."

"Did they start you off ? " asked Madge, half inclined to feel sorry for him.

"Well, missy, I wouldn't like to say there warn't

a fairish chunk of original sin in my composition to start with, but them confounded yaller-backs helped. Lor, but they was muck ! An' speak 'bout the honour amongst—pals ! There's not one of them that wouldn't cut my throat for sixpence when I was asleep. There's Sammy now——”

But checking himself he brought his teeth together with a snap without finishing, and Madge could see how annoyed the man was with himself for having said so much.

“ Dear me ! ” commented Madge with an innocent expression on her face. “ I always thought Mr Sam Holt was such an amiable and exemplary old gentleman.”

The desperado seemed tickled over something. He threw back his head, and again indulged in that hoarse, indescribable cackle.

“ And your white neighbours in the district,” said Madge, as if carrying on the most casual conversation. “ There's Captain Smith, for instance, who keeps a good deal to himself, who indeed seems to avoid society ; how do you get on with him ? ”

Hawker stared very hard at her indeed. Was this really charming girl quite so simple as she looked ? But for the circumstances, he could afford to be candid with her. Being candid was a refreshing and novel rôle. He would suit himself to his company. He could still play at being the toff, and probably she would not notice that he had not washed, and that his hair would insist on sticking through the crown of his hat.

“ We ain't 'xactly what you'd call on visiting terms,” he explained. “ You see, we haven't bin



properly interduced though we have met. Tell ye how. I knew he'd come to live over the way, but as I didn't particularly want callers, I fought shy of him, though I owns I watched him pretty close for a spell. He was a curious cove. One day as I thought I'd comed pretty close to him—close enough to git the dead drop—blowed if he didn't pop up at my blooming back from behind a rock, an' pinting a six-shooter at my boko, he says, says he, 'Mister Whatever-the-dickens-your-name-is, we can consider that we have been interduced at last. You can put it that I've called, but you mayn't return the call. In fact, if I finds you on my premises again without first ringing the front door bell, this shooting stick and your carcis will become better acquainted. Foot-sek. Scoot!' I saw he meant b'z, and as he had the dead drop, I lit out. Now, if there's one man I can respeck, it's the cove who can get the pull on his man like that. That Smith cove may be mad as a hatter, but he's a corker! As soon try to catch a weasel asleep as him. I giv' over trying."

So they were now beyond doubt in the Happy Hunting-ground of the elusive Smith! And the irony of the whole situation to Madge was that now, when they were probably within a few miles of him, she was a prisoner, and her uncle and friends were being consumed with concern as to her fate. Bitterly did she regret her precipitancy in starting out.

And then a rifle shot with a remarkable series of echoes rang out far down the valley. Madge started to her feet.

"Sit down, my dear, that ain't of any consequence," said the outlaw calmly.

## XXIII

### IN DESPERATE STRAITS

**T**HE sun was high in the heavens, and the girl noticed that the outlaw was showing unmistakable signs of drowsiness. Had she known that he had been up and out the greater part of the night, watching their party so as to obtain an interview with Holt or Bird or Brock, she would not have wondered at this. As a matter of fact, he had not got back to his eyrie more than half-an-hour when Madge had put in an appearance. Of late Hawker had been accustomed to sleep in the day-time, for his nights were often spent in moving from one place to another, and being on the alert so as to guard against surprise and capture by whites, or attacks by blacks.

His efforts to conceal his struggle against the desire for sleep would have been ludicrous if the situation had not been tragic. He became anxious and angry with himself. He walked backwards and forwards aimlessly, and busied himself in apparently unnecessary tasks. He even tried to whistle and sing, but the effects he produced were so weird and discordant that, evidently discouraged, he relapsed into silence again. As Madge hoped that he would go to sleep, she took good care to say nothing that was likely to stimulate him into wakefulness.

At last, as if he could stand it no longer, he picked up a few armfuls of dry grass and twigs and an old blue blanket that apparently constituted his bedding, laid them down on the narrow path leading from the gallery into the natural chamber, and prepared to indulge in forty winks. This might enable him to stave off the almost irresistible desire to give himself entirely to unrestricted slumber. The hunted life he had led in the bush had made him a wonderfully light sleeper. The girl would be unable to pass without instantly awakening him.

“Now then, missy,” he said as he settled himself into a half-sitting position with his back to the wall, “I’m a-goin’ to hev’ forty winks for the sake o’ my complexion—beauty sleep you gals calls it—so you jest content yerself for a little while. I may’s well tell you I’m a bit of a weasel, I am, an’ sleeps wid one eye open. If you’ve any idear of trying to pass me, take my tip an’ don’t. Sumthin’ll happen if you do that, you’ll only have yerself to thank for.”

He looked at her so significantly, and his manner was so strange, that Madge realised she would be taking the very gravest risk to go anywhere near him.

With his rifle between his legs, and his hands grasping the barrel, Hawker threw his head back, and in another minute was apparently fast asleep.

Madge watched him long and keenly. If the outlaw was not really asleep, then his performance was one of the most artistic it was possible for human ingenuity to accomplish. There was the relaxed jaw, the upturned eye-balls under the scarcely meeting lids, the slight twitching and spasmodic

movements of the muscles of the face and neck, and the stertorous breathing.

Surely she could pass him ! If she took off her boots, and stepped over his body, how could he hear ? He was evidently dead tired, and she had watched him trying to conceal the fact, and to struggle against it. Once past him she was fleet of foot, and would soon regain the camp. He had said he was like a weasel, and would be sure to hear her if she got up to any tricks ; but, of course, that was only said to prevent her trying to escape.

But if, after all, he was not really asleep, and was only foxing, or if, on the other hand, he really was asleep and happened to awake and catch her—what then ?

If she could only manage to recover the revolver he had taken away from her, she had him at her mercy. Or if she could only possess herself of some missile by which she could stun him, the action itself would not present any particular difficulties. She had seen how dreadfully drowsy the man had been, and, after all, he might really be asleep. She looked around for something she might use, and, strangely enough, she was almost relieved to find there was nothing—not even a loose stone—that would act as a weapon of offence. To fire at a man when he was the aggressor, and in actual defence of life, was one thing, but to employ brutal means of attack when one was lying presumably unconscious, was quite another. She wondered how she could for a moment have entertained such a thought.

Hawker stirred, and seemed to be muttering in his dreams. His teeth clicked together, and his

shoulders worked spasmodically. A low inarticulate moan was followed by a sigh of relief, and then his breathing became less laboured and more natural. Surely he was asleep!

She took a step or two towards him, and stood again to watch him. He was breathing regularly and easily now. He reminded her of a great sleeping dog, the uncontrolled and active working of whose brain it is easy to follow by its voice and actions. She took another step nearer him.

And then she remembered the almost diabolical cunning this man had displayed a little earlier when he had gone down the gallery, telling her not to dream of escaping, and at the same time hiding in a dark alcove so that he could pounce upon her just at the critical moment. A man who was cunning enough to do that was up to any trick under the sun. She would not trust him. The chances were he was only shamming and awaiting his opportunity to mortify her again, and to give him an excuse for wreaking some horrible revenge. At the very moment she raised a foot to step over his prostrate body he would, in all probability, spring up and seize her.

She remembered the dark passage at the back of the cavern, and the rush of cold air that had somehow checked and filled her with a dread of some unseen horror. What if, after all, Hawker had lied to her, and it was really a means by which she might escape? The outlaw had said she would fall four hundred feet and more if she tried to go that way. But how was it possible to believe a single word of what a man like Hawker said—a man who was

known to be a murderer twice over? His devilish cunning had suggested the most effectual means of preventing her attempting to pry into that dark passage at all. Afterwards he might probably twit her with the exceedingly simple means by which he had fooled her.

The situation resolved itself into the choice of two attempts at escape. She felt that to delay in the hope that her friends would come to the rescue might prove fatal, while again, if she tried that dark passage at the back, she could surely feel her way, and there would be some means of apprising herself of such a peril as a fall of four hundred feet. She turned, and stealthily made back towards that dim, draughty gallery.

The first several yards were easy enough, and then the twilight deepened, and she practically had to grope her way, feeling the wall alongside with one hand for guidance. There was a current of cold air; she knew that anyhow this cave or gallery did not end in a cul-de-sac. It was probably of volcanic origin. Ages ago lava and hot air blasts from internal fires had made it an outlet for superfluous energy. Then after a lapse of time, when the fires had long since disappeared, the action of wind and water had been at work removing traces of former forces, eating away the soft rock, and executing remarkable honeycombing in the bowels of the earth.

It became darker, and still hugging the wall of the gallery Madge timidly put one foot before the other as if afraid of that terrible drop of four hundred feet. On she went, and the passage seemed to be leading upwards. At last she heard a familiar

sound, and realised it was that of falling water. Her spirits rose. She became conscious of a less accentuated form of the darkness, and a wan greenish-grey surrounded her. It must have been suggestive of looking through the thick plate glass of a diving-bell. Her heart beat with renewed hope, and she prayed that she was now within easy reach of the unknown land above.

It grew lighter. Then all at once, as the path took a sharp turn, she was brought up abruptly on the brink of a nightmarish chasm. She gasped for breath, and something like panic seized her for the moment.

She had suddenly struck the brink of a great shaft or crater which was open to the blue heavens, some couple of hundred feet or so above, while at her feet it fell sheer away. It was a horrible abyss, and to look downwards made one sick and faint. The odd thing was that the bottom of this awesome pit was filled with a pale-green shaft of light. Doubtless, some great cave from the valley led into it.

What a cataclysm of Nature there must have been to have caused such a rent in the bowels of the earth! The suddenness and unexpectedness with which she was confronted with it made her, for the moment, forget the even greater peril.

By an effort she pulled herself together. It was no use giving way to fear or emotion. She must meet bravely and calmly whatever perils menaced. It was the only way if she would save herself.

When she became accustomed to the light—for passing through the gallery had caused the pupils

of her eyes to contract—she saw that the path she stood on still led upwards towards the mouth of the great shaft. But what a path! It looked more like a perch for birds than the means by which a human being could hope to pass to the world of light above.

But that was not the worst feature of the seeming way out. It narrowed as it proceeded upwards, and there was a point round which it disappeared. She could not tell what it might be like beyond that. Perhaps it would become still more difficult to negotiate, and there might come a place where it would be impossible to turn and go back. Horrible!

But again, the chances were that the outlaw used this means of entrance or exit as the case might be. He had probably chosen this very terrace for the means of escape it presented. She must make up her mind quickly. Hawker might awake at any moment, and if he caught her there——

She breathed a prayer, and began her perilous ascent. She must look upwards she told herself. It was only the yawning space beneath that made her position seem so unsafe. All her life she had been an expert climber. Her mind was made up to surmount all obstacles. She would do so.

Looking upwards, and keeping as close to the wall as circumstances permitted, she quickly covered the first fifteen yards or so. She tried to make herself believe it was only a very ordinary feat indeed, and she endeavoured to dismiss from her mind the nightmarish depths below. She noted that some human agency had been at work to enlarge the scanty foothold. Perhaps prehistoric



man had used this place as a haven of refuge from his enemies. The world and man were so much older than people supposed. Indeed, Madge had often smiled at the attempts made by pseudo-scientists to specify by numbers the respective duration of the various ages. A numeral and a row of noughts a mile in length would fall short of an actual period. What human intelligence could ever grasp the idea of Time !

She rounded a bend trying to think of anything but her agonising position. The ledge had grown so narrow that she had to press herself against the cold rock to prevent herself overbalancing. And then she came to a dead stop. She felt as if the end of all things had come.

She could not advance another inch. She felt that it was impossible to turn and go back. To return backwards was out of the question, the footing was so broken and uncertain. It would spell death.

For a moment she paused and remained motionless. To her it was a lifetime. It seemed that her consciousness detached itself from her body, and she saw herself cowering on the brink of eternity. Her nineteen years of life spread out before her with all its little happenings and incidents marking its progress, as the figures on the face of a clock mark the minutes and hours. Her senses must have become stimulated into abnormal activity, for she noted such trivial things as the form of a rent on the sleeve of her blouse, and the peculiar grain and colour of the formation against which she pressed. She noticed the water that welled from the opposite

side of the shaft, and splashed against a jutting rock, and the glowing orange and green of the fungus and lichens that sprawled on the black slimy walls.

She had a mind to call out, but she realised that the splash of water must drown her voice, and the chances were no one would hear her. Anyhow, it could do no good. For a moment she experienced an odd, almost irresistible, impulse to let herself fall into that yawning space and have done with it. Then the thought of the pass her foolhardiness had brought her to came home to her, and she pictured the condition of mind of her uncle, Sir Donald, whom she had grown to love and respect, when he realised that he had to break the news of her disappearance to her mother. The thought that no one would probably ever find out what had become of her, surely savoured of the agony of death itself.

Then her mood changed. Some latent fighting spirit awoke in her. If the outlaw made use of this path, how was it she could not do it? She nerved herself, lifted her head to look upwards, and her heart started throbbing again with excitement. Within eighteen inches of her head there dangled the end of a stout knotted rope which was evidently secured some fifteen feet or so higher up, where it hung over what was apparently quite a broad ledge. There was nothing at all wonderful in that rope being there. It was the means which the outlaw had taken care to provide in case of surprise. And had he not told her he could climb like a cat!

But could she climb hand over hand? She had

certainly tried it, and had succeeded in doing so for a few feet, but this was another matter.

She did not hesitate. Instinctively, she knew that if she as much as thought about it, she would give up the idea in despair. She straightened herself, and grasped the rope just above the knot.

She was light and strong for her sex and years. Hand over hand she raised herself. She braced her feet against the rock, and her body was swaying over the abyss. She was desperate now, and it meant life or death. She came to the cornice of rock against which the rope pressed, but her hands could not surmount that. Do what she would, she could not get a fresh grip. She tugged and strained. It was surely tempting Providence to trust in that rope of which she could know but little. But it was all of no avail. She must give it up. With failing strength she began to lower herself again. And then, just before her feet touched the ledge and her arms were stretched to their utmost, the rope twisted and to her great joy she found herself facing the gallery.

The moment Madge found solid footing she carefully released the rope. She experienced an almost irresistible desire to make a rush down that narrow, dangerous ledge and reach a place of safety. But she overcame the impulse, and hugging the cliff, picked her way slowly back to the fairly broad gallery. Another minute and she had reached it. Sorely tried and exhausted, nature must have at last given way, for she fell on her face, and for a minute or two lapsed into unconsciousness.

When she came to herself again, she breathed

a prayer of thankfulness for her preservation. She rose to her feet, and with one fearful glance at the abyss, prepared to go back to the cave where Hawker was. Somehow she was not so afraid of him now as she had been at first. Criminal he, of course, was, but it seemed to her that his revolt against society did not include such as she. Who could tell but that in the bygone years there had been one little ray of romance in the life of the outlaw, and that though it had been unable to keep his feet from flying, it had still proved strong enough to make him pause and stay his hand when someone came in his way who stirred within him those memories of the past. She had noted the conflicting emotions that had evidently swayed the man at sight of her. She thought she understood him, and she had divined that a woman might manage him where a man would only provoke his antagonism.

As she entered the cavern again, he was still lying in the same place. He opened his eyes, closed them again, and with something that resembled a sigh of resignation, said :

“ Now, won't ye let me have them forty winks ? ”

Forty winks ! and since she had seen him, she had lived through an age of agony !

## XXIV

### THE UNEXPECTED

**T**WO or three times that day the searchers for Madge were actually within hail of her, but on each occasion Hawker would rouse himself, and order her back from the ledge. Once she was on the point of disobeying him and crying out, but the desperado divined her purpose, and there came a look into his eyes that filled her with a nameless dread, and kept her silent. He grew fitful, and when he relapsed into one of his gloomy moods the girl realised he was becoming dangerous. She would then endeavour to arouse him, and distract his mind from what she instinctively knew were dangerous thoughts. There could be no question that the solitary life the man had led had unhinged his reason. It was, doubtless, fortunate for her that it was so. Once she followed up the ledge, but found that just where it reached a point some fifteen feet or so from the summit of the cliff, it ceased altogether, and there was no hope of escape in that direction. The terrible ordeal she had passed through earlier in the day had taken some of the spirit out of her. It possessed her soul like some horrible nightmare.

It grew dark. Hawker threw the remaining firewood over the cliff so that she might not be able

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to make a fire with it and attract attention. To her entreaties that he should allow her to go, he turned a deaf ear. She told him that her uncle would not only make him a solid consideration, but would guarantee the secrecy of the party regarding his whereabouts. She felt she could safely do this.

But Hawker did not seem to hear her. The English mint could hardly be expected to weigh with a man who knew the scaffold stood between him and the spending of even a penny. Towards evening she had some more food.

Later on, when the moon rose, he took a prospector's pick from a corner, and bidding her follow him, descended the fragile path. It was so narrow that she realised had it been daylight, and she could have seen farther, she would surely have become giddy, and lost her foothold. Ascending and looking upwards was another matter. Before they reached the narrow and most dangerous part of the shelf, he told her to stop and prepare to go back. Then he deliberately turned and demolished the slender foothold between them. He retired backwards, and destroyed several yards of the ledge.

"You can't come further," he said, "so you'll have to go back. It'll be a bit of a job for me to get to you again, but I've still got a set of backstairs that you'll never be able to find, and couldn't use if you wanted to. As I told you this morning, I'm a bit of a cat, I am. So, good-bye till I see you again, and take good care of yourself!"

