

Steele Rudd

On Our Selection

On Our Selection by Steele Rudd

PIONEERS OF AUSTRALIA! TO YOU "WHO GAVE OUR COUNTRY BIRTH;" TO THE MEMORY OF YOU WHOSE NAMES, WHOSE GIANT ENTERPRISE, WHOSE DEEDS OF FORTITUDE AND DARING WERE NEVER ENGRAVED ON TABLET OR TOMBSTONE; TO YOU WHO STROVE THROUGH THE SILENCES OF THE BUSH-LANDS AND MADE THEM OURS; TO YOU WHO DELVED AND TOILED IN LONELINESS THROUGH THE YEARS THAT HAVE FADED AWAY; TO YOU WHO HAVE NO PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF OUR COUNTRY SO FAR AS IT IS YET WRITTEN; TO YOU WHO HAVE DONE MOST FOR THIS LAND; TO YOU FOR WHOM FEW, IN THE MARCH OF SETTLEMENT, IN THE TURMOIL OF BUSY CITY LIFE, NOW APPEAR TO CARE; AND TO YOU PARTICULARLY, GOOD OLD DAD, THIS BOOK IS MOST AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.

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On Our Selection.

CHAPTER I.

Starting the Selection.

It's twenty years ago now since we settled on the Creek. Twenty years! I remember well the day we came from Stanthorpe, on Jerome's dray—eight of us, and all the things—beds, tubs, a bucket, the two cedar chairs with the pine bottoms and backs that Dad put in them, some pint-pots and old Crib. It was a scorching hot day, too—talk about thirst! At every creek we came to we drank till it stopped running.

Dad did n't travel up with us: he had gone some months before, to put up the house and dig the waterhole. It was a slabbed house, with shingled roof, and space enough for two rooms; but the partition was n't up. The floor was earth; but Dad had a mixture of sand and fresh cow-dung with which he used to keep it level. About once every month he would put it on; and everyone had to keep outside that day till it was dry. There were no locks on the doors: pegs were put in to keep them fast at night; and the slabs were not very close together, for we could easily see through them anybody coming on horseback. Joe and I used to play at counting the stars through the cracks in the roof.

The day after we arrived Dad took Mother and us out to see the paddock and the flat on the other side of the gully that he was going to clear for cultivation. There was no fence round the paddock, but he pointed out on a tree the surveyor's marks, showing the boundary of our ground. It must have been fine

land, the way Dad talked about it! There was very valuable timber on it, too, so he said; and he showed us a place, among some rocks on a ridge, where he was sure gold would be found, but we were n't to say anything about it. Joe and I went back that evening and turned over every stone on the ridge, but we did n't find any gold.

No mistake, it was a real wilderness—nothing but trees, "goannas," dead timber, and bears; and the nearest house—Dwyer's—was three miles away. I often wonder how the women stood it the first few years; and I can remember how Mother, when she was alone, used to sit on a log, where the lane is now, and cry for hours. Lonely! It WAS lonely.

Dad soon talked about clearing a couple of acres and putting in corn—all of us did, in fact—till the work commenced. It was a delightful topic before we started,; but in two weeks the clusters of fires that illumined the whooping bush in the night, and the crash upon crash of the big trees as they fell, had lost all their poetry.

We toiled and toiled clearing those four acres, where the haystacks are now standing, till every tree and sapling that had grown there was down. We thought then the worst was over; but how little we knew of clearing land! Dad was never tired of calculating and telling us how much the crop would fetch if the ground could only be got ready in time to put it in; so we laboured the harder.

With our combined male and female forces and the aid of a sapling lever we rolled the thundering big logs together in the face of Hell's own fires; and when there were no logs to roll it

was tramp, tramp the day through, gathering armfuls of sticks, while the clothes clung to our backs with a muddy perspiration. Sometimes Dan and Dave would sit in the shade beside the billy of water and gaze at the small patch that had taken so long to do; then they would turn hopelessly to what was before them and ask Dad (who would never take a spell) what was the use of thinking of ever getting such a place cleared? And when Dave wanted to know why Dad did n't take up a place on the plain, where there were no trees to grub and plenty of water, Dad would cough as if something was sticking in his throat, and then curse terribly about the squatters and political jobbery. He would soon cool down, though, and get hopeful again.

"Look at the Dwyers," he'd say; "from ten acres of wheat they got seventy pounds last year, besides feed for the fowls; they've got corn in now, and there's only the two."

It was n't only burning off! Whenever there came a short drought the waterhole was sure to run dry; then it was take turns to carry water from the springs—about two miles. We had no draught horse, and if we had there was neither water-cask, trolley, nor dray; so we humped it—and talk about a drag! By the time you returned, if you had n't drained the bucket, in spite of the big drink you'd take before leaving the springs, more than half would certainly be spilt through the vessel bumping against your leg every time you stumbled in the long grass. Somehow, none of us liked carrying water. We would sooner keep the fires going all day without dinner than do a trip to the springs.

One hot, thirsty day it was Joe's turn with the bucket, and he managed to get back without spilling very much. We were all pleased because there was enough left after the tea had been made to give each a drink. Dinner was nearly over; Dan had finished, and was taking it easy on the sofa, when Joe said:

"I say, Dad, what's a nater-dog like?" Dad told him: "Yellow, sharp ears and bushy tail."

"Those muster bin some then that I seen—I do n't know 'bout the bushy tail—all th' hair had comed off." "Where'd y' see them, Joe?" we asked. "Down 'n th' springs floating about—dead."

Then everyone seemed to think hard and look at the tea. I did n't want any more. Dan jumped off the sofa and went outside; and Dad looked after Mother.

At last the four acres—excepting the biggest of the iron-bark trees and about fifty stumps—were pretty well cleared; and then came a problem that could n't be worked-out on a draught-board. I have already said that we had n't any draught horses; indeed, the only thing on the selection like a horse was an old "tuppy" mare that Dad used to straddle. The date of her foaling went further back than Dad's, I believe; and she was shaped something like an alderman. We found her one day in about eighteen inches of mud, with both eyes picked out by the crows, and her hide bearing evidence that a feathery tribe had made a roost of her carcase. Plainly, there was no chance of breaking up the ground with her help. We had no plough, either; how then was the corn to be put in? That was the question.

Dan and Dave sat outside in the corner of the chimney, both scratching the ground with a chip and not saying anything. Dad and Mother sat inside talking it over. Sometimes Dad would get up and walk round the room shaking his head; then he would kick old Crib for lying under the table. At last Mother struck something which brightened him up, and he called Dave.

"Catch Topsy and—" He paused because he remembered the old mare was dead.

"Run over and ask Mister Dwyer to lend me three hoes."

Dave went; Dwyer lent the hoes; and the problem was solved. That was how we started.

CHAPTER II.

Our First Harvest

If there is anything worse than burr-cutting or breaking stones, it's putting corn in with a hoe.

We had just finished. The girls were sowing the last of the grain when Fred Dwyer appeared on the scene. Dad stopped and talked with him while we (Dan, Dave and myself) sat on our hoe-handles, like kangaroos on their tails, and killed flies. Terrible were the flies, particularly when you had sore legs or the blight.

Dwyer was a big man with long, brown arms and red, bushy whiskers.

"You must find it slow work with a hoe?" he said.

"Well-yes-pretty," replied Dad (just as if he was n't quite sure).

After a while Dwyer walked over the "cultivation", and looked at it hard, then scraped a hole with the heel of his boot, spat, and said he did n't think the corn would ever come up. Dan slid off his perch at this, and Dave let the flies eat his leg nearly off without seeming to feel it; but Dad argued it out.

"Orright, orright," said Dwyer; "I hope it do."