Despairingly, and trembling in every limb, Madge made back to surer foothold. She was surely



cut off from all succour now. Beyond doubt, Hawker was a dangerous maniac. The only thing left for her was to wait until he got some distance away, and then cooe for help in the hope that some of her party might be in the neighbourhood and hear.

It was the most terrible night she ever spent in her life. She had called again and again, until she thought her voice must fail her altogether. Far down the valley she had seen a red glare in the sky, and she knew that a great bonfire was burning on top of the high rock where was the camp. How she was ever to get down, even if help came, was somewhat of a puzzle. She noted that a gentle breeze was passing from west to east, and that surely would carry the sound of her voice in the right direction. Then despite the peril that menaced, she lay down on the shelf, and went to sleep.

Sir Donald, Maitland, and I, Dr Payne, had skirted the north cliff in the moonlight, bruising our shins against boulders, and tearing our clothes in thorny scrubs. The wan dawnlight was stealing over the high cliffs, and a thin mist rising from the dew-damp ground drifted down the valley, wreathing the gaunt boles of giant trees with finest lawn, and sagging fantastically from limb to spray.

We cut across the great natural arena to explore a recess in the side of the great cliff that we thought might have escaped notice. After infinite labour we succeeded in working our way through a dense thicket of golden wattle, and reached the clear bed of a dry watercourse which skirted the base of

the cliff. In this we found fresh horse tracks. We followed them to where, at the foot of a terrace, we saw that a horse had stood, and here on a patch of sand we found the tracks of a man and woman. The latter were Madge's tracks beyond doubt.

Up that dangerous narrow terrace we passed with beating hearts, and then we came to the gap that we afterwards learned Hawker made with the pick. The last-named article we found leaning against the cliff. Maitland being the lightest of the party, and as he had already proved himself a very good climber, was in the lead. He had shown throughout the night a spirit and hardihood that had aroused our admiration.

"Steady yourselves against the cliff," he said, "and better not cooe. If you'll let me have that rope, doctor, I'll take it with me. Once upon a time I practised mountaineering with other boys on the grey old city wall of Chichester. I've no doubt I'll get across that gap."

It looked such a mad feat, and as a slip meant certain death, I demurred.

"Even if we tied you to us, Maitland," I said, "it would be quite impossible to hold you in the event of a slip. It's like holding on by one's toenails as it is. What we can do is to take a turn round your body and then try and get a purchase on this rock."

"I must be quite free," he replied. "I'm taking the risks in this business, and we mustn't make more noise than we can help. We would stand a poor show if caught on this sparrow's perch. Pass me the pick. I only hope no one will hear."

We could hardly believe it was the hitherto diffident and apparently timid tutor who spoke. There was now determination in his every word and action, and he was cool as a cucumber.

He took off his boots, and, leaning forward over the sickening slippery surface of rock, he began to make footholds for himself.

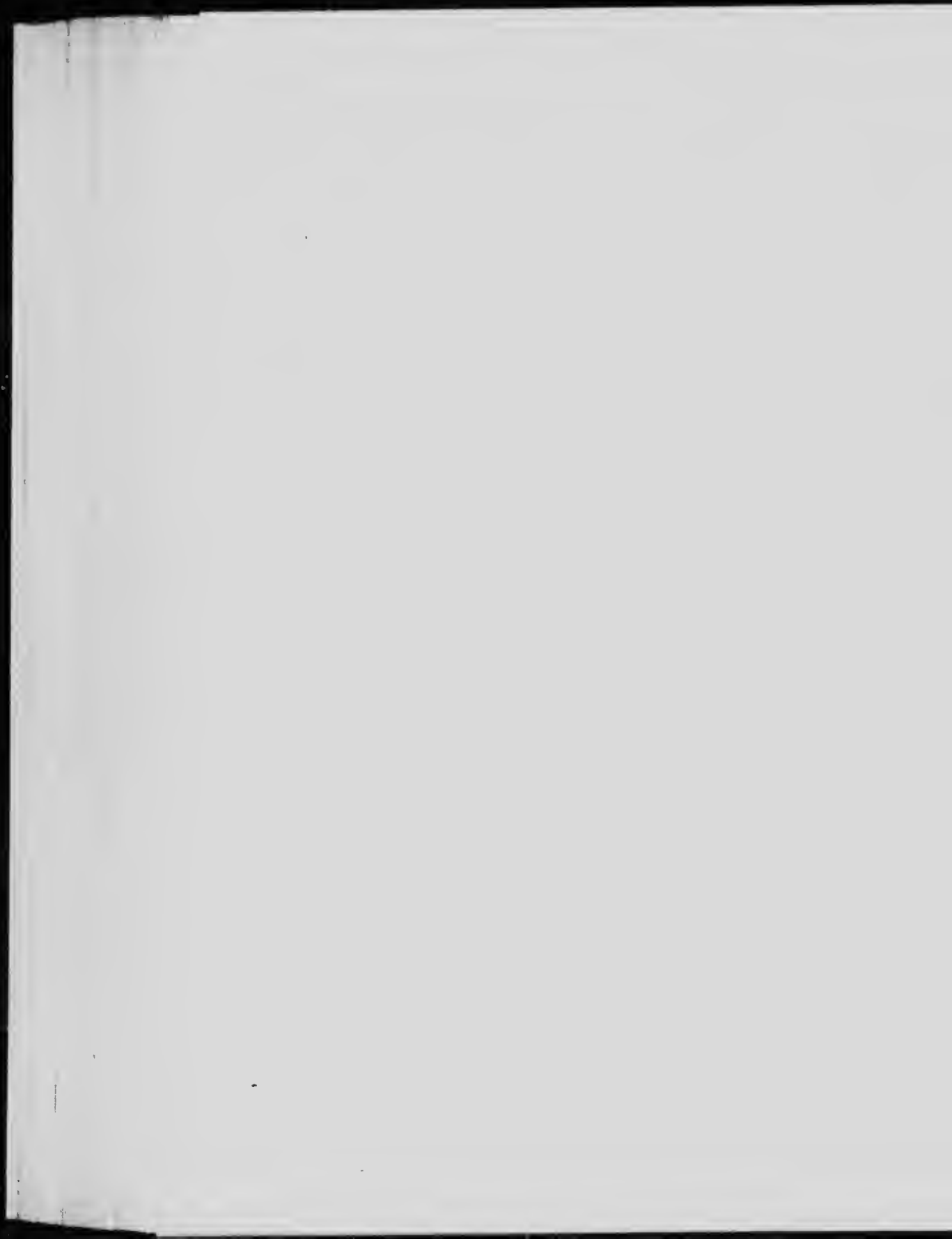
It was slow work, but the rock was gap-toothed, and in fifteen minutes Maitland had worked his way several feet from where we stood. His position was indeed terrible to contemplate. I could hardly understand how he managed to cling to the cliff. He reminded me of a fly negotiating a pane of glass. We dared not speak to him lest we should distract his attention, and cause him to lose his footing. And what would happen then ?

Just at that moment the first rays of the rising sun glanced athwart the cliff tops. And then the thin mist that hitherto had hidden the depths beneath, lifted. A sickening nightmarish drop of some hundreds of feet revealed itself. It was horrible ! Would the daring man, now that the death below grinned up at him in all its ghastliness, sicken and faint at the sight, and drop to destruction ?

For one moment only, I thought, the tutor realised the unveiling of the abyss. It may have only been fancy, but it appeared to me that his face paled, and he pressed closer to the rock. Next moment, with set face and deliberate action, he was wielding the pick methodically and surely. As for Sir Donald and myself, we could only cling closer to our precarious perch and breathe an inward

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prayer that the man who was proving such a hero would bridge the awful gap safely.

And then it was as if what occurred was indeed a nightmare. Round the bend of the rock and down the narrow path came the lost one—Madge!

When I look back upon that scene now the thought of it almost stops the beating of my heart as it did then.

Our first impulse was to cry out, and then the thought and sight of Maitland, whom it seemed a breath of air would dislodge, held us breathless. I cannot say what Sir Donald did, but I know I lifted one hand warningly and pointed to the brave man whose life was in the balance. He had struck a piece of hard rock. He was making little or no headway. It would be impossible for him to retreat.

Madge realised the situation at a glance, and I could see her face pale. Maitland must have heard or seen her, because he stopped work with his pick, and leant heavily against the rock. He either could or dared not speak. I could see him gazing at her.

Now that he had seen her, at least the danger of the surprise was over.

“Rest for a minute or two,” she cried to him with unnatural calmness. “I’m perfectly all right, and there’s no need for you to hurry.”

I heard Sir Donald behind me thank God, but he did not trust himself to speak further.

I could see the girl look around, and then her gaze rested on the rope that Maitland carried coiled over one shoulder.

“If you could manage to throw me one end of that rope, Mr Maitland,” she said, “there’s a

jutting piece of rock I think would hold it at this end, and it would make you feel ever so much safer."

I thought it was a risky thing to do, but with one hand he lifted the coil from his shoulders. Gripping one end in his teeth, he threw the spare of the rope to her. She caught it deftly.

"Make it fast round your body," she directed. "But first hold on to it tightly, and let me make it fast at this end."

She slipped her end twice round a jutting pinnacle of rock, and he made his fast round his body. Then Maitland spoke, and what he said testified to the presence of mind of the man.

"As you may have to come down this way," he observed, "I may as well make places for your feet."

Next moment he set to work.

A few minutes later he stepped on to the opposite ledge. Madge caught him by both hands. I do not think either of them spoke a word. It was a situation beyond speech. As for Sir Donald and myself, we have both tacitly agreed to forget what we actually did say or do within these next few minutes.

As Maitland assured himself of the fact that he and Madge would have to descend by the way he had climbed up, he threw us the end of the rope, which Sir Donald and I lying flat on the edge held on to. The tutor then with some degree of safety enlarged the footholds he had made when ascending. It was another ordeal awaiting us when Madge's turn came to negotiate that passage. We did not know then that only a few hours before Madge had undergone an ordeal of much the same sort, but

compared to which this one was tame. She told us afterwards that climbing giant trees had been one of the weaknesses of her girlhood. Maitland followed close on her footsteps with the idea of helping her, but she effected the passage in such a masterly way that we concluded she must have had previous experience in mountaineering.

There was no parade of emotion when Madge, safe and sound, confronted her uncle—no matter what both of them must have felt. Sir Donald kissed her, then pulled himself together, and for a minute or two essayed to adopt an indignant and Orderly Room style.

“Confound it all, Madge,” he thundered. “It’s really too bad, you know! You’ve been absent two days without leave, and, by Jove! it’s thirty days’ C.B.—confined to barracks, you know—I’m going to give you for this, as sure as your name is Madge!”

And then to hide his emotion he abruptly turned his back on her, and imperilled the safety of the entire party by violently shaking hands with Maitland. This fortunately accomplished, he swore roundly at what I am firmly convinced were fictitious personages invented for the occasion, and led the way down the terrace.



## XXV

### MURDER AND MUTINY

**A**SKING innumerable questions and answering them, we followed down the shaded bottom of the dry watercourse that skirted the cliff. Once more we entered the vast tree-clad arena in which the fortress-like rock rose up sheer and green. We skirted it on the north side so as to gain the place of ascent. It was broad day now; the laughing-jackass had ceased his noisy cachination, and the organ-magpie instead chanted his beautiful song. Suddenly, as we forced our way through a thicket of golden wattle, we heard a cry from a human throat such as I devoutly hope no one who reads this tale may ever hear. It was a hoarse, discordant, agonised cry instinct with the horror of cold-blooded murder. It sends a shiver through me now as I think of it.

“They’ve quarrelled amongst themselves, and are murdering someone,” cried Sir Donald, rightly interpreting the situation.

Telling Maitland to stay behind with Madge, Sir Donald and I pushed through the thicket. We were too late. In the distance we could see two or three disappearing forms. On the ground was a prostrate figure. Coming up to it, the ghastly situation was plain.

There lay the dreaded desperado Hawker on his back, with wide-open eyes staring up fixedly at the inscrutable heavens. When he heard our footsteps he staggered to his feet, and glared at us. He reminded one of some wild animal that knowing it is fairly cornered, and with the odds against it, still has pluck enough to die game. There was an ugly wound over his right temple, but the big smear of blood that showed on his shirt in the neighbourhood of the heart, told me at once that some one had stabbed him there, and the knife had been withdrawn. He was weaponless—his assailants had doubtless taken away his rifle—but he clenched his fists at sight of us.

Next moment he reeled, and fell.

I was at his side in a moment. "You've nothing to fear from us," I said, "I'm a surgeon and will do what I can for you."

"I ain't afeared," he protested indignantly, and with obvious sincerity. "Lemme be, I ain't taking favours from you."

"There's no favour about it," I said. "Do you think we're going to allow you to bleed to death if we can help it? Besides, we've just heard something about you, and we're inclined to treat you mercifully."

We placed him in as easy a position as was possible, and I ripped open his shirt. It was as I feared. He was bleeding internally, and it was only a question of time with him.

"Hev' I cheated the hangman?" he asked as he caught my gaze.

"Hawker," I said, "it is nothing to cheat the

hangman. In a very few minutes you will have to face Someone of ten thousand times greater importance. Make your peace with Him."

"D'ye really b'lieve in 'im?—honour bright?" he asked, gazing at me earnestly.

"I do," I said, "just as surely as I believe in His mercy."

"Well, I reckon as how you're an edycated man and should know," he said. "Them spouting fellers in the Domain at Sydney said as how there was no God, but I wouldn't wonder if there was a big boss somewheres." He paused a minute, and I could see he was very busy with his thoughts. Suddenly he spoke again.

"You'll find her—the missy—in one o' them terraces. If you go up to her that way"—he indicated the place from which we had rescued Madge—"and take picks and a rope wid you, you'll be able to git her. She's all right. I'm thankful for that."

"Here she is," I said. "Yes, you have not been altogether bad, and that will go to your credit account."

Madge and Maitland came up at that moment, and it needed no one to tell the former that her late gaoler was dying.

The girl went over to him.

"I would like to tell you," she said, "that I am very, very sorry for you."

"Thank you for that," he said. "I thought as how you were one o' the right sort. I'm glad to see you're safe agen—I really am. You're a brick!"

A cricket or some other sun-loving insect carolled loudly and merrily hard by. The glorious gladden-

ing sun had dissipated the morning's mist and now shone brightly down, making the shadows clearly defined, black as jet, palpable. Everything in that tropical forest was throbbing with life, even in the shadow of the wings of the Angel of Death.

The end was very near, and I had done for him the little I could. His thoughts seemed to be drifting away from the life that was around him. He roused himself, and said :

" You've all bin mighty good, and I'd like you to know I'm thankful. You'd better get back to camp. If that cove Smith wir only here he'd be a mighty help to you, he would. But I don't know where he is—never could know where he was. Now, go."

" Which of them did it ? " I asked. " Sam Holt or Bird or Brock ? "

" Don't ask," he said ; " 'tain't worth while. An' one thing I never did was to peach. Anyhow, keep 'em out o' camp, an' I think you'll pull through. So-long, all of you ! "

And then suddenly the end came, and the outlaw went out alone to stand before the bar of Eternal Justice.

" It is all over," I said. " It won't do to stop here. Hello ! what's this ? "

My eye had detected the gleam of steel in the long grass. I stepped towards it and picked up a species of bowie-knife with the blade still wet with blood. It was the sort of knife that nearly all bushmen carry, and on the wooder handle there was carved the letter B. I recognised it at once as Bird's.

" I am sure I saw Bird," I said, " and I know

this is his knife. I have seen him mending harness with it. But we mustn't stay. These fellows are certain to be up to mischief."

If we had harboured any doubts upon the subject, a bullet that at that moment sent the bark flying from a tree close to Sir Donald's head, quickly dissipated them. Following close upon it a volley from unseen foes awakened us to the extreme danger of our position.

"There's no questioning your point," cried Sir Donald. "Let's circle so as not to draw their fire in the direction of the others. Run low, and dodge."

I do not suppose two middle-aged men ever made better time than we did. It would have been folly to have attempted a stand, and to return their fire.

"Come on, my dear," Sir Donald cried to his niece. "We've got to take up an entrenched position. The enemy have opened the attack."

But Madge could have left us all behind had she wished.

We needed no incentive. We forced our way from clump of undergrowth to undergrowth, and the mutineers pressed us hard. We had several very narrow squeaks, and only prevented the murderers from coming up with us by a few careful and well-directed shots at intervals. I am perfectly certain that only the knowledge of the fact that but for the thought of the women, nothing would have deterred Sir Donald from boldly meeting and trying conclusions with the miscreants. They nearly had us at the base of the inclined plane, however, for

one of them managed to reach the scattered boulders between us and it. Our position became one of the extremest danger, when *bang, bang, bang!* and we realised that for the moment, at least, fortune was in our favour.

“Hurrah!” cried Sir Donald. “It’s Jack and Bailey. I hope to goodness they’ll take care of themselves, and not be rash. We can’t afford to lose men!”

As we pressed cautiously on to join them, we realised the wisdom of his words. We caught sight of Jack incautiously galloping out into the open as if to make for our attackers, and we experienced a species of nightmare, to say the least of it. Sir Donald bawled at the top of his trumpet-like voice to stop him, but it was of no use. Bailey was also shouting to him.

“Confound the boy!” cried Sir Donald, beside himself with vexation and grievous apprehension. “He’s riding to certain death—he’s got no business to! When will an Englishman learn to fight with his brains?”

It was only too true, Jack, as many more have done, was mistaking foolhardiness for courage. It cost him dearly. The cut-throats must have rejoiced and laughed. Forgetting our own position, we rushed forward just in time to see Bird step boldly from behind a tree-trunk and cover the rash youth with his rifle. Jack must have looked the fool he assuredly was at that moment. All he could do was to try and control his horse when it was too late. No time to take even a snapshot now.

Doubtless, it was this questionable and otherwise

ill-judged action that saved him, for his steed, violently checked in its career, and startled by the sudden appearance of a human being from behind a tree, swerved and plunged violently. At the same moment Bird fired. Even at the distance at which we were, one could see the horse flinch as the traitor's bullet caught it fair on the neck. It came down on its knees, and the blood gushed from the wound. Jack half slipped and slid to the ground. Up went Bird's gun again to his shoulder as he moved a step or two to one side so as to get a better shot. But before he could draw the trigger, I managed to cover him and fire. He dropped his rifle, and the blood poured down the side of his head and neck. I had shot off an ear—a lucky fluke, if anyone will have it so!

Jack must undoubtedly have been shot, had not at that moment another distraction occurred. There was a drumming of horses' hoofs, and we knew that Bailey and Martin had come upon the scene. These old hands knew better than rush into the lion's mouth. They stopped in the neighbourhood of some boulders, and opened fire on the mutineers. In the surprise and confusion that followed, Jack managed to make good his escape. He had been taught a lesson it is hoped he may never forget.

We joined forces with the relief body, and then engaged in a running fight with the mutineers. Maitland with praiseworthy foresight had sternly insisted on Madge making for the camp, and himself accompanied her. At first she had demurred, but the tutor showed a side of his character that, taken in conjunction with the heroic action she had so

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Up went Bird's gun to his shoulder.





lately witnessed, so completely surprised Madge that she wonderingly obeyed.

There was now Sir Donald, Jack, Bailey, Martin and myself against Sam Holt, Bird and Brock, and what with our reserves in the shape of Maitland and Parker at the camp, surely we would be more than a match for the enemy.

But Sir Donald was too old a soldier to pin his faith upon what was merely obvious. He realised that our odds were more **apparent** than real. Any moment the odds might be **against** us. Holding the enemy too cheaply, and the **consequent** disregard of proper precautions, might **enable** the treacherous ones to equalise the contest. To retire on our position, and entrench ourselves until we could determine on a line of effective offence, was the proper thing to do. As on another momentous occasion, Sir Donald was heroic enough to risk misinterpretation of motive rather than expose others to annihilation, and risk the certainty of ultimate success.

Within the next hour he proved the wisdom of this line of action. We had no sooner succeeded in reaching the camp, which we had done slowly and without mishap, and had taken up our position at the neck of the plateau on the top of the rise, than we were startled by certain intelligence, shouted by one of the sharp-eyed black boys, that at first hearing made us uncertain as to whether the new development was the consummation of a catastrophe, or the probable saving of the situation. Streaming up the valley through the gorge like a swarm of black ants came the wild blacks. They

were literally in hundreds and darkened the ground as they came. Even at that distance we could see they were armed for fight with spears and shields.

It was Madge who interpreted the situation. She astonished me and doubtless the others, to find how remarkably coolly she took the terrifying aspect of affairs.

"It's our friend Crocodile," she explained, "and he's staked his all in facing his tribe again. They have spared him, because he has told them about us, and, doubtless, he has promised to lead them to victory. He will side with Sam Holt & Company, until, as he imagines, he has us in his power and then he will play wolf, and proceed to get rid of his allies."

"Get out the ammunition boxes, Bailey," cried Sir Donald, "and that case with the red circle on it, and we'll give them something more than they bargained for."

## XXVI

### THE GREAT FIGHT

**T**HE case Sir Donald referred to was quickly opened, and to the intense satisfaction of all of us, disclosed a small quick-firing Colt's machine-gun in perfect working order. In a few minutes more it was mounted behind a shelf or low wall of rock, and ready for developments. Sir Donald himself was the gunner, and doubtless it was a unique position for a British General to occupy. We were all posted in capital positions, right across the narrow neck, and even Madge, I have reason to believe, though ordered by Sir Donald to go and keep Mrs Bailey company in the shelter of the great rocks and waggon, did some sharp-shooting on her own account from a cunning point of vantage.

Fortune had indeed favoured us, for had we delayed getting into camp ten minutes more, the blacks would have been there before us, and we would, doubtless, all have been massacred. The situation was one that would have appalled many a less devoted little band. It was, indeed, fortunate that we were entrenched in such a position of natural defence. Had we been in the open, with all sides liable to attack, our fate would have been a foregone conclusion.

The sun shone fiercely down, and the shadows of the trees and overhanging rocks stood out black as ink and clearly defined. There was a great stillness everywhere, only at intervals some irresponsible and garrulous grasshopper raised a spasmodic, inopportune din, and failing to find support, subsided into resentful silence again. This waiting for hostilities to begin was, as is usual in such cases, even more trying than the actual combat. Then we heard the stentorian voice of Sir Donald, who had been looking through his field-glasses, sing out:

“Now then, all, here come the man-eaters. Don't fire a shot until I give the order. We can't afford to throw away powder against such odds.”

In all truth what we saw was terrifying enough. Up the inclined plane they came singly, by twos and threes, and in scattered groups. Some affected cover behind the high boulders and the tree-trunks, while up the dry bed of the watercourse a black mass of human beings pushed on quickly. It was a confused vision of glistening ebony limbs, shaggy mops of hair, and quivering spears. If any white men were with them, they were lost sight of amid that ever-changing host.

Perhaps one of the most unnerving and terrifying features of the situation was the noise the advancing host made. They uttered wild vengeful shouts, made a sound like the thunder of horses' hoofs by stamping on the ground, and created a disconcerting rattle by beating their boomerangs together. All this was doubtless done with the idea of frightening us.

“The confounded fools!” I heard Sir Donald say.

"It seems a pity to take advantage of their ignorance. Snowball, tell them to stop, and jabber a little."

"Perhaps they prefer to fight, sir," said Jack, who I could see was looking forward to the prospect with no little satisfaction.

"And what in the name of all that's wonderful, sir, do you call a fight?" cried the General. "Is it when savages or fanatics rush headlong to destruction in the teeth of machine-guns?"

As Jack had nothing further to say on the subject, he relapsed into silence. His father, who was evidently exercised over the subject, after a brief pause, continued:

"I'm a Britisher to the backbone, I hope; but the Jingoism of our nation when we've got to fight savages makes me sick. When we've got to tackle an intelligent foe, and suffer a few reverses because we find we've been playing too much at soldiers, instead of working hard to find out what the real thing is like, we sing a very different song indeed. Then we blame our leaders, because our fireside critics have handicapped their efforts to perfect the fighting machine."

I thought of South Africa, and could understand Sir Donald's indirect defence of those who had not been quite so fortunate as himself.

"But, sir," Jack persisted, "the odds here are a hundred to one, and they are forcing our hand. We'll have to fight with a vengeance!"

"We probably will, sir," retorted Sir Donald. "But I can see what we'll have to do, and I don't half like it. Let's be fair and square with them, and

if they don't listen to us, then, let them take the consequence. Snowball, don't you hear me? sing out to them."

Only that I knew Sir Donald to be one of the bravest officers in the British army, I might have thought he was trying to temporise.

Snowball bawled to them at the top of his voice, but it was of no avail. In another moment spears were fixed in womerars, or throwing sticks, and our coloured driver of the spare horses was obliged to duck his head while a veritable shower of whirring and dangerous missiles rattled on the rocks in his immediate neighbourhood with a decidedly unpleasant rattle. Sir Donald had incautiously lifted his head a little too high so as to better observe the situation of affairs, when *bang, zip!* and a bullet glancing off a rock sent his high-crowned hat spinning into the air. The mutineers were with the blacks after all, and doubtless urging them on. There was only one course to be pursued now.

"That settles it," cried Sir Donald. "Now then, each one his man and shoot straight!"

*Pom, pom, pom, pom, pom—pom—pom!*

The Colt's gun had gone mad, and a stream of lead fairly hailed upon the mass of black humanity struggling up the watercourse, paving it with dead and dying.

*Bang, bang, bang! tick, tock—tick, tock!* and the Martini-Henry and Parker's Mauser, which he had managed to smuggle under his master's nose all the way from the Tugela, bellowed and rat-tatted an accompaniment to the Colt's gun. Could flesh and blood stand up against such a hail of death?

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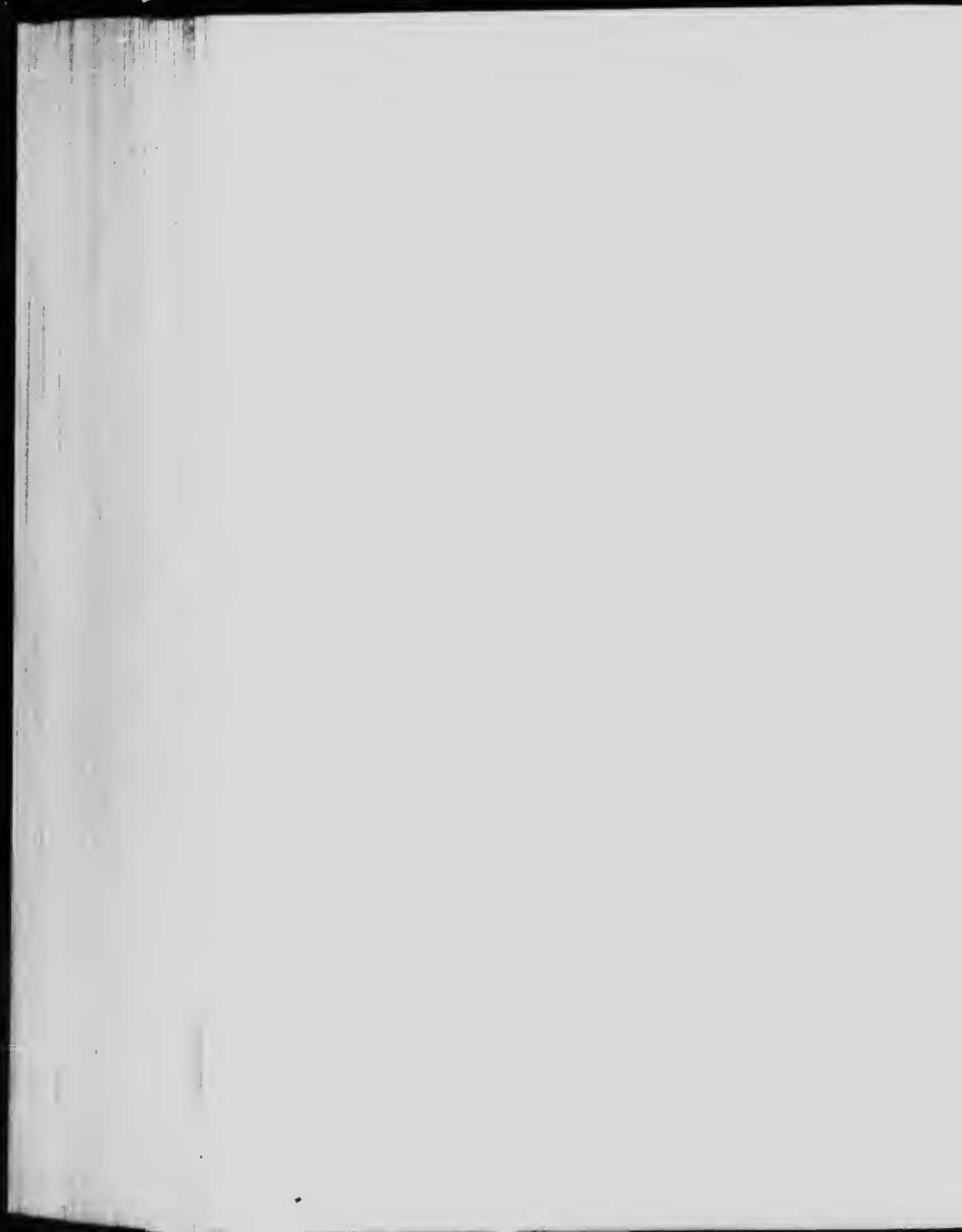
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The mutineers were urging them on.





*Pom, pom, pom—pom, pom—pom, pom!* and the parched and yellow sand in the dry torrent bed drank up the crimson flood that flowed as if from newly-born springs. It was on and up to the breastwork—over the limp and lifeless bodies of those who hardly wotted of the bloody unseen death that mowed them down like grass before the sickle. Would nothing stop them?

On they came. They were up to the breastwork now—they had struggled up and over a pathway of dying and dead—right in the teeth of the blood-red flash and ghoulish bark of rifle and Colt's gun.

Each man stuck to his post grim and determined. I saw Sir Donald hatless and with grimed face working the gun with a masterful celerity that even then compelled my admiration. Still he did not like the work. It was only dire necessity that made him fight those infatuated savages. He told me afterwards, that such work sickened him of soldiering, but it was forced upon him and had to be done. Smartly serving the gun, and barefooted and bare-headed, Parker waited on his master. He skipped nimbly about, and there was a light in his eyes plainly denoting that if the look-out was blue, he was at least in his proper element. All that disturbed Parker was that he could not get at some of the enemy with his fists. I am morally certain he would have infinitely preferred it to his present method of fighting.

Maitland was another revelation, he had boldly pushed forward, and, with a smartness that compelled my admiration, was literally drilling the lead

into the advancing enemy. Once I saw a huge black, who had somehow crept up undetected, and was actually past our line, turn on him with a great jagged club raised high above his head. The tutor had fired the last cartridge in his magazine, but he promptly clubbed his rifle, and, so as not to break the stock, drove the butt right into the left side of his assailant's face. Even in that din I heard the thud and click as the burly savage went down all of a heap with a broken jaw. And where he fell, there he lay.

*Pom, pom, pom, pom, pom, pom, pom!*

Would nothing stop them!

*Bang, bang, bang! tick, tock—tick, tock!* and Colt's gun, Martini-Henry, and Mauser played for all they were worth upon that struggling mass of fierce black savagery. The place was becoming a shambles, but the sight of blood only seemed to madden and urge our assailants on. They showered spears, clubs, and even stones upon us as they advanced. Thanks, however, to the strong breastworks Sir Donald had insisted on us building, we had fairly good cover. For all that, I noted with concern that some of us got nasty knocks, and in one or two cases blood had been drawn. Had it not been that we were posted right across the neck of land that led to the plateau, we must have been outflanked and speedily annihilated. As it was, the attackers were hampered by their own dead and wounded. Still, I observed more than one savage avail himself of a fallen comrade. I actually saw some stalwarts catch up dead or wounded blacks and use them as shields. In my experience of savage warfare, this was something

I had not hitherto seen. But then the Australian savage is unlike any other on earth.

They had been obliged to fall back, but were still within twenty paces of us. Despite the withering, steady fire we maintained, it was evident it was only a question of time before they would be up again to the muzzle of our guns, and then by sheer force of numbers they were bound to overwhelm us.

"Give it them, boys," Sir Donald cried while the Colt's gun was being charged; "they can't stand much more of it. Let's cheer. There's magic in a good, ringing British cheer. Hip-hip-hurrah!"

And we cheered for all we were worth.

And wonderful to tell, such a lusty chorus from willing throats wrought wonders. The savages, who had doubtless never heard anything like it in their lives, were startled and taken aback. For a moment they paused irresolute. They might not have exactly known what a cheer portended, but there was something in the very sound of it that suggested fresh energy and victory.

"Back with them, boys; keep it up!" cried Sir Donald, and setting his actions to his words he gripped the Colt's gun and swept the enemy's front. The rest of us in turn took prompt aim at the most warlike and aggressive of the foemen, and proceeded to show them that we meant to fight to a finish.

One wily savage had somehow managed to rush right up to the opening from which the truculent muzzle of the Colt's gun protruded, and had actually laid hands on it to push it over, when luckily he was seen by Parker. The manservant had nothing in his hands at the time, but stooping quickly, he picked

up a stone about the size of a cricket ball, and let the daring attacker have it right on the neck. *Click!* and the savage dropped never to rise again.

“Well done, Parker, let them have a few more like that, but don’t expose yourself,” cried Sir Donald.

Next moment Parker was enjoying himself to his heart’s content. He had hitherto refrained from indulging in those methods of warfare dearest to his heart as he had not obtained permission, but now that he had given practical demonstration that his bowling powers were unimpaired, and could be turned to excellent account, he started in with all his might to show how it could be done.

The effect on the blacks was demoralising to a degree. Perhaps there are no human beings who are more skilful in throwing stones than the aboriginals of Australia. They may be said to practise from their babyhood, and they can respect anyone who can throw straight and hit hard. Luckily, owing to their being packed so closely together, and also owing to the fact that most of the throwable stones on their side had already been utilised, they were no longer in a position to prosecute this primitive but effective mode of warfare. When, therefore, they found themselves with a diminished stock of spears and boomerangs, and being lustily bombarded by a white man who was a very demon at the game they so much dreaded, they were non-plussed, and began to fall back.

As soon as they did so we found ourselves menaced by a fresh danger—one we had almost lost sight of. The mutineers, Holt, Bird and Brock, who hitherto

had been prevented from making any good shooting, owing to the presence of their black allies so close to the breastwork, at once proceeded to do some sharp-shooting. Of course, the traitors would not have deplored the accidental shooting of a few blacks. It was the wasting of ammunition and time they grudged.