Then Dad went on to speak of places he knew of where they preferred hoes to a plough for putting corn in with; but Dwyer only laughed and shook his head.

"D—n him!" Dad muttered, when he had gone; "what rot! WON'T COME UP!"

Dan, who was still thinking hard, at last straightened himself up and said HE did n't think it was any use either. Then Dad lost his temper.

"No USE?" he yelled, "you whelp, what do you know about it?"

Dan answered quietly: "On'y this, that it's nothing but tomfoolery, this hoe business."

"How would you do it then?" Dad roared, and Dan hung his head and tried to button his buttonless shirt wrist-band while he thought.

"With a plough," he answered.

Something in Dad's throat prevented him saying what he wished, so he rushed at Dan with the hoe, but—was too slow.

Dan slept outside that night.

No sooner was the grain sown than it rained. How it rained! for weeks! And in the midst of it all the corn came up—every grain—and proved Dwyer a bad prophet. Dad was in high spirits and promised each of us something—new boots all round.

The corn continued to grow—so did our hopes, but a lot faster. Pulling the suckers and "heeling it up" with hoes was but child's play—we liked it. Our thoughts were all on the boots; 'twas months months since we had pulled on a pair. Every night,

in bed, we decided twenty times over whether they would be lace-ups or bluchers, and Dave had a bottle of "goanna" oil ready to keep his soft with.

Dad now talked of going up country—as Mother put it, "to keep the wolf from the door"—while the four acres of corn ripened. He went, and returned on the day Tom and Bill were born—twins. Maybe his absence did keep the wolf from the door, but it did n't keep the dingoes from the fowl-house!

Once the corn ripened it did n't take long to pull it, but Dad had to put on his considering-cap when we came to the question of getting it in. To hump it in bags seemed inevitable till Dwyer asked Dad to give him a hand to put up a milking-yard. Then Dad's chance came, and he seized it.

Dwyer, in return for Dad's labour, carted in the corn and took it to the railway-station when it was shelled. Yes, when it WAS shelled! We had to shell it with our hands, and what a time we had! For the first half-hour we did n't mind it at all, and shelled cob after cob as though we liked it; but next day, talk about blisters! we could n't close our hands for them, and our faces had to go without a wash for a fortnight.

Fifteen bags we got off the four acres, and the storekeeper undertook to sell it. Corn was then at 12 shillings and 14 shillings per bushel, and Dad expected a big cheque.

Every day for nearly three weeks he trudged over to the store (five miles) and I went with him. Each time the storekeeper would shake his head and say "No word yet."

Dad could n't understand. At last word did come. The storekeeper was busy serving a customer when we went in, so he told Dad to "hold on a bit".

Dad felt very pleased—so did I.

The customer left. The storekeeper looked at Dad and twirled a piece of string round his first finger, then said—"Twelve pounds your corn cleared, Mr. Rudd; but, of course" (going to a desk) "there's that account of yours which I have credited with the amount of the cheque—that brings it down now to just three pound, as you will see by the account."

Dad was speechless, and looked sick.

He went home and sat on a block and stared into the fire with his chin resting in his hands, till Mother laid her hand upon his shoulder and asked him kindly what was the matter. Then he drew the storekeeper's bill from his pocket, and handed it to her, and she too sat down and gazed into the fire.

That was OUR first harvest.

CHAPTER III.

Before We Got The Deeds

Our selection adjoined a sheep-run on the Darling Downs, and boasted of few and scant improvements, though things had gradually got a little better than when we started. A verandahless four-roomed slab-hut now standing out from a forest of box-trees, a stock-yard, and six acres under barley were the only evidence of settlement. A few horses—not ours—sometimes grazed about; and occasionally a mob of cattle—also not ours—cows with young calves, steers, and an old bull or two, would stroll around, chew the best legs of any trousers that might be hanging on the log reserved as a clothes-line, then leave in the night and be seen no more for months—some of them never.