We took advantage of the comparative slackening of hostilities to serve out more ammunition, and to replace such stones on the schanze as had been dislodged when we were fighting at close quarters.

The first intimation of the new danger was the *phut* of a bullet on a rock alongside Maitland, and next moment we saw that the little leaden messenger had glanced or ricocheted and given the tutor a nasty cut on the right temple. It was as if it had been done by a razor.

"By Jove!" he cried, "that was our old friend Sam Holt, or I'm a Dutchman. He can shoot, and no mistake."

The Oxonian seemed to have quite lost sight of the narrow squeak he had made in his admiration of the markmanship displayed.

I was beside him next moment. I saw at a glance that the wound was not dangerous, and would not incapacitate him.

"A narrow shave, Maitland," said I. "Let me tie this round it. All it wants is keeping clean."

"Thanks, doctor. For the sake of appearances it may be as well," he observed, and submitted himself to my bandaging. In another minute he was peering over the breastwork again as unconcerned as if nothing had happened. I guessed, however,

he was looking for the man who had fired the shot.

"Now look out, gentlemen," cried Sir Donald. "Our white enemies are up to some game, I feel certain. They can't spot us from below, so they're pretty sure to make for some neighbouring heights where they can catch a glimpse of or fire down upon us."

"Look, Uncle," cried Madge, who had crept up to us, and was pointing to a terrace partly covered with bushes some several hundred yards away. "There they are—Holt, Bird & Company, and they're trying to reach a point where they will be able to command the camp. There are one or two blacks with them."

"Thank you, Madge, I see them," cried Sir Donald. "Now, Parker, give a hand here, and round with the gun. They're stopping to reconnoitre Quick—at seven hundred yards. Ready!"

In less time than it takes to tell it the quick-fire was wheeled into position, and Sir Donald seizing the handle took careful aim.

We could see the traitors plainly on the terrace. They seemed in the act of stopping to turn back. A score or two of savages who, actuated either by desire to support them or by curiosity, were crowding up after them, doubtless to the annoyance and disgust of the intending sharp-shooters.

*Pom, pom, pom, pom, pom, pom!* and the Colt's gun opened fire on them. Despite the tragedy of the situation it was almost ludicrous to notice the effect of the fusilade upon the enemy. While one or two blacks were seen to drop, the others scattered

and simply tore down the terrace again, flying for their lives. Madge, who was looking through field-glasses, cried :

“ Uncle, you should just see Sam Holt run ! A kangaroo isn't in it with him.”

“ And even Brock, who always gave one the idea that he was born tired, is running him close,” cried Jack. “ It shows how one should never judge by appearances.”

To hear Jack express such a serio-comic truth was funny, to say the least of it. Madge looked at him, and made no attempt to disguise her amusement. It had always been a matter of wonder to me to note how the cousins, though both about the same age, were years apart so far as their mental outlook was concerned. Though Jack was in fact the older of the two, it was easy to see that Madge looked upon him much as she would have done upon a schoolboy. Moreover, she exacted from him that deference which, in the Old Country at least, is wisely expected from young people towards their seniors.

Sir Donald continued firing at the terrace as long as there was anyone to aim at. But as the whites soon vacated it, the savages followed suit. It did not matter about them anyhow. Having no fire-arms, they could do us no injury at that distance. Some of the blacks surprised on the terrace showed considerable good sense. Instead of trying to make good their escape by running the gauntlet, they threw themselves flat amongst the stones and long grass, and waited there till assured that the seat of operations lay elsewhere.

And now the sun was right overhead, and it



seemed as if the attacking party had cried a halt. They disappeared as if by magic, and not a shot could we get at them.

"Go and help Mrs Bailey to boil a camp-kettle of tea in cover of the rocks, Parker," Sir Donald said to the manservant. "And you, Madge, Maitland and Jack, go and have a rest and something to eat, and we'll watch here. You can relieve us later. The enemy is going to leave us alone for a little but they're pretty certain to try and rush us again before night falls. And remember, all, to keep well under cover. It's not the blacks, but the renegades with rifles we have to dread."

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## XXVII

### THE JAWS OF DEATH

**I**T was a blessed respite that temporary cessation of hostilities, and we made the most of it. While some of us went behind the screen of great rocks to partake of much needed refreshment, Sir Donald, Bailey, Martin, the two black boys, and myself busied ourselves in building up the breastwork. We did not spare ourselves. We knew that our lives might depend on the resistance we could offer to the enemy.

In a short time some of the others took our places, and Sir Donald and I took advantage of the temporary lull in the fight to have a good drink of tea and eat some meat and bread. And here, while on the subject of eating and drinking, let me say as one who has had a pretty wide experience under all sorts of conditions and climates, that tea or coffee are not only actually the best stimulants, but the best restorers of lost energy. Alcohol has its uses, but when once its temporary stimulation has passed, a reaction sets in that lowers the system more than would have been the case had the subject gone without anything. Then we took out our pipes, and went back to the stern work that we knew awaited us.

Sir Donald had a good look through his field-glasses so as to note the disposition of the enemy.

"They'll be at it again very shortly," he observed. "They seem to be swarming everywhere. I had no idea that Australian savages could muster like this."

"You see, Uncle," said Madge, "the public generally only know the Australian black fellow by the wretched specimens they see hanging around civilised parts. They know comparatively nothing at all about the warlike tribes in this part of Australia, where they are unspoiled by civilisation."

"I wish these chaps weren't quite so unspoiled," I broke in. "Goodness, the fanatics in the Soudan were tame compared to this lot!"

"I'm sorry I've got to fight them," said Sir Donald. "You may think it queer of an old soldier to say so, but I never saw a brave enemy fall yet without an honest pang of regret. I'm a soldier by profession, and I think warfare one of the most interesting games on earth, but I hate the actual killing more than I can tell you. It's a deplorable necessity."

I quite agreed with Sir Donald, but what I observed at that moment obliged me to alter the sentiments that were on my lips to something very different.

"Then I'm sorry to inform you that before many minutes you're about to be confronted with a good deal of very uncongenial work," I said. "The blacks are on the move again."

"And we have got to defend ourselves," said Sir Donald. "Now, Madge, do go and stay with Mrs

Bailey. You've all got lots of cartridges handy, I think. Keep cool and don't throw away a shot."

"Goodness!" I exclaimed, "what a lot of them there are. I thought we had pretty well thinned their ranks."

"And so we have," said Sir Donald. "And now they've brought up their reserves. They are staking everything on this attack."

"Fortunately, we're better prepared for them," I observed. "This breastwork will take some scaling."

In two minutes more we were hard at it again, but, as I have said, our labours during the brief pause in the hostilities proved invaluable. The wall of big flat stones prevented the savages rushing us, while it afforded those behind it excellent cover.

While the fight was at its fiercest I saw Madge—against orders, I am afraid—return to the breastwork, and join the ranks of the defenders. She used her repeating rifle with a coolness and dexterity that would have done credit to any soldier. She was indeed a great aid to us.

For some little time there was no opportunity of noting how my neighbours were getting on, the savages were making such a continuous and determined onslaught. One or two of them indeed made a rush at the breastwork, and one huge fellow somehow actually managed to scale it, and leap down upon us. Before he could recover himself I saw Maitland, evidently profiting by Parker's example, pick up a stone and deliver an overhand at the bold one's head. *Crash!* and the warrior went down all of a heap like a smashed glass bottle.

No one succeeded in following his example. The savages were evidently nonplussed by the higher breastwork, and began to draw back. I looked around, and noted that Madge was not beside us. Apprehensive that something might have happened to her, and noting that I could be spared just then, I ran round to where behind the rocks we had left Mrs Bailey. But that good woman was busy making some coffee in order to hand it round to us—for fighting is always thirsty work—and she had not seen Madge. I looked towards the plateau where the waggons were, and there on the very brink of the cliff I saw something that gave me a nasty turn.

Some of the enemy had actually scaled it, and were being actively engaged by Martin, the teamster. The traitor Bird, who must have known of this weak spot, was struggling with Madge. He had succeeded in catching her rifle, and was wrenching it from her grasp. They were swaying on the very edge of the cliff. I ran swiftly right up to them.

“Let go your rifle, Madge,” I cried. “Let it go!”

She did so, and Bird, suddenly released, spun sideways for a yard or two. Madge stepped backwards. Quick as thought Bird threw her rifle from him, and clubbed his own heavier one. There was a look of sneering, devilish hate on his face as he swung it upward to bring it down on my head.

“Too late, Bird!” I cried, and dealt him a blow on the chest with the butt end of mine that sent him reeling backwards over the cliff. I will never forget, as long as I live, the look in his face as he realised he was going over. So perished a traitor, and the murderer of a fellow in crime.

As Martin was making short work of the blacks who had followed up Bird, I ran to the edge of the cliff and saw that there were dozens climbing up by the way the others had come.

With Madge's help I loosened a goodly-sized boulder, and sent it crashing down on the top of the invaders. That settled the business so far as they were concerned. I left Madge on the brink and ran round to the front again. I had heard ominous sounds coming from that quarter. It was a hoarse murmur punctuated by shrill cries.

It was a hand-to-hand fight now, and a few minutes more would decide our fate.

It was the last attempt of the savages to rush us, and they went through with it as only men can who have absolutely no fear of death. They swarmed right up to our position, and as we were obliged more or less to show ourselves, the white miscreants opened fire. It was a lucky thing for us that their shooting was not what it ought to have been, otherwise we must speedily have been all wiped out.

If only we had possessed bayonets to have tackled them at such close quarters! There is something that acts like magic at the sight of cold steel. I remember once at the siege of Wepener, in South Africa, when in a midnight attack the Boers had fought their way right up to our trenches, they drew back at the last moment when someone sang out: "Fix bayonets!" But for that order the enemy had as good as carried the position.

But we had no bayonets now, and already it was almost a hand-to-hand fight. By reason of their

vastly superior numbers, they were bound to swamp us, no matter how many of them we killed.

And was this the end of our search for Smith! Were our chivalrous or quixotic endeavours to rescue a friend from the wilderness to be rewarded by death? If so, we could only hope that it would be a speedy one. The Australian blacks do not torture their victims so far as is known. They know no such refinement of cruelty. To kill as quickly and effectually as possible is their first aim. For a moment I thought of how foolish I had been to come out all the way to Australia to help look for a man in the wilderness whom I did not know, and who would, doubtless, not have thanked me for my pains had I found him. But I had come to help my old comrade, my friend Sir Donald, and I knew that at that moment his fears were not for himself, but for those whom he had brought with him. It needed no one to tell me that his thoughts just then must have been very bitter ones indeed.

"Payne," he cried to me as we fought shoulder to shoulder, "I'm afraid it's all over with us. When I think of how I brought you all out here, it's too terrible for words."

"Don't make it harder for us by speaking like that," I said. "It's the fortune of war, and no human being could have foreseen such a thing." As I spoke I made a lunge at a black fellow's head appearing over the breastwork. That nigger disappeared for good.

"We mustn't let the women fall into their hands, Payne," cried Sir Donald. "Send Madge to my side, like a good fellow, and tell Bailey to see to his wife."

His words were the death-knell of any hopes we may have had. It certainly was the most terrible moment of my life.

And then something occurred that sends the blood pulsing through my veins even now with the very thought of it. We had been unable to recharge the Colt's gun, and the rifle fire had stopped. Only painful gasps and the dull thud of blows were to be heard, when a series of reports down in the valley thrilled us with their import. It was the sharp crackle of a repeating rifle which never seemed to cease firing. Nearer and nearer came the sound. Some of the attackers, who had leapt on to the breastwork, turned and jumped down again. Those who had succeeded in getting within our lines seemed to regret their precipitancy, and we had little difficulty in making short work of them.

And ever that ominous fusilade was becoming more and more distinct. Could it be that the blacks had turned on the traitors for some reason or another, and that the latter were engaged in defending themselves?

We fought with a fresh access of energy. The savages, doubtless, unable to account for this new mysterious force behind them, and fearing to be hemmed in, began to retreat. We pressed them for all we were worth. That was the turning-point. Panic seized our hitherto all but victorious enemies, and some of them throwing down their weapons, bolted.

So suddenly and unexpectedly had the changed aspect of affairs come about that we could hardly realise we had just been snatched from the very jaws of death.



## XXVIII

### WE ARE FOUND BY SMITH

**P**ARKER was the first man who seemed to realise and appreciate the astonishing turn of fortune's wheel. He at once set about making the most of it, and fairly let himself go. With an ear-splitting cry, he jumped over the breastwork and made straight for a huge savage who with a few more was trying to rally the panic-stricken crowd. The black had only time to raise his nullah-nullah when he was bowled over by a blow straight from the shoulder. As Parker's rifle had jammed, and he had thrown it from him, this accident gave him the opportunity he had been looking for, and his fists fairly revelled in the work dearest to his soul. I saw three savages go down like ninepins in less than a minute and a half, and a fourth seemed to be so taken aback by the spectacle that he was incapable of action. This gentleman speedily found himself used as a species of missile, with the result that he was the means of bowling over three or four of his fellows.

By this time the savages saw that there was nothing for it but flight. In this respect their efforts were as whole-hearted and strenuous as their desire to annihilate us had been. Parker being fleet of foot

started in to make the most of vanishing opportunities.

“Hold on, gentlemen,” cried Sir Donald. “Keep together, and don’t go farther than the foot of the kopje. They may rally at any moment. I wonder who on earth the relief is?”

“I can see him—there’s only one man,” cried Madge, “and from what I’ve heard of him, it must be Smith. I’m sure it’s Smith!”

I don’t exactly know why we should have thought she was talking nonsense, but we did. In the course of our expedition we had indulged in so much speculation as to the whereabouts of the elusive mortal whom we sought, and had really met with so little actual proof of his being in that neighbourhood, that some of us, despite our faith in Sir Donald, had almost come to the conclusion that Smith was a myth and did not exist at all. Lots of stories had got about from time to time of lost explorers being seen with the wild blacks by whom they were kept in a state of captivity, so nothing was more likely than that what the survey party had said about the mysterious white visitor to their camp was one of the usual stock items of news especially invented to raise a mild sensation. As for Smith’s name on the tree, were there not thousands of Bill Smiths in the world?

But when we caught sight of that tall, gaunt, ragged figure, with an old battered helmet stuck on one side of his head, standing out fearlessly and alone near the foot of the hill, punishing the savages with methodical and dire effect, our doubts changed to speculation, and our speculations to a certainty.

He was the veriest scarecrow and travesty of a civilised being, and so unlike our preconceived ideas of an ex-army officer roughing it that, somehow, we came to the conclusion he was no other than Sir Donald's eccentric friend!

We had come thousands of miles to find Smith, and he had unexpectedly turned up and found us, and just when we most wanted finding!

In a body we ran down the slope, firing upon our thoroughly demoralised enemies. They made straight for the entrance to the valley.

And then from the fleeing blacks we saw a white man detach himself, and raising his rifle, aim point-blank at our deliverer. We recognised the would-be murderer as Sam Holt.

Next moment we had levelled our rifles at him. But we were too late.

"Don't fire," cried Sir Donald. "You'll shoot them both."

Our apprehensions were short-lived, for just at that moment a burly savage running swiftly in one direction, and looking in another, ran full tilt into the traitor. The impact reminded one of the meeting of two express trains, and Sam Holt had the thinner skull. He never rose again. And then as Crocodile—for he was the savage—doubtless feeling dazed, recovered himself, Parker was right in front of him. The recognition was mutual. Crocodile gave him a quick look of hate and fear from under lowering brows. He remembered one occasion when after meeting with fistic punishment from this man he had thrown a stick at his head with such force that—had it only struck him—the white fellow ought



He stood, a gaunt eccentric-looking figure, silently regarding us.



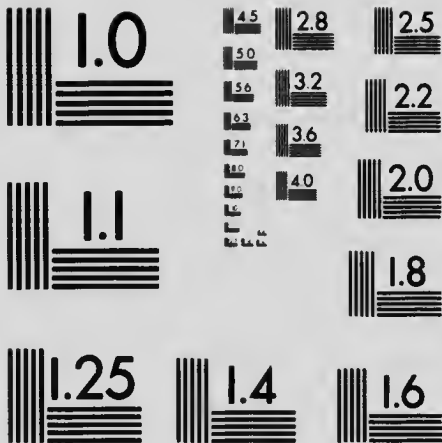
to have seen more stars than there were in the heavens. Then Crocodile's turn had come when he caught him napping beside the prostrate body of Hawker and, as he had thought, finished him. But now here surely was the ghost of that irrepressible white man who had such a curious weakness for fighting with his hands. He had never tackled a ghost, but he would try.

With courage that was beyond question, and promptitude indeed admirable, he stooped and picked up a goodly-sized stone. Only that the man-servant ducked, he would beyond doubt have been a ghost in another minute. Parker rushed in upon him. *Click!* and Crocodile probably never knew what happened, for the blow right under the jaw sent him spinning backwards; his heels caught on an outcrop of rock, and he shot head first over the bank of the dry creek. He landed on the back of his head on the stony bottom, some fifteen feet or so below. And that was the end of the dangerous savage who tried to run with the hares, and hunt with the hounds.

The blacks had fled helter-skelter through the gorge. So as Sir Donald, and indeed all of us, considered that they had paid dearly enough for their aggressiveness, and that it was exceedingly unlikely they would rally, we turned our attention to the strange man of whose odd elusive ways we had heard such queer stories that, at times, we were almost inclined to place him outside the human pale.

He stood, a gaunt, eccentric-looking figure, silently regarding us, with the butt of his rifle resting on the





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ground and between his feet, which were wide apart. His two hands grasped the muzzle. It was a strange idea, but he gave me the impression of one who, despite his assumption of sang-froid, was in reality so shy that he would have bolted from our presence even then could he have done so. His naturally fair complexion was browned by sun and weather, and he had undoubtedly a good face. There was an odd admixture of alertness and thoughtfulness in his blue eyes which denoted a life accustomed to ceaseless watchfulness, and perhaps to overmuch communion with his own thoughts. He suggested a modernised Don Quixote wearing a battered old pith helmet instead of a metal one. In place of a coat of mail, a ragged and faded blue shirt covered his spare body. The sleeves had been torn off at the elbows, probably for the sake of convenience. A pair of muddy brown moleskin trousers secured by a heavy cartridge belt, covered the lower part of his body, and coarse hobnailed boots in the last stage of dissolution, and only held together by a clumsy but ingenious arrangement of string and greenhide, encased his feet. A bandolier containing cartridges was slung over one shoulder, while a capacious leather bag that bulged in a mysterious and extraordinary manner, hung from the other side. This bag, we afterwards discovered, contained his entire spare wardrobe and commissariat.

He did not appear to be surprised in the very slightest degree to see us. His casual expression of interest in us did not seem to be more than that of a policeman in the foot-passengers at a crowded crossing.

We approached him, and I think it was a sense of the great significance of this meeting that kept us strangely silent.

As for Smith, his self-repression and seeming coolness under the circumstances was extraordinary. Parker, who happened to be nearest him, was the first to speak.

"Good-morning, sir," he said, and touched his hat. Then staring harder, and like one who could not believe the evidence of his own senses, the manservant brought his heels together, and saluted. His thoughts were beyond speech.

"Good-morning," said the gaunt stranger, eyeing Parker calmly, and acknowledging the salute. Before Sir Donald could speak he addressed himself to us.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," he said. "Sorry you have had some little unpleasantness with my neighbours. Can't understand it; I've lived here for some little time, and despite the fact that several months ago they tried to make me a permanent fixture in their camp, which, of course, I objected to, I've generally been able to keep them to their own side of the house."

"Smith," interrupted Sir Donald, rushing up to him. "Don't you know me, Smith? Goodness, man, I've been searching the wide world for you!"

And Sir Donald, obviously brimful with emotion, handed his rifle to Parker, and seized the human scarecrow by both hands.

"Bless my heart, the dear old General!" cried Smith, and the recognition was complete.

Sir Donald introduced him to his niece, and the

courtly sweep that battered old helmet described reminded one of a scene from Cervantes. The diverse elements of pathos and comedy were so strong in it as to be bewildering. Then in turn we menfolk were taken up and introduced to him. His manner was one of well-bred cordiality, chastened by unmistakable shyness.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, that, having been from home these last few days," said Mr Smith comprehensively and apologetically, "my larder isn't such that I can offer you—er—the sort of hospitality I'd like to, but——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Sir Donald, "you're our guest now, Smith. I can remember you always were an extravagant sort of chap. You'd spend no end of money on entertaining all sorts of people, and you never seemed to care a rap about what you ate or wore yourself."

Those of us who could, blushed at this outspoken indictment as we noticed the extreme shabbiness of the human clothes-prop before us. But Smith did not seem to mind in the very least.

"When you've got no money," he observed reflectively, and with a return of that far-away look in his eyes, "then you want to look as if you had some. But if you've got lots, I don't see that it matters a penny what you look like, because you've got it, you know."

By which sage remarks we gathered that Mr Smith, despite his philosophy, had not always valued money as he ought to have done, with the result that when he wanted it, he had formed a correct estimate of the value of appearances.

We were now close to the partially bared gold-reef that had so excited the cupidity and murderous instincts of the conspirators, and Smith, pointing it out, remarked in a most casual fashion that it was really as chock-full of gold as it could well be, and that he had marked out a prospector's claim upon the same. He said that he would now mark out a claim for Sir Donald, and advised us all to do the same. There was a fortune for every one of us. As he spoke, the man who was, doubtless, now practically a millionaire, stooped to tighten a piece of green-hide which was tied round the right boot so as to prevent the sole parting company with the uppers. I could actually see his bare toes peeping through.

But Sir Donald seemed still exercised about the now invisible enemy, and remarked that if it were only to influence them, should they again take it into their heads to rally, it might be incumbent upon us to see that we gave them no opportunity of changing their minds.

"You needn't be alarmed on that score, General," said Mr Smith quietly. "They'll keep on going now they've started. I told them on one occasion that if ever they provoked me again, and I started out upon the kill-kill, I wouldn't leave off until I had polished off every one of them. And you gave them beans, too! No, no, they'll keep on going."

We felt that he must be an authority on the subject, and did not trouble further. As for the white conspirators, they had come to the unregretted end of all such short-sighted mortals—all save the slow-witted Brock of gastronomic aspirations. But as he

fled with the cannibals, it is more than likely that when the latter had time to turn their attention to him, his punishment would fit his crimes.

One remarkable feature of the great fight had been our comparative freedom from serious casualties. Such as there were, I very soon fixed up. Parker's knuckles occupied me most.

As it would soon be dusk, Sir Donald suggested an instant return to camp so as to put things to rights. There were the horses to water, and a few other necessary things to be seen to.

"But where are your traps, Smith?" Sir Donald asked innocently. "You see, you're one of us now."

"My traps!" said Smith, regarding him with mild surprise. "Why, here, of course—in this little bag. Do you suppose I could afford to leave anything lying about in a country like this?"

"But your commissariat department—spare clothes—bedding and all that sort of thing?" persisted Sir Donald.

"Why, here, all here!" exclaimed the simple one, still patting the little brown bag slung scholar-wise over his back.

Sir Donald stopped and looked incredulous. He doubtless suspected his friend of some practical joke.

"The remnants of such garments as I brought with me," said Smith, who saw that some explanation was required of him, "are the elegant signals of distress you may observe still flying from various parts of my body. I actually once owned soap—two bars of Non-Trust soap it was—and occasionally on a Sunday, when I considered it wicked to perform any other sort of work, I used to do my washing and

make myself beautiful. But I considered it an awful nuisance to have to sit in the shade of a tree or a rock when the flies were bad, while my clothes dried in the sun. Even Providence indicated a desire to agree with my sentiments on this point, for one day my horse ate my last half-bar of soap—we were in wretched spinifex country and no grass—and I promptly accepted the sign. Therefore, behold me ! But I'm not going to apologise. You've got to take me as you find me."

Mr Smith was obviously as independent as he differed from the orthodox pattern.

"Please don't apologise, Smith," said Sir Donald. "We didn't mean to touch on such personal details at all. It was your commissariat department I was more particularly thinking about. Where is your food supply ? But, of course, you won't need it now ; we've got any amount of stuff."

Smith stopped short, and his long features seemed expressive of surprise.

"Why should I want to hamper myself with a lot of provisions that would only want carting about, when you can always get plenty as you go along ?" he asked. "Why, there's any amount of bandicoots, snakes, crows, hawks and possums, and fish and shell-fish in the big pools of the permanent creeks ; and you see this little green plant ? Well, it's excellent spinach ! And what more can a man want !"

I am afraid that although we menfolk were too polite to express our lack of enthusiasm in such a menu, our faces must have been eloquent, for Madge hastened to say :

"Bandicoots, of course, are luxuries, Mr Smith,

and a good deal depends upon the age of the possums and hawks. As for snakes, I once had to sample one. It was a young carpet snake, and we roasted it on the ashes. It wasn't half bad, but just a trifle tasteless."

Smith looked at her with an appreciable increase of deference, and seemed pleased.

"It all depends on one's appetite," he observed. "Once upon a time I used to turn up my nose at the dinners in the Savoy and the Carlton. I used to wonder how any human being could be so hungry as to tackle—say treacle pudding with square chunks of suet in it and that sort of thing, you know. But now I sometimes dream about puddings and roly-polies, and conjure up a heaven where they are a standing dish."

"We'll give you one to-morrow, Smith. Mrs Bailey will make such a pudding as will make your hair curl," exclaimed Sir Donald encouragingly.

"And we'll chop the suet well up," added Madge.

"By Jove!" said Smith, "that will be a treat. Don't promise more things or I sh'an't be able to sleep to-night."

I noted that his pinched and somewhat drawn features relaxed. It was good for one's soul to see the face of a prospective millionaire light up at the prospect of treacle pudding with lots of suet in it.

## XXIX

### SMITH'S PHILOSOPHY

**W**E certainly would have left that hill of blood there and then had it been possible. But it was much too late in the day, and anyhow we would only have been vacating an excellent position for one of questionable security. We stretched a couple of lines with alarms attached, some seventy yards or so from the breastwork, so that no one could approach without at first giving warning. We also appointed a watch for the night.

It was upon the whole quite a festive party that sat around the great fire within the irregular square of those immense boulders. When we came to think of it, there was every reason for rejoicing. In the first place, we had been saved from a terrible fate, and the man whom we had come all the way from England to find, had been found. The strangest part of it all was that, he had found us just when we wanted finding very badly, and there was the goldmine and all that it might signify. None of us seemed hungry save Mr Smith and the black boys. The sight of so many horrors had not evidently affected their appetites.

We were never tired of watching the new member of our company, and wondering at the extraordinary



spectacle he presented. Pictures of Robinson Crusoe would have had to take second place alongside him. The odd thing was he never for a moment seemed to think his personal attire fell short of that standard required by polite society. Had he appeared as he was in civilisation, he would certainly have been stopped and cautioned. In Sussex, England, where they send constables on windy nights to summon cyclists whose lamps have blown out, they would probably have sent him to stand his trial at Lewes on a charge of perpetuating moral damage on the community, or manslaughter, according to the peculiar mental kink of the mildewed J.P.'s on the Bench.

But Mr Smith himself did not seem to think that his long bare arms and legs, destitute of covering from the knee downwards, although beautifully darkened by the sun and the weather, were anything that could possibly attract attention. Sir Donald indeed had taken his friend aside, and as delicately as possible suggested that seeing it was unlikely he—Smith—had been able to do much shopping of late, his own over-stocked portmanteau was heartily at his disposal.

But Mr Smith in his childlike innocence failing to grasp the situation, merely promised to have a look at the things in question next day, and for that night at least we gazed with a species of awe upon an English gentleman who would have made the fortune of any showman, had the latter only exhibited him as a wild man of the woods.

It was a treat to see Smith eat. He never once hesitated to accept anything that was offered to

him, and he attacked every article on our bill of fare in a most gallant fashion. I could see that although he made brave show with knife and fork, he would much sooner have dispensed with these useful articles. Once he was betrayed into plucking a handful of grass and cleaning his plate with an eye to indulging in tinned lobster after a helping of bottled apricots, when suddenly recollecting himself, he blushed painfully beneath his tan, and made a hopeless statement to the effect that he liked a suggestion of the aromatic properties of spinifex grass in his food, much as an Italian or even an Englishman might like an onion rubbed in the bowl containing a salad. This was one of the few evidences Smith at first evinced of a past acquaintanceship with better things.

Of course, as is usual in such cases, Sir Donald and he had such a tremendous lot to say to each other that neither of them knew where to begin, with the result that one not aware of the true state of affairs, would have imagined they were merely the most casual acquaintances with a dearth of interests in common.

"Smith," said Sir Donald after the meal was over, "I brought a box of special Havanas along with me for this occasion. You haven't given up smoking, have you?"

Smith's voice trembled with emotion when he replied that, for many months past, only in his dreams had he been smoking—at other times he had been making himself ill, and ruining his lungs, by inhaling the fumes of certain noxious and poisonous plants and weeds. His face was a sight

for sore eyes as he cut and lit a long cigar handed him by Sir Donald. Previous to smoking, however, he had a pannikin of coffee, the first, he said, he had tasted for over a year. Tea, he said, he had not tasted for eighteen months, and he was fond of it.

"Smith," said Sir Donald, "apart from the fact that you are a little thin, I really never saw you look so much like appreciating the world you live in as now. And you appear to enjoy your food. Last time we dined together I remember you seemed to consider it a nuisance to have to eat at all. We had salmon, sweetbreads and kidneys, and other things, and I could see the very sight of them made you shudder. I'm glad to see this change in you. If you've roughed it of late, it's been worth it."

"If you're born with a silver spoon in your mouth, and never use anything else," said Smith, "the fact of its being silver gives you precious little satisfaction, and is, in fact, nothing to you. But if you've got to use a horn one occasionally—and they're by no means the worst sort of spoon to use, though cheap—or one of the shallow rough-edged sort made out of old biscuit tins that they sell in the shops out here, then you can appreciate the silver spoon when you meet with it."

"You were always a bit of a philosopher, Smith," laughed Sir Donald. "Without being too personal, I suppose it was because you had too much silver spoon once upon a time that you saw the necessity of a change in life if you were ever to enjoy things again?"

"Partly, but there wasn't too much silver spoon that time I was with you in South Africa. And it

was just before the end of the war that I left, if you remember."

"Yes, yes, I do, and I couldn't make out what had taken you off in such a hurry. And you didn't go back to England as nearly everyone else did, but came straight out here. It was incomprehensible."

"Not when you know the facts. I'd lost my money, and wanted to make more. Besides, I longed for experiences in another phase of life. How can you properly realise you're alive if you always run in one little groove? It's only by contrasts you can estimate or appreciate things. A man who knows how to, can live by comparison a thousand years—and have a good time, too—if he only has pluck enough to face change."

"Um, yes," murmured Sir Donald.

"Change is rest to the faculties that have run too long in one groove," observed Smith. "But, of course, there are some who can keep on running, and don't seem to mind it. I'm of the rolling-cone species, and it's my firm conviction one's life is prolonged that way."

"But we heard that some great cannibal queen had got hold of you, Smith, and wouldn't let you go. Was there any truth in it?"

Something seemed to have gone wrong with Smith's cigar. He choked over it—why he should have done so I do not know—then absently said:

"Yes; I heard the name of the previous year's winner from a surveyor chap who was defining the one hundred and thirty-seventh degree of eastern longitude—the boundary line between Queensland

and the Northern Territory, you know. Had you anything on that year?"

"Smith," said the General quietly, "is there any truth in what I just asked you?"

"That I saw the surveyor?" asked Smith.

"Come, come," persisted Sir Donald, "you're not going to shake me off like that! Did this cannibal queen collar you, and if she did, how did you manage to get out of her clutches again?"

By the firelight we could see Smith nursing his bare knees, round which his sleeveless arms were clasped. He was gazing fixedly at a burning log.

"Oh, you heard that, did you?" he said, evidently somewhat disconcerted. "Well, it's a queer thing how news travels. But I wasn't exactly a prisoner, you know."

"Only under arrest. Confined to your quarters in barracks, eh?" said Sir Donald.

"I see, I'll have to tell you, General, or you'll be imagining all sorts of things," said Smith. "It's queer how old army officers should be the most inquisitive class of men under the sun. But there's no man alive has a better right to question me about things than you, General. So I'd better begin and tell you the whole story, such as it is, and you can cut me short if you get bored."

And here I will set down Smith's story as well as I can remember the same, as he told it to us that night round the camp fire. I will dispense with inverted commas, for it will be understood that Smith himself is speaking. Seated on the ground with his knees drawn up to his chin, and his long arms clasped round them, he began.

### XXX

#### SMITH'S STORY AS TOLD BY HIMSELF

ONE of the most inconvenient things in life is to be born with what are called superior tastes and without the wherewithal to gratify them. I often wished in the earlier part of my career that mine had been more in accordance with my means and prospects, but, unfortunately, they were not. Knowing that pleasures and luxuries are largely comparative, I have had a very rough time of it trying to reduce my standards. Only by a painful exercise of will power, and taking myself severely in hand, have I been able to do so. Monetary misfortunes, and of late a solitary life that has been conducive to a cultivation of philosophy, have, I am happy to say, enabled me to alter my views of things, and to accept with equanimity the ups and downs of a chequered career. I have striven after the simple life, and one great truth has been impressed on me—that it quickens our natures, and at the same time prevents our ideals from running away with us. Human nature is such that, if any man suddenly found himself with all the things he had been sighing for, he would soon become the most discontented of mortals, simply because there was nothing more left to desire.

It was towards the end of the South African War that I heard I had lost all my money. There was nothing to be gained from the wreckage of my means, and I realised that to stay in the army, with all its old associations reminding me of altered fortunes, would only drive me melancholy mad. I determined to enter upon a new life—to begin again as it were, and forget the past—if possible.

I had been in Australia when I was younger, and a cousin of mine, who had been out in this wild Gulf of Carpentaria country for the good of his health, had told me so many fascinating stories about the great comparatively unexplored open plains and forests bordering on the coast, and the mountain ranges called the Never-Never, farther inland, that I determined to go there. I may say that I have always been rather fond of travelling, seizing every opportunity of going off the beaten track, and naturally I had picked up a knowledge of many things outside my profession. In the Rockies and in South Africa I had been fascinated by prospecting and gold-mining, and I knew I was just as practical as the average man who goes into the wilderness in search of gold.

To cut a long story short, I left the army, and came out to Australia in the same ship as one of the returning contingents. It saved me money, for now I only possessed what pay I had saved during the campaign, and knew that by the time I had rigged myself out with a saddle-horse, and pack-horses and provisions, I would have practically nothing left.