And yet we were always out of meat!

Dad was up the country earning a few pounds—the corn drove him up when it did n't bring what he expected. All we got out of it was a bag of flour—I do n't know what the storekeeper got. Before he left we put in the barley. Somehow, Dad did n't believe in sowing any more crops, he seemed to lose heart; but Mother talked it over with him, and when reminded that he would soon be entitled to the deeds he brightened up again and worked. How he worked!

We had no plough, so old Anderson turned over the six acres for us, and Dad gave him a pound an acre—at least he was to send him the first six pounds got up country. Dad sowed the seed; then he, Dan and Dave yoked themselves to a large dry

bramble each and harrowed it in. From the way they sweated it must have been hard work. Sometimes they would sit down in the middle of the paddock and "spell" but Dad would say something about getting the deeds and they'd start again.

A cockatoo-fence was round the barley; and wire-posts, a long distance apart, round the grass-paddock. We were to get the wire to put in when Dad sent the money; and apply for the deeds when he came back. Things would be different then, according to Dad, and the farm would be worked properly. We would break up fifty acres, build a barn, buy a reaper, ploughs, cornsheller, get cows and good horses, and start two or three ploughs. Meanwhile, if we (Dan, Dave and I) minded the barley he was sure there'd be something got out of it.

Dad had been away about six weeks. Travellers were passing by every day, and there was n't one that did n't want a little of something or other. Mother used to ask them if they had met Dad? None ever did until an old grey man came along and said he knew Dad well—he had camped with him one night and shared a damper. Mother was very pleased and brought him in. We had a kangaroo-rat (stewed) for dinner that day. The girls did n't want to lay it on the table at first, but Mother said he would n't know what it was. The traveller was very hungry and liked it, and when passing his plate the second time for more, said it was n't often he got any poultry.

He tramped on again, and the girls were very glad he did n't know it was a rat. But Dave was n't so sure that he did n't know a rat from a rooster, and reckoned he had n't met Dad at all.

The seventh week Dad came back. He arrived at night, and the lot of us had to get up to find the hammer to knock the peg out of the door and let him in. He brought home three pounds—not enough to get the wire with, but he also brought a horse and saddle. He did n't say if he bought them. It was a bay mare, a grand animal for a journey—so Dad said—and only wanted condition. Emelina, he called her. No mistake, she was a quiet mare! We put her where there was good feed, but she was n't one that fattened on grass. Birds took kindly to her—crows mostly—and she could n't go anywhere but a flock of them accompanied her. Even when Dad used to ride her (Dan or Dave never rode her) they used to follow, and would fly on ahead to wait in a tree and "caw" when he was passing beneath.

One morning when Dan was digging potatoes for dinner—splendid potatoes they were, too, Dad said; he had only once tasted sweeter ones, but they were grown in a cemetery—he found the kangaroos had been in the barley. We knew what THAT meant, and that night made fires round it, thinking to frighten them off, but did n't—mobs of them were in at daybreak. Dad swore from the house at them, but they took no notice; and when he ran down, they just hopped over the fence and sat looking at him. Poor Dad! I do n't know if he was knocked up or if he did n't know any more, but he stopped swearing and sat on a stump looking at a patch of barley they had destroyed, and shaking his head. Perhaps he was thinking if he only had a dog! We did have one until he got a bait. Old Crib! He was lying under the table at supper-time when he took the first fit, and what a fright we got! He must have reared before stiffening out, because he capsized the table into Mother's lap,

and everything on it smashed except the tin-plates and the pints. The lamp fell on Dad, too, and the melted fat scalded his arm. Dad dragged Crib out and cut off his tail and ears, but he might as well have taken off his head.