I disembarked at Thursday Island, changed into

a small coaster, and landed at Normanton. I managed to get three good horses there, and loaded up without attracting attention or being asked awkward questions. And here I may say that a fellow has got a tremendous pull over his neighbours when his name is Smith. For instance, if a man tells you something discreditable about a chap called Ponsonby you don't forget it, and afterwards the law of association somewhat discounts that reputable name in your estimation. But when you're only plain Bill Smith, and you come a cropper, it doesn't matter a rap, because no one associates you with the affair, the presumption being that more than likely it may be one of the other numerous Bill Smiths.

I travelled overland to Burketown ; but I didn't call at that little township, passing it at the Albert crossing, a few miles to the south. I avoided the track or trail as much as possible, generally riding parallel to it and just out of sight. You see, there is a queer lot of fellows in the Gulf country—fugitives from the law and men who think positively nothing of taking another man's horse—in fact, they hardly call it stealing. I believe that in the old days you took it for granted that not one man's name in five was his real one, and that he was merely there because the police were looking for him elsewhere. It was a sort of Tom Tiddier's land, and a species of happy hunting-ground for all sorts of adventurers, and a sanctuary for those who for very good reason desired to be left alone.

At Turn-off Lagoon I got "beyond the fences," as they call it out here, and had to proceed warily



as the blacks had the reputation of being very bad indeed. But I had brought certain little things with me that would stand me in stead if by any chance I got amongst the big tribes in the interior. I had always been fond of conjuring, and so brought a few tricks and simple disguises along, that would go into very little space. With these, and some little skill in ventriloquism, I flattered myself I could temporise, should I by any chance get into the clutches of the wild blacks. Of course I had heard of the Great Black Queen who was supposed to live somewhere in these Never-Never Mountains, and who ruled her subjects in a very high-handed and despotic way indeed. As a rule there are very few heads of tribes in Australia. There are communes, and the tribal laws are strict and comprehensive—mostly Levitical and sanitary. That this huge savage woman had possibly overruled existing laws or customs, and taken the lead, argued that she was one of quite exceptional individuality and strength. But, of course, I had taken all the extraordinary stories I had heard about her with a very big grain of salt.

At Turn-off Lagoon I had met a party returning from the tablelands, and they told me it was madness to go by myself into such a country as I proposed doing. I would be killed, they said, for a dead certainty. Several prospectors, who from time to time had been lured on into these Never-Never Mountains by the stories about pure lodes of gold existing in them, had neither returned nor been heard of again. These blacks more particularly affected one portion of the Never-Never Mountains

which were particularly inaccessible to any save a large well-armed party.

Still, I knew how superstitious these blacks were, and it occurred to me that if only it could be possible to impress them with the idea that I was something more than human, it might be conducive to my safety. It is not such a very difficult thing to humbug the simple native mind. The principal quality required to attain such a consummation is, to put it in the vernacular, *cheek*, and I hoped it was not wanting in my composition.

One night I was attacked by blacks, but as I had detected signs of them in the day-time, I was prepared and ready for them. It is always easy to fix a night-line round one's camp, and to have a white dummy mosquito net rigged in a conspicuous place, and underneath which you do *not* while, under cover of some bushes close at hand, you sleep safely under a dark one. And, by the way, all this is on much the same principle as conjuring generally.

When the blacks closed in upon me, and sent a shower of spears into the tenantless mosquito net, I was ready for them. I struck a match and lit an assortment of fireworks that banged, and whizzed all around me, and made night hideous. I slipped on a large paper mask that gave me the appearance of some horrible monster, and showed myself boldly. At the same time I blew furiously on a tin fog-horn that must have scared those savages within an inch of their lives. Picking up my rifle I fired a few shots into the bushes to help them make up their minds, but, I daresay, that was quite unnecessary. They dropped everything in their headlong flight, and

since then not a black has ever come within half-a-mile of me at night-time. I suppose my reputation travelled ahead of me, for until I got to these mountains, not a savage crossed my path. It may seem a childish way of getting rid of one's enemies, but when one comes to think of it, there could be few methods more effective.

When at last I came here, I had to face one who was not so easily humbugged. She was no less than the Great Black Queen or chieftainess whose sway is absolute over the warlike Yuculas who live in these ranges, but more particularly the broken country and great forests and plains that slope towards the south.

I will not forget in a hurry my first interview with the despotic Amazon. I was about to camp for the night on a little ridge which I had been following up all day in the hope of finding traces of gold-bearing quartz, when I became aware of a great mob of savages on a low terrace about a mile to the west. If I was to be the neighbour of such gentry for any length of time, the sooner I either conciliated, or had an understanding with them, the better. It was necessary to show them that I had no intention of being either bullied or turned back. I took a few things with me, and went forward to meet them.

It fairly took my breath away, and made me not a little apprehensive when I got a proper view of the Great Black Queen, and saw for myself that even rumour had by no means exaggerated her formidable appearance and proportions. She was over seven feet in height, and with an intelligent if not exactly a prepossessing face. Her arms were so long

that she somehow reminded one of a gigantic ape. A grey-haired warrior stood beside her, whom I afterwards learned was the chief of the tribe, her husband. It was not, however, difficult to see that she was the real ruler. At a sign or gesture from her, he was obedience personified.

Holding my rifle in my left hand, and a green bough in my right, I advanced to within fifty paces of the crowd of blacks. I have always found when dealing with savages that it is best to take the bull by the horns, and make the first move. Don't give them time to think—and that, by the way, is a safe rule to go by when conjuring. Of course, I never actually trust them whatever I may appear to do, and it is always wise to let them see that one is not afraid of them, and has no intention of running away. The moment one shows the slightest fear, the game is up. Savages are peculiarly susceptible to suggestion.

I noticed they had all laid down their spears, and that the great black woman also held a small bough in her hand, which nearly everywhere is a sign that the party holding it means to be conciliatory and wants to talk.

"What do you want?" I cried when within thirty paces of the queen, for such it may be as well to style her.

Of course I had not the very faintest hope that she would understand me; but one had to say something. To my intense astonishment she replied in English.

"Oh, solitary one," she said, "what do you here? Whom did you kill, or what did you steal that has

driven you from your own people and into our country ? ”

I realised at once that at one time or the other she had probably lived in the immediate neighbourhood of some telegraph or missionary station far to the north, and like all her kind she had made most excellent use of her opportunities to learn the white man's language. I have even found blacks, who never before saw a white man, know quite a number of English words which had been taught them by other blacks who had come in contact with whites.

“ O Queen,” I said, “ do not imagine because there are several white men living in the bush who have been wrong-doers, and dare not face their own people, that all are like that. What is it you want to say to me ? ”

“ Have you then come as others have come to look for the yellow stones ? ” she asked. “ Do you not know that those who come here never go back again ? And yet you come alone ! You must surely be either a very ignorant or a very foolish man.”

“ You may think what you like, O Queen, but I am not alone. There are many such as I close at hand, only you cannot see them. If you or any of your people raised as much as a little finger to do me harm, the spirits would instantly come to my aid.”

“ Bah ! what foolishness you talk ! ” exclaimed the big queen. “ I heard about you when you were many days' journey from here, and how you frightened the Minghins when they tried to steal upon you. But we are not the Minghins, and so not afraid.”

"Bring six of your people with you, O Queen, and come nearer and talk to me. My spirits may not care to go near so many, but if, as you say, you are not afraid, then you can come near to me."

This evidently touched the old lady on a tender spot, for beckoning her husband and five others, she came down from the terrace and towards me.

I was very far from feeling comfortable, but I knew the only way out of the difficulty was to appear unconcerned, and face the music. Bluff can accomplish much. It may appear childish to hear a man confess that he has had to resort to such tricks as ventriloquism and hanky-panky generally to get him out of a fix, but I was dealing with savages, and realised that otherwise it would have required an armed force to have helped me.

In a few minutes more they stood within ten or fifteen paces of me. Now, I could see that despite the big queen's bold front she had the inevitable streak of superstition in her nature. She had undoubtedly at one time been much with white people—her English proved that—but she was only a savage after all, despite her strong and uncommon individuality and her brave words. I had little doubt, therefore, that I would impress upon her what a wonderful and terrible fellow I was, and that it would be as well for her if she left me alone.

"I will show you what the unseen spirits will do for me," I said. "Tell one of those who are with you to step forward. I promise you nothing will befall him."

I was sorry for her attendants at this point. Each one looked the other way, and when one poor wretch

received a tap from the bough the big queen held in her hand, he must have thought his last hour had come. He looked very sick indeed. He doubtless thought he was to be delivered over bodily to the spirits I had spoken about.

But I smiled and beckoned to him, and gave him my hat to hold, which I had covered with my pocket-handkerchief.

But it is no use going into the details of the tricks I performed. Suffice it to say that when I had done with him, he was one of the most terrified black fellows I had seen for many a long day, for he firmly believed that somehow all the things I had put into the hat had vanished in order to attach themselves to various parts of his body. I really felt sorry for him, and allowed him to return to the group as soon as I could. The queen was silent, and looked at me strangely, while, as for her subjects I could plainly see they considered me in league with some "debil-debil."

Then I quickly did some sleight-of-hand tricks and without giving them time to think—which, as I have said, is half the battle in conjuring—I asked the queen if she would like to speak with the principal spirit that had done the things she had just witnessed.

By this time the huge queen was looking very uneasy indeed, but, doubtless, because she knew her reputation was at stake, she was obliged to put a bold face on the matter.

To my annoyance she went one better than I had intended, and demanded to *see* the spirit. If I could not produce a sample of what the ghost world was

like, she would see to it that I became one myself. Of course, I understood her threat, and was on my mettle.

There was a hollow gum-tree at my hand, for, of course, you have observed that at least one tree in five in this tropical region is a mere shell, and hollow as a drum, though apparently sound and hale. It is another of the anachronisms in this land of topsyturvydom.

Without paying any heed to her question, I stepped up to the tree and, tapping on it, put my head on one side as if to listen.

"Hullo!" I cried. "Inside there!"

Next moment a muffled voice requested to be allowed to come out.

That was enough for the blacks, who, with terror-stricken faces, began to draw back with an idea of bolting. But the big queen, although obviously alarmed and puzzled, stood her ground right bravely. She snatched the nullah-nullah, or club, from the hands of her husband, who was a very badly-scared monarch indeed, and promptly belaboured some of her retinue as had shown a disposition to desert her. Then I held a brief conversation with the spirit inside the tree.

But the queen was one of the most persistent women I ever met in my life. She still demanded to see the spirit who was speaking to me.

I told her that the spirit who lived in the tree was somewhat shy, and would only consent to give his audience a brief glimpse of himself if I would go behind the tree with him. Spirits, I explained, required moral support.



I need not say that what she did see was only one of my properties. It was a well-painted mask made of fine skin resembling the head of a dragon. This when deflated could go easily into one's waistcoat pocket. It was a very artistic and lifelike article.

The blacks by this time were reduced to a state of abject terror.

"Oh, white man with the yellow whiskers," said the queen, "you are a very wonderful person indeed, and it would be a pity to kill you. You are in league with the spirits, that is plain, and I have bethought myself that you may be useful to me. I have enemies who are very cruel and cunning—one Crocodile in particular, who has actually aimed at becoming chief of this people himself—and I am desirous of confounding them. There are many things I would like to talk to you about. You will come with me, and I promise that no harm will befall you so long as you will behave yourself. Come with us."

I had been in many tight corners and strange predicaments in my life, but surely here now was the very queerest adventure awaiting me that one could well imagine. Although no indignity was offered, I was practically a prisoner. Adventure had always been as the breath of my nostrils, but I realised that more strange experiences were in store for me than are permitted one man in a generation. That great black woman knew too much, and, moreover, being a cannibal, it was difficult to banish all thoughts of her stock-pot from one's mind.

## XXXI

### SMITH IS CAPTURED BY THE WILD BLACKS

**I**MAGINE me trotting alongside the great baboon woman, the Queen, and her obedient spouse. Some little distance behind came the blacks half afraid of me, and like all their kind not understanding why I was not put to death. Perhaps they thought that to kill me might not be quite so easy a matter as such operations usually are. They doubtless had encountered many questionable witch doctors in their time, but never had they been confronted with such indubitable proof of the existence of spirits as that which they had just witnessed. Some of them felt unhappy about it, for they had been inclined to hold the ghost world rather cheaply, and the ghosts might retaliate. Believing in ghosts had given rather a fillip of excitement to their lives, but otherwise they had not taken them very seriously. They had actually amused themselves by telling one another about the uncanny things they had seen in the forest when they had been alone—it was odd that ghosts never appeared to more than one person at a time—but since they had been children, they had taken such things for granted. Now all that was changed. There were spirits about, and consequently trouble brewing.

They were a furtive-eyed lot, but perhaps not

really so treacherous and dangerous as the semi-civilised savage. Anthropology had always been my favourite study, so now I had a treat in store for me—that was to say, if the queen did not take it into her head to cut short my career. I realised I was absolutely in her power, and that the best thing I could do was to talk and act as if I regarded her as my friend and not as an enemy. I would not have been afraid of a score or two of her subjects, or even of the old king, but she was another matter.

“White man,” she said as we walked towards a great honeycombed cliff, “I know it is the yellow stone that brings you out here. What on earth is it that makes all you white people love that stone so? It is neither particularly beautiful, nor yet is it good to eat. Why, therefore, should you invade the black man’s country for it?”

“Perhaps you did not understand how to cook it properly,” I said on the outlook for information. “Or, perhaps, the sort of yellow stone that you find in these mountains is the sort that is no good to anyone. If you cared to show it to me, I would very soon tell you.”

“Nay,” she said, “if I showed you where the yellow stuff lies then would all you white men flock thither like kites after a dead kangaroo, and dispute our hunting-ground with us. Is it at all likely we want to be driven farther back into the great barren deserts, where one either perishes with thirst or is surrounded by a great sea, in extent like unto the salt sea water that lies far to the north?”

I could quite understand it. The discovery of

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minerals in these mountains meant an end of the old state of things so far as they were concerned. But then, must not a low state of civilisation in which cannibalism, and even greater evils, are leading features, give way to those who are on a higher plane, and who would use the gifts of the Great Spirit for man's good? It seemed a hard thing that the savage should have to give up his birthright. But it was one of those inscrutable laws there was no gainsaying.

We marched to one of these long winding terraces that lead up from the valley into the tableland, and there half-way up was a series of great caves honeycombing the face of the cliff. As you will have observed, all this mountainous country is of much the same nature. It has been subjected to slow and to great and sudden changes, and is broken and serrated to a degree. The caves of which I speak, and which constituted the headquarters of the blacks, lie about thirty miles to the south of this.

I was given a little natural chamber opening on to one of the terraces, and told that I might consider it my own until such time as they determined what was to be done with me. Of course, it was impossible to pass up or down the terrace without being instantly seen.

Still believing in the policy of showing a bold front, I told the queen that I was quite content to stay with them as I had been running short of food. In all probability, they would have more of my company than they had bargained for.

"You are a strange man, and unlike most whites that I have seen," observed the big old queen. "I

have a mind to see more of you. Moreover, you know big magic, and that we must turn to account. Perhaps we will marry you to one of our people, and in time you may be one of our leaders."

I hastened to assure her that already I was very much married in a distant land—which, of course, you know is a polite fallacy—and that I absolutely refused to be further married. Nothing would anger the spirits more, I said, than that a white man should have more than one wife.

But the big black queen only smiled in an inscrutable fashion. Her face made me think of the enigma that is always hovering about the lips of Egypt's sphinx.

I had my food in a large cavern with the king and queen, and was waited upon by two or three blacks who were evidently trusted personal attendants.

One thing that attracted my attention in that cave was a large piece of quartz which was fairly yellow with gold. It almost took my breath away when I looked at it. It was placed alongside the open fire, and appeared to be used as a block on which to break unwieldy pieces of firewood. I tried to keep my eyes off that magnificent nugget in which there seemed to be a small fortune, but my gaze would return to it again and again. It indeed fascinated me.

"Ah," said the queen, following my gaze, "I had to remove that lump of yellow stone from the top of the quarry on which it lay. It might have attracted the notice of some of you white men. It was found a long day's journey from here, and you could never find the spot. But here are some bandicoots,

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O white man, which you can roast on the fire, and some large yams. Here in this gourd is water, eat and drink, and make your poor spirit glad."

I was hungry and fell to. It was an odd thing and a unique experience to be sitting in that place having supper with a cannibal king and queen. I was relieved to find that nothing resembling "long pig" was *en evidence* during the meal. In point of fact, cannibals only use human flesh on certain festive occasions. Indeed, with some savages the eating of human flesh partakes of the nature of a superstitious rite.

The attendants were soon sent away, and the queen then gave me an account of the malcontent Crocodile, who had tried to overturn the reigning dynasty so as to get himself elected king or chief. He certainly belonged to the royal family, and had a certain amount of influence with the blacks themselves, partly by reason of his birth, and partly because men feared him. He had succeeded in conciliating a certain faction, so that it would have been dangerous to try and wipe him out altogether. At the same time, that had not prevented him from being expelled from the tribe more than once. On these occasions he had the audacity to go right into the white man's country, and make himself agreeable to them. It was obvious, however, that the whites invariably found him out before long, as two or three times he had returned in a great hurry to claim sanctuary from his people. Doubtless, the police and black trackers were after him on these occasions.