Dad stood with his back to the fire while Mother was putting a stitch in his trousers. "There's nothing for it but to watch them at night," he was saying, when old Anderson appeared and asked "if I could have those few pounds." Dad asked Mother if she had any money in the house? Of course she had n't. Then he told Anderson he would let him have it when he got the deeds. Anderson left, and Dad sat on the edge of the sofa and seemed to be counting the grains on a corn-cob that he lifted from the floor, while Mother sat looking at a kangaroo-tail on the table and did n't notice the cat drag it off. At last Dad said, "Ah, well!—it won't be long now, Ellen, before we have the deeds!"

We took it in turns to watch the barley. Dan and the two girls watched the first half of the night, and Dad, Dave and I the second. Dad always slept in his clothes, and he used to think some nights that the others came in before time. It was terrible going out, half awake, to tramp round that paddock from fire to fire, from hour to hour, shouting and yelling. And how we used to long for daybreak! Whenever we sat down quietly together for a few minutes we would hear the dull THUD! THUD! THUD! —the kangaroo's footstep.

At last we each carried a kerosene tin, slung like a kettle-drum, and belted it with a waddy—Dad's idea. He himself manipulated an old bell that he had found on a bullock's grave, and made a splendid noise with it.

It was a hard struggle, but we succeeded in saving the bulk of the barley, and cut it down with a scythe and three reaping-hooks. The girls helped to bind it, and Jimmy Mulcahy carted it in return for three days' binding Dad put in for him. The stack was n't built twenty-four hours when a score of somebody's crawling cattle ate their way up to their tails in it. We took the hint and put a sapling fence round it.

Again Dad decided to go up country for a while. He caught Emelina after breakfast, rolled up a blanket, told us to watch the stack, and started. The crows followed.

We were having dinner. Dave said, "Listen!" We listened, and it seemed as though all the crows and other feathered demons of the wide bush were engaged in a mighty scrimmage. "Dad's back!" Dan said, and rushed out in the lead of a stampede.

Emelina was back, anyway, with the swag on, but Dad was n't. We caught her, and Dave pointed to white spots all over the saddle, and said—"Hanged if they have n't been ridin' her!"—meaning the crows.

Mother got anxious, and sent Dan to see what had happened. Dan found Dad, with his shirt off, at a pub on the main road, wanting to fight the publican for a hundred pounds,

but could n't persuade him to come home. Two men brought him home that night on a sheep-hurdle, and he gave up the idea of going away.

After all, the barley turned out well—there was a good price that year, and we were able to run two wires round the paddock.

One day a bulky Government letter came. Dad looked surprised and pleased, and how his hand trembled as he broke the seal! "THE DEEDS!" he said, and all of us gathered round to look at them. Dave thought they were like the inside of a bear-skin covered with writing.

Dad said he would ride to town at once, and went for Emelina.

"Could n't y' find her, Dad?" Dan said, seeing him return without the mare.

Dad cleared his throat, but did n't answer. Mother asked him.

"Yes, I FOUND her," he said slowly, "DEAD."

The crows had got her at last.

He wrapped the deeds in a piece of rag and walked.

There was nothing, scarcely, that he did n't send out from town, and Jimmy Mulcahy and old Anderson many and many times after that borrowed our dray.

Now Dad regularly curses the deeds every mail-day, and wishes to Heaven he had never got them.

CHAPTER IV.

When the Wolf was at the Door.

There had been a long stretch of dry weather, and we were cleaning out the waterhole. Dad was down the hole shovelling up the dirt; Joe squatted on the brink catching flies and letting them go again without their wings—a favourite amusement of his; while Dan and Dave cut a drain to turn the water that ran off the ridge into the hole—when it rained. Dad was feeling dry, and told Joe to fetch him a drink.

Joe said: "See first if this cove can fly with only one wing." Then he went, but returned and said: "There's no water in the bucket—Mother used the last drop to boil th' punkins," and renewed the fly-catching. Dad tried to spit, and was going to say something when Mother, half-way between the house and the waterhole, cried out that the grass paddock was all on fire. "So it is, Dad!" said Joe, slowly but surely dragging the head off a fly with finger and thumb.