Perhaps the worst feature of his iniquitous con-

duct, the big queen went on to explain, was his partiality for bad company. If there was a white desperado who was living the life of a hunted wild animal in the bush, Crocodile was sure to find him out, and become chummy with him. They would plot together, and give each other warning in the event of danger. The black queen had probably never heard of that saying much used by white people which expresses the truism that birds of a feather flock together, but she said something of a very similar nature to define the situation.

The gist of the queen's communication to me was: could I by means of my magic find a way of effectually ridding them of Crocodile, without stirring up the elements of party strife and discord which even now were causing trouble amongst her people?

She had hardly put the question to me before Crocodile himself entered the chamber. In a moment I recognised him as a particularly villainous semi-civilised savage I had seen hanging around Normanton, and causing no end of trouble in that growing township. He had always known enough after doing wrong to stick to the township, for there he knew he could not be summarily "dispersed" or dealt with by the Mounted Police. Squatters knew him to their cost, for on several occasions he had stolen their horses, and killed their cattle, and was always clever enough to avoid being caught in the act. I also had known him at a little place called Floraville, on the Leichardt River, where I had stopped him just as I believed he was going to ride off with my two horses, so our recogni-

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tion was mutual. On the occasion referred to, I had been obliged to give him a good hiding, although it had gone against my grain to chastise such as he. As usual I took the bull by the horns.

"Hello, Crocodile!" I said, "I heard that Poingdestre and Lamont, the Police Inspectors, were hard on your trail on the Gregory River, but I see you've managed to give them the slip. You have been clever."

"And you—s'posin' you br' gif 'em me slip one time, me gottem you now!" rejoined the savage, regarding me wickedly.

"Don't be an ass," I observed pleasantly. "I am at present enjoying the hospitality of this august lady your Queen, not to speak of your King, so you had better not shove in your oar where it is not wanted."

I don't know if he quite followed my words, but that he quite understood my meaning was very obvious.

"Bah!" he snorted, and his evil eyes glared with a baleful light. "Last time I met you, O yellow whiskers, the laugh was yours, because you did not fight fair and surprised me. But my turn is close at hand."

That Crocodile should accuse me of unfairness was too funny, and I laughed in his face.

"Considering that you were trying to steal my horses at the time, and that you threw a stone at my head, I do not think you had much to complain of," I retorted.

"Crocodile," said the big queen, "who said you might come in here? This white man is my prisoner,



or guest, as the case may be, not yours. My husband has power of life and death, not you. You will do well to be gone."

The malcontent was a very angry man now, and it was obvious there was some truth in his voice when he said :

"Your husband has no power of life and death save through you. He is not fit to reign, being feeble of heart and under the rule of a woman. The Yucula people have about had enough of you both, so take care lest they turn upon you, and tell you so. It is not to your interest to go against my wishes. I do not want much—only this ugly, red-haired fellow that I may wipe my feet on his rags."

I was extremely annoyed, but fortunately, when I reach a certain degree of anger, I let it all pass from me, and become perfectly cool. I smiled pleasantly on him as I retorted :

"Crocodile," I said, "if I were your king I would place your head on a tall pole to frighten away the evil spirits, and to be a warning to others. Nothing would please me better than that you should have an opportunity of attempting to wipe your dirty feet on my poor rags. I propose that to-morrow, when it is light, you have the chance you desire. Either you wipe your feet on me, or I sweep the ground with your magnificent mop of hair."

To cut a long story short, it was arranged that next day Crocodile and I should fight a duel. He was to be allowed so many throwing spears, and I was to have a club. If he threw his spears in vain, it would be my turn."

## XXXII

### SMITH'S DUEL

UPON the whole I could not complain of my treatment by the savages. They kept a sharp look-out upon me, and it would have been quite impossible to have escaped, had I tried. They had not taken my rifle. Doubtless, there was not one of them who had hardihood enough to touch it, as they must have regarded it with a species of awe and dread. As for the king and queen, it was not difficult to see that although naturally racial prejudice forbade their desiring that a white man should triumph over one who was considered a representative athlete of his people, still Crocodile was such a bugbear to them, not to say a menace to their safety, that they very likely hoped I might humiliate him, and break his neck when I was at it. In their opinion, such a contingency was unlikely, but I had shown myself on terms of intimacy with the spirit world, and might invoke unseen aid.

I slept fairly well that first night, despite the fact that I knew my captors were divided into two factions, one of which would have gladly compassed my death. For it was more than likely that Crocodile foresaw that if I once gained the goodwill of the king and queen, I would cast in my lot with them, and

by my advice and personal aid prove a powerful and dangerous enemy. I hinted as much to the queen, and she put on those she could trust to sleep at the threshold of my rocky chamber.

Next morning at dawn the whole great camp was in a state of excitement. Everyone knew that I was to be pitted against Crocodile, and they flocked by their hundreds down to the grassy hollow which was to be the scene of the fight. I partook of a light breakfast of baked land-turtle and some roasted yams—by no means bad fare—and with the king and queen went down to the place of trial.

It was for all the world like a natural arena. It might have been so formed by Nature for the very purpose it was to serve. Indeed, the queen told me, it was the spot where personal differences were arranged, and therefore a most popular place of amusement. In the bygone days it had witnessed many bloody combats and nightmarish scenes.

It was necessary the fight should take place before the sun got too high, so no time was lost in preliminaries.

I thought it as well to show the queen that she had my confidence, so handed her my rifle, of course unloaded. My other property I also placed in her custody. She and her husband and two or three heads of departments stood some distance behind me, while Crocodile, almost completely stripped, and with several of his friends, was some thirty yards in front of me. He held a womera, or throwing stick—a species of light lever into which the end of the spears fitted—in his right hand, while close

to him were at least a dozen spears stuck in the ground and ready to his hand. I held a club as nearly resembling a cricket bat as possible.

It seemed to me to indicate a lack of fair play on their part to expect me to ward off spears with such a means of defence; but I knew that they with their narrow light shields were accustomed to defend themselves against such missiles, and perhaps they imagined that I could do the same. More than likely they thought I would present an entertaining sight hopping about with half-a-dozen spears in me.

To do the big queen justice, she expostulated with me on my proposed mode of warfare, but I thanked her, and said that she need have no fear. At the same time, I was not exactly sure about it.

When Crocodile toed the mark I realised I had my work cut out. He was splendidly built, and seemed as agile as a kitten. I had dispensed with my shirt, for it was the only one I possessed, and already the sleeves had almost disappeared. Crocodile had nothing on, and, of course, this would give him a great advantage if it came to grips. I don't know what the betting was—if these niggers bet at all—but I fancy the favourite was the local champion.

I will not soon forget that great amphitheatre of black faces and gleaming eyes. The sight of them was enough to unnerve a less seasoned warrior than myself. Any one of them would have been a draw for Barnum or any other showman. They exchanged courtesies by exploring each other's great mops of hair and finding little stores of "pitcherie," an herb which they chew, and treating themselves

to the same. They were evidently impatient for the show to begin.

Crocodile began it by suddenly launching a couple of spears at me before the signal had been given. I had anticipated this, and had been looking carelessly around so as to induce him to waste one or two shots. I pretended to be taken by surprise, and skipped clumsily out of the way. A roar of laughter went up from the vast concourse at my apparent discomfiture. This encouraged Crocodile to launch two more spears, and again I dodged them clumsily.

The blacks must have thought I had all the luck of a clumsy fool, and they began to twit Crocodile with his misses.

My adversary looked annoyed, and went more warily to work. He threw another spear which ought to have caught me in the lower part of the body, but I sprang into the air, and allowed the spear to pass between my outstretched legs.

Derisive laughter and jeers went up from the interested spectators, and all sorts of advice was shouted to the now angry Crocodile. But he had seven spears left, and that would be more than enough to finish me with.

"Why can't you throw straight?" I yelled to him. "Go and have some more breakfast, and perhaps you'll be able to send your spears a little higher."

This time he sent one high enough in all earnest. He threw it by aid of his throwing stick. He had been so bent on transfixing me that he lost sight of the fact that by this time we had moved considerably to one side of the arena, thus endangering

the spectators. Moreover, he did not intend that I should make fun of him this time by allowing the spear to pass between my legs.

I kissed my hand to the missile as it whizzed past my head, which I had simply jerked to one side. Next moment there was a terrible howl of anguish from an unfortunate spectator who hitherto had been a noisy applauder. The spear had caught him on the shoulder, and transfixed him. A roar of mingled consternation, amusement, and indignation arose from the spectators.

"You clumsy fool!" I cried to Crocodile. "You should not be trusted with spears. Go back and practise throwing trial-sticks with the piccanninies."

A decided revulsion of feeling set in with the crowd, and I honestly believe the unfortunate Crocodile would have been instantly lynched if I had not interfered.

"Leave him to me," I cried. "I claim him as my adversary. I will teach the careless fellow a lesson."

But even now with his remaining spears he ought to have found me an easy victim. Fortunately, my jeers and those of the crowd had the effect I had been working for, and he lost control over himself. He began to launch his missiles at me recklessly. I caught the club as if it were a cricket bat, and began to stop his spears. I had always been a keen batsman, but I never put my soul into my work as I did now. I was thoroughly on my mettle. Calling upon him to put some life into his work, I caught spear after spear on my club, and, of course, they smashed against the hard ironwood. He gradually worked

closer to me, and when he came to throw his last spear, he was not more than ten paces away. This time I missed it to the further consternation and detriment of some hapless spectator.

I verily believe that by this time the disgusted lookers-on would have rid me of my enemy if I had shown the slightest acquiescence. But that would have been letting him down too easily. I considered he had yet to be punished for his uncalled-for enmity and double-dealing. I turned to the onlookers.

“Can't you send me a man to fight?” I cried. “What have I done to you that you should insult me by asking me to fight a thing like that?”

But Crocodile was the best man amongst them, and they knew it. Was it likely that they were going to see their prestige suffer by letting me fight a duffer?

“You have not done with him yet!” they cried. “You must fight to a finish.”

By this time I have no doubt half of them hardly knew what they did want. They were divided between a feeling of outraged pride and a very natural desire that Crocodile should suffer for having lowered the prestige of his tribe. Crocodile must be given a chance of rehabilitating himself in the eyes of his fellows, and at the same time vindicating the good name of his people. If he did not succeed in doing so, then it was to be hoped the white man would convert him into mincemeat when he was about it.

I still held the club in my hand, although I had no idea just then of using it on my adversary. But Crocodile quite forgetting how unequal the fight

had been only a few minutes before, now twitted me with my preparedness as compared with his.

"Look," he cried to the spectators, "the white man has a club, yet shall I sweep the ground with him."

"You rascal!" I cried. "I will fight you without the club, and wipe my feet on your door-mat of a head into the bargain. In the meantime, take that!"

I threw the club lightly at him. He failed to duck in time, and a sharp rap was the result. Of course, as you know, what would fracture the skull of a white man, would not make the slightest impression on that of a black one. The club glanced off him, and fell to earth.

He sprang after it, but I had anticipated his move, and just when he was going to pick it up, I was close alongside, and gave him a push that made him overreach himself. He went sprawling on his face.

I picked up the club and threw it to the queen.

"Please take charge of it," I said. "Crocodile and I are now on equal terms."

Now, years before when wandering in Japan I had been very much struck with their thorough study of the art of ju-jitsu, and had gone in for a regular course of it. The secret of being able to make use of it successfully is to keep your wits about you, and when making a move, to do so quickly.

I hardly noticed the spectators now, all my attention was concentrated on the angry savage facing me. He looked wicked and dangerous to a degree, and undoubtedly he was both. He reminded me of a wild beast watching its opportunity to spring. I edged closer to him. Quicker than it takes



to tell it, he stooped again—this time to pick up a stone. He never touched that stone, for I was right on top of him, and sent him head over heels. It would have been comparatively easy to have finished the fight there and then, but I had no intention of letting him off so cheaply. An ordinary lesson was not good enough for Crocodile.

“Get up,” I cried to him, “and if you try to pick up a stone again, I’ll break your neck!”

This time he made a rush that reminded me of a wounded tiger. Again I sent him sprawling—this time on his back.

He was up in a moment, and, regardless of what he might receive in the way of fistic punishment, rushed at me with outstretched arms.

I stepped aside, caught him by the left wrist, gave it a sharp twist, and next moment he gave a howl like that of a wild animal, and was once more upon his back.

“Get up,” I cried. “It really makes me ashamed to fight a fellow like you. You are altogether too stupid. I will let you go away now if you want to. If you desire to fight more, I may really hurt you.”

If looks could kill I would have been a dead man. The spectators had become wonderfully quiet; they had never seen anything like it in their lives.

Then something happened that very nearly turned the scales completely in Crocodile’s favour. I think it must have been someone who either was incensed against me as a white man, or who desired to ingratiate himself with Crocodile, for a boomerang was thrown into the arena so that it fell at the feet of the savage. Next moment he had picked it up,

and run back a few paces so as to get a good shot at me.

*Whirr-r !* and the deadly boomerang with an edge like a knife whirled through the air. It was the most dangerous moment of the whole fight. It was more by good luck than by skill on my part that it did not strike and kill me on the spot. As it was, I ducked, and the heavy ironwood blade, hardened by fire, and with a momentum that no other weapon in the world fashioned by the hand of man possesses, knocked off my helmet and inflicted a scalp wound that I shall carry with me to the grave. I was a very lucky man indeed to get off so lightly.

I was now beginning to feel annoyed. The queen, moreover, evidently felt that I was not being treated in a fair manner. Even the peculiar ideas regarding fair play cherished by these blacks were being strained. I heard the queen give an order to some of her subjects to secure the officious spectator who had thrown the boomerang into the arena. I felt that it was time to bring the proceedings to a close.

Crocodile saw that I meant business, and made another rush at me. This time he converted his head into a species of battering-ram when he got close up. It would have been easy to have got his head into chancery, but such a method to one who has learned ju-jitsu is old-fashioned and clumsy to a degree. Besides, what impression can a white man make on a nigger's head ! What suffers in such cases is invariably the knuckles of the white man !

I managed to avoid Crocodile, and succeeded in catching his left wrist. Then I put one hand on the

small of his back, and gripped his other wrist. He struggled and kicked like a mad bull, but not for long. One application of the rack and in a moment he was yelling in agony, and as passive as a tame rabbit. I had him fairly at my mercy. I could now have killed him artistically by breaking every bone in his body, but that would have been neither human nor dignified, seeing I was a white man and he a savage. Still, he had lived with the whites, and could not plead ignorance as to methods of fair play, so some punishment was necessitated. I proceeded to punish him, but in no vindictive spirit. What wanted levelling more than anything was his overbearing conceit and insolence.

I marched him round that arena as if he were a wheelbarrow with his wrists securely held by me behind his back. His face was turned towards the ground, and he had to walk or trot at my pleasure. A more undignified attitude for a warrior to occupy could not well be imagined.

At first I thought the insult to one of their own people would have been too much for the blacks, but as I have said, they were divided into two factions, and the one kept the other in check. There was a hoarse murmur eloquent of mingled sentiment from the great concourse. It is not unlikely that they hardly knew themselves what their feelings were in the matter. They were terribly excited, and shouted, jeered, laughed and gave voice to threats, all in one breath. I motioned the queen, and told her I desired to make the people a speech if she would permit me, and be good enough to interpret.

I will not bore you with that speech now. I wil

merely say that I told the blacks that I would be more merciful to Crocodile than he would have been to me. As a token of goodwill to them, and to show them that I had no desire to injure them in any way whatever, I would allow Crocodile to go, although it would have been the easiest thing in the world for me to have killed him. I told them that I intended staying in that neighbourhood for some little time, and I hoped they would not interfere with me. I would be their friend, and, moreover, I would come and see them now and again. There was no reason why I should run away.

Addressing Crocodile, I told him if he valued his life to leave that part of the country at once. If I came across him again I would certainly kill him.

A great shout went up from the blacks when I spoke like this, and the queen told me that I had won my freedom, and that as long as I stopped in that part of the country, I would not be molested. And, mark you, she kept her word, for those blacks who have fought you to-day belong to the rival faction of which Crocodile has been the leading spirit. The queen with the loyal blacks is some twenty miles to the south of this at the present moment, and, probably, having heard of your predicament is hastening to give aid. Having a horse, which is at present picketed in a neighbouring gully, I rode on to see if I could be of any assistance to you. If the queen's party on their way here should fall in with the routed disloyal ones, there will be a final touch put to your work.

Then I handed Crocodile over to the young men, and he was drummed out of camp. The faction he

had affected were too much taken aback, and disgusted, to offer any dissent.

I returned with the king and queen to the camp, and though I confess to a dislike of courtly functions, I must say the big corroboree those blacks held in my honour was extremely entertaining and interesting. The only unpleasant incident in the festivities was the public punishment of the black who had thrown the boomerang to Crocodile while in the arena. I ventured to plead for him, but the queen would not listen to me.

After that, my liberty was practically assured, and I went backwards and forwards amongst these blacks for months unmolested. Of course, I had to keep my eyes pretty well open on account of those belonging to the rival faction, for had any of them managed to surprise me, I would certainly have been murdered.

And all this time I was endeavouring to find the quartz-reef from which that magnificent specimen of gold had come, and which I had seen in the blacks' camp. I avoided asking the savages about it, as I knew that doing so might only get them into trouble. With patience I was bound to find the reef before long.

And then, unexpectedly, came the greatest menace to my safety—no less than the appearance in this valley of the notorious outlaw Hawker. And a pretty game we had dodging and trying to get ahead of each other.

## XXXIII

### SMITH INTERVIEWS THE OUTLAW

I COULD write a book about those savages, so interesting did I find them. Mine was not simply an idle curiosity, their modes of life, their language, and their folk-lore interested me. I learned their dialect, and by means of it, and my knowledge of Eastern tongues, I traced their origin to the Aryan race. When they came to understand me better, and found that I really desired to treat them fairly and live on good terms with them, they showed me every consideration. I went all over the neighbourhood alone, and frequently was away for a fortnight at a time. I became an adept at tracking, and in finding such food as the bush afforded. Where once upon a time I would have perished of hunger, I could now get more than enough for all my needs. Moreover, the things in natural history that these savages showed me opened my eyes. They are, I believe, the keenest observers in the world, and no book of natural history is so interesting, and at the same time so entertaining, as an hour's stroll with an intelligent savage in the forest. The wonders of Nature with him assume a more astonishing aspect, only you begin to understand the why and wherefore of the great scheme much better. Moreover. the marvellous intelligence dis-

played everywhere forces one to think, and invests the whole with a new meaning, a significance and a dignity.

But I was speaking about the desperado Hawker when I diverged. He was a protégé of Crocodile's, whom he had known in civilisation, and this to a certain extent assured his safety in that neighbourhood. Besides, the savages knew he was at war with their natural enemy, the intrusive white man, and that he did not come there to look for the gleaming yellow stuff which they themselves despised. It was the old king and queen themselves who told me that this undesirable neighbour was somewhere about, and gave me a friendly warning to be on my guard.

Of course, it was not long before I came across Mr Hawker's tracks. But although these became fairly familiar to me, and mine must have become very well known to him, it was several months before we met. I soon arrived at the identity of this notorious outlaw by the news that leaked out about him from such blacks as had seen him. Besides, before I had left civilisation the whole country was ringing with his crimes, and his desperate doings. At the same time, there had always been something theatrical and stagey about the man's goings on, and I do not believe he was any worse, if indeed as bad, as his friend Sam Holt, who only to-day met with a well-deserved fate.

By this time I was prospecting in this very valley, and on the track of the gold-mine which we have just taken up, and which we will register as soon as we get back to civilisation. I knew from the little

"blows" or outcrops that the reef was somewhere about the place where eventually I located it, and I also knew from the specimens I had picked up that it was an extremely rich reef. Moreover, from certain hints I had received, I had good reason to believe that it was the very same reef from which the magnificent specimen came which I had seen in the blacks' stronghold.

It was not the presence of the savages that disturbed me now, for by reason of my ventriloquism and conjuring tricks, I had gained quite a reputation as a sort of wizard or medicine man amongst them, and even had any of them cherished any special grudge against me, it is extremely doubtful that they—with, of course, the exception of Crocodile—would have lifted a hand to do me injury.

My life was now perpetually menaced by this fellow Hawker. As I have said, I knew by the description some friendly blacks had given me of him that he was a murderer three or four times over, and that one more murder was not likely to trouble him if, for any reason either real or fanciful, he came to believe that I was inimical to his safety. When at last I found the reef, and began to work on it to define its limits, I realised that my life was in perpetual jeopardy. I found his tracks in the immediate neighbourhood, and I dared not work on the reef more than quarter of an hour at a stretch without a spell off to see that he was not lurking in the immediate neighbourhood. I had no desire to be shot down by an unseen assassin in a trench. I caught sight of him hanging around like some



creature of prey on two or three occasions, but he was like a rat or a weasel, and he would cleverly disappear just when I thought I had him. My friends amongst the blacks were away on a hunting expedition at the time, or I would have secured their help to rid me of such a terrible nuisance—to put it mildly. What with being perpetually on the *qui vive* day and night, the fellow began to tell upon my nerves.

I determined to put a stop to it, and I wonder now why on earth I did not come to such a decision sooner. I knew by this time that he was as well aware of the richness and value of the reef I had unearthed as I was myself—indeed, he was probably much better aware. That, I realised, would be an extra incentive to him to murder me. Of course, the reef would be of no use to him personally, but he could put old mates on to it, and when they sold it to a syndicate or a capitalist, it would not be difficult for him to be handed a share of the proceeds. This, I say, is probably what he thought, but most of you know that he would have been very foolish indeed to have relied on any such arrangement. Blackguards are always blackguards even to one another, and there never was a falser, rottener or more misleading so-called sentiment than the one: “Honour amongst thieves.” As if there ever could be *honour* amongst thieves!

One day when I crept down from my shelf on the terrace, where I used to camp at night in case of attack, I brought what spare clothes I had with me. I jumped into the trench, and in a few minutes with the help of my long-handled shovel had rigged up a

fairly respectable dummy. I capped it with my helmet.

Then I crawled out of the trench again by the far end, and worked my way through a clump of golden wattle. I felt pretty certain that Hawker had been watching me, and that before long, when he found I was engaged on a more protracted spell of work in the trench than usual, his curiosity would be roused, and he would be emboldened to crawl up and try to pot me. I described a half-circle in the bush, and got behind a rock at a spot from which I thought it was likely he would conduct operations.

I cowered in the shadow, and the dazzling furnace of the tropical light waxed in intensity as the sun mounted higher and higher. As the clearly-cut shadows narrowed, my position became more and more intolerable, for only those who have had to lie inactive and suffer the fierce rigour of a tropical sun, can realise what that meant. The air quivered with refracted heat waves, and both light and shade were as things that might be felt, clearly cut, palpable. It was an ordeal of endurance and patience, for if I moved now my enemy would be sure to see me, and my chances of surprising him gone for ever. I began to regret that I had not availed myself of the services of some of the friendly blacks; but that would have augured that I was not up to coping with the situation myself, and would have lowered my prestige. I looked about warily to catch a glimpse of the enemy, if indeed enemy there was.

But I felt that Hawker was somewhere close at

hand, and that, if I only had patience, my sufferings would be rewarded.

But what if Hawker had observed my movements, and it was a case of the hunter being hunted? I knew very well that a fellow like the desperado who had been for years carrying his life in his hand would have acquired the cunning that one finds to such perfection among the brutes, and that his perceptive faculties being strongly developed, it was problematical if he would be taken in by such a simple trap as the one I had laid for him.

Then I became aware that the grasshoppers and locusts in my immediate neighbourhood, which had become silent when I at first took up my position, began once more to raise their erratic din.

What a fool I had been not to think of it—had Hawker been anywhere near when I first came there, the silence of the insect world that heralded my approach, and accompanied my presence, must have been obvious to him! He must by this time have learned to read and interpret the various signs of Nature as easily—and probably much more easily—than if he had been reading an open book! The lesson was still being impressed upon me that the longer I lived in touch with Nature the more I had to learn. It is the man who knows most about the wonders of Nature who realises that he is only on the doorstep of the wonder-house of Creation.

I felt uncomfortable for a few minutes after that, and hardly dared move in case the desperado had spotted me, and was deliberating whether he would fire or not. But a frilled lizard that mounted a stunted bush a few paces away, and began to brush

his face with its forepaws, reassured me. It would certainly not have been there if anyone had been close at hand.

Within a minute or two, I saw the beautifully marked and fantastic-looking reptile pause, cock its head to one side, and listen.

Someone was coming. It wheeled round till it faced some bushes, then flattened itself against a convenient limb. Or had it somehow or other vanished? I could not see it now against the mottled bark. If it was there at all, it had become part of the tree! Marvellous provision of Nature to make the skin of a reptile the exact image of the bark—to a half-turned knot and a tiny splash of orange imitating a fungus against an olive background! Caprice indeed!

That lizard probably saved my life, for if I had lain as I was, I could not possibly have seen the desperado approach. Moreover, he took good care to follow a vein of sand so that I could not have heard his footsteps.

I crawled round the rock, and with my face to the ground, watched Hawker. A picturesque old villain truly—a veritable man-slayer—surely one of those criminally mad, the sort of man who should have been taken in hand before he was old enough to prey upon society, and been placed where he had no chance of doing any harm. I watched him as a hunter might have watched the approach of some royal specimen of the animal world in the jungle. His face and movements were a study. The man seemed to have reverted to the beast of prey. He moved as stealthily as a tiger. His face was instinct

with anticipation and murderous design. His grey eyes seemed to be everywhere at once. He seemed to be all nerves, and if a cricket shrilled in some fresh spot, his gaze was there on that very instant. So conscious was I of his highly impressionable condition of mind and body that, somehow, I was almost afraid to think, lest some subtle brain-wave might reveal my presence.

He would advance a few steps, then stop to look around. His movements reminded me of a cat's. Would he discover my presence, and if he did, could I be quick enough with my rifle to prevent him shooting me? He held his rifle at the ready, and I knew he would be quickness itself. The moments seemed spun into years. He came abreast of me. He passed me, and I drew a long breath. I could see that he moved from one place to another, so that he could be enabled to keep my dummy in the trench in sight. Once he raised his rifle as if to fire, and then he lowered it again, and paused as if to steady himself. It was obvious he meant to make sure work of me.

I rose from behind the rock, and stole after him on tiptoe. I had kicked off my boots, so as to move noiselessly. I held my rifle in position, so that should he turn round, I had him that same moment. Without loss of time I lessened the distance between us.

And then he stopped, and straightened himself. My helmet was almost entirely exposed to view in the trench. He was going to shoot.

*Bang, bang!* and I saw my helmet spin round on top of the shovel. The desperado rushed in, and fired again. And then he stopped dead, and I could

see that bewilderment and something like panic seized him. The lay figure still stood there, evidently uninjured. He took a couple of steps forward, and fired again, and then he lowered his rifle.

The sound of the shooting had deadened my footsteps—even could they have been heard—so that I had come close up to him. I had actually snatched the rifle from his grasp before he was aware of my presence. When he wheeled round I was calmly regarding him, and my rifle was pointed at his breast. It was such an unexpected *dénouement* that, for the moment, I believe he thought I was the spirit of the man he was in the act of murdering. I did not speak, but kept my eyes fixed on him. He was grey to the lips, and trembled like one with the ague. At last I spoke.

“Hawker,” I said, “the gallows will surely get you after all. What have I done that you should want to murder me? Is this country not big enough for us both?”

The startled wretch was so taken aback by the way the tables had been turned upon him that he seemed incapable of either thought or speech.

Of course, even had I wanted to aid the law, I could hardly have taken such a desperate fellow back to civilisation unaided. I don't think any man could have done it. I could see, desperate character that he was, that my action and words had impressed him, and I thought it would be possible to make a compact with him, though, of course, I knew how little I would be able to trust to his sense of honour. It would certainly be useless appealing to that problematical sense of chivalry.

“Hawker,” I continued, “as the oldest white resident in this neighbourhood, I owed you a call. So you can take it from me that I’ve called, and that our exchange of courtesies need go no further. Most men would have killed you where you stand, and I could even have you reserved for a far greater punishment—the gallows. But I propose to let you go free, and, between man and man, I will expect you to walk straight. If you don’t, or if you meditate further tricks, believe me, I’ll know.”

I never saw a man so utterly taken aback, and nonplussed, as when I handed him back his gun. I did not even take out the remaining cartridges in the magazine of his rifle. He tried to speak, but he could not. I suppose my action was something so contradictory to the line his intelligence would have dictated, that it practically left him incapable of entertaining even treachery for a moment.

“Both of us,” I continued, “practically hold our lives in our hands in this country, so the least thing we can do is to leave the other to go his own way. I’m afraid we haven’t much in common, so we’d better keep apart. Indeed, I’d strongly advise you to clear out of the neighbourhood. I’m not using threats—I’m leaving all that to your intelligence. Good-bye.”

I motioned to the mouth of the valley, and waited for him to go.

He moved his lips as if to speak, but did not utter a word. For the first time he looked me in the eyes, and I will never forget as long as I live his look of solemn wonder. It was as if for a brief space some part of the man’s brain or heart that had long lain

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dormant, had been quickened, and he saw things as they really were. He handed me back the rifle.

"Keep it," he said at length. "I'd like to feel that you knowed I meant to be on the square with you. Besides, I don't know that I can always answer for myself."

"I'll trust you," I said. "And you may want your gun if the blacks turn on you. Good-bye."

He turned and walked away, and it is only justice to him to say he kept his word. I understand he came to the reef, and had some talk with the mutineers when I was away, but I have good reason to believe that he thought I had left it for good. He was practically in the position of a hunted wild animal. The gallows was always before his eyes, so that some allowance must be made for any of his after movements when he may have seemed to forget. But he has gone to stand his trial before a higher court.



## XXXIV

### THE RETURN

**W**HEN Mr Smith finished the story of his experiences, there was a pause for a minute or two. It was broken by Sir Donald.

"Madge," he said, with unwonted seriousness, "I think we owe Captain Smith more than, perhaps, he imagines. Hawker did not treat you so very badly considering he knew your discovery of his hiding-place might mean his capture and, of course, all that that entailed."

"He did not treat me badly," said the girl. "And all the time I was his prisoner I felt there was something that was influencing him, and making him merciful to me. He told me he had shot people for less than what I had done."

"I quite believe it," said Sir Donald. "You see, when the gallows is hanging over a man, there isn't much he will stick at to escape. At least I shouldn't think so."

"It is quite evident that whatever Hawker was he was not ungrateful," I said. "Upon the whole, Madge, I should say he treated you well. There can be little doubt that the mercy extended to him by Captain Smith that time he was caught in the act of doing a little stalking, bore excellent fruit."

"And even when he left me on the terrace he

must have known that you were bound to find and rescue me," said Madge. "He only wanted time to get clear away. He probably didn't realise what a terribly difficult and dangerous feat my rescue would be."

"I can understand now why Bird and Holt and the others murdered him," said Sir Donald. "They probably asked him what he had done with you, Madge, and when he wouldn't tell—you remember, Payne, he refused to say where Madge was on the previous night—and very likely declined to have anything further to do with them, they killed him in a fit of rage."

"It was Bird who did it," I said.

"Whatever Hawker's crimes may have been, we owe him something," said Sir Donald. "We will give his body decent burial to-morrow. The blacks are certain to return and remove all their dead. Those of us who may come back here again will not find a trace of the fight unless it may be the breast-work that sheltered us."

But now the Southern Cross had described a half-circle in the jewelled heavens, so setting a watch, and bidding one another good-night, those of us who were not on duty unrolled our blankets and turned in.

Next morning we were all early astir, for was it not the first day of the return journey to civilisation and all that that meant!

Those of us who were not in the secret, were astonished to find a remarkable change in the general appearance of Captain Smith. In place of the disreputable and scanty rags he had worn on

the previous day, he was now clad in an excellent suit of khaki. It did not matter if the suit in question was a size or two too large for him. Sir Donald had insisted on Smith donning one of his own, and it was only when the plea of decency had been advanced that the careless one capitulated.

Before leaving the valley we all formally staked out claims on Smith's line of reef. It is now one of the richest gold-mines in the Northern Territory of South Australia, and everyone of our party has a banking account, such as he or she never dreamed of having. We also recovered Madge's horse, Barney, which had been stampeded by the blacks. The girl's joy on its recovery was a very real thing indeed.

We had passed through the gorge, and were once more on the open plain, when something occurred that startled us considerably. It was the rapid approach of a great body of blacks. They were extended in skirmishing order, and evidently on the war-path.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sir Donald when we caught sight of them. "Here they are again, and they've got us in the open this time! We must form a laager with the waggons. Get out the Colt's gun Payne, like a good fellow. Smith, come with me."

In a moment all was bustle and excitement. Smith only seemed unmoved.

"It's all right," he said. "It's only my friend the Queen and the loyalists. They'll be jolly glad we've given the rebels such a drubbing."

And to our no little surprise, and no slight concern, Smith cantered towards the advancing host, waving his hat to them.

It was quite evident that at first they did not recognise him in his new attire, and for a moment things looked dangerous for our ambassador. But when he raised his voice and called to them, a great hoarse roar went up from the warriors, and abandoning their fighting formation, they rushed towards him with every demonstration of joy and friendliness. They did not trouble about us at all.

It was quite a discomfiting experience, after the events of the previous day, to be surrounded by a great host of dusky, spear-armed and jabbering savages. They looked so very like the reckless fanatics our Colt's gun had mowed down. But Smith was laughing and talking to them, apparently quite at his ease, and it was evident he was telling them what terrible fellows we were, and how we had been fighting their battles for them. I never in all my life met a man who could so humbug the simple native as Smith. He somehow always contrived to make them believe he was their particular Wallace or Bruce or Tell as the case might be, and apart from that, he was one of the most sympathetic and jolliest fellows breathing. I have no doubt that had Smith laid himself out for it, he could now be ruling over a united black Australia.

But there is no necessity to tell of the great Durbar we held in the forest, and how we were all formally introduced to the famous black queen and her lesser half, the king. Another time, perhaps, I may tell of that intensely interesting event, and the speeches and the compliments that were exchanged.

These blacks actually insisted on escorting us to

within a short distance of civilisation, and we parted with many expressed hopes on their part that we would return at no distant date.

Our leisurely march back to the Albert River was a very interesting and pleasant one indeed.

When Jack passed his exams. with flying colours, Maitland, the one-time agnostic, entered the Church, and is now a power for good in Christendom. For when face to face with Nature in the wilderness he had been impressed with one great truth—that law and order cannot be the outcome of caprice, but must be the attribute of the Supremest Intelligence.

As for Sir Donald and myself, we have quite lost sight of the fact that we at one time suffered from gout and other ailments. Our expedition into the Never-Never had made new men of us.

As for Madge—can anyone guess ?

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