Dad scrambled out of the hole and looked. "Good God!" was all he said. How he ran! All of us rushed after him except Joe—he could n't run very well, because the day before he had ridden fifteen miles on a poor horse, bare-back. When near the fire Dad stopped running to break a green bush. He hit upon a tough one. Dad was in a hurry. The bush was n't. Dad swore and tugged with all his might. Then the bush broke and Dad fell heavily upon his back and swore again.

To save the cockatoo fence that was round the cultivation was what was troubling Dad. Right and left we fought the fire with boughs. Hot! It was hellish hot! Whenever there was a lull in the wind we worked. Like a wind-mill Dad's bough moved—and how he rushed for another when one was used up! Once we had the fire almost under control; but the wind rose again, and away went the flames higher and faster than ever.

"It's no use," said Dad at last, placing his hand on his head, and throwing down his bough. We did the same, then stood and watched the fence go. After supper we went out again and saw it still burning. Joe asked Dad if he did n't think it was a splendid sight? Dad did n't answer him—he did n't seem conversational that night.

We decided to put the fence up again. Dan had sharpened the axe with a broken file, and he and Dad were about to start when Mother asked them what was to be done about flour? She said she had shaken the bag to get enough to make scones for that morning's breakfast, and unless some was got somewhere there would be no bread for dinner.

Dad reflected, while Dan felt the edge on the axe with his thumb.

Dad said, "Won't Missus Dwyer let you have a dishful until we get some?"

"No," Mother answered; "I can't ask her until we send back what we owe them."

Dad reflected again. "The Andersons, then?" he said.

Mother shook her head and asked what good there was it sending to them when they, only that morning, had sent to her for some?

"Well, we must do the best we can at present," Dad answered, "and I'll go to the store this evening and see what is to be done."

Putting the fence up again in the hurry that Dad was in was the very devil! He felled the saplings—and such saplings!—TREES many of them were—while we, "all of a muck of sweat," dragged them into line. Dad worked like a horse himself, and expected us to do the same. "Never mind staring about you," he'd say, if he caught us looking at the sun to see if it were coming dinner-time—"there's no time to lose if we want to get the fence up and a crop in."

Dan worked nearly as hard as Dad until he dropped the butt-end of a heavy sapling on his foot, which made him hop about on one leg and say that he was sick and tired of the dashed fence. Then he argued with Dad, and declared that it would be far better to put a wire-fence up at once, and be done with it, instead of wasting time over a thing that would only be burnt down again. "How long," he said, "will it take to get the posts? Not a week," and he hit the ground disgustedly with a piece of stick he had in his hand.

"Confound it!" Dad said, "have n't you got any sense, boy? What earthly use would a wire-fence be without any wire in it?"

Then we knocked off and went to dinner.

No one appeared in any humour to talk at the table. Mother sat silently at the end and poured out the tea while Dad, at the head, served the pumpkin and divided what cold meat there was. Mother would n't have any meat—one of us would have to go without if she had taken any.

I don't know if it was on account of Dan arguing with him, or if it was because there was no bread for dinner, that Dad was in a bad temper; anyway, he swore at Joe for coming to the table with dirty hands. Joe cried and said that he could n't wash them when Dave, as soon as he had washed his, had thrown the water out. Then Dad scowled at Dave, and Joe passed his plate along for more pumpkin.

Dinner was almost over when Dan, still looking hungry, grinned and asked Dave if he was n't going to have some BREAD? Whereupon Dad jumped up in a tearing passion. "D—n your insolence!" he said to Dan, "make a jest of it, would you?"

"Who's jestin'?" Dan answered and grinned again.

"Go!" said Dad, furiously, pointing to the door, "leave my roof, you thankless dog!"

Dan went that night.

It was only upon Dad promising faithfully to reduce his account within two months that the storekeeper let us have another bag of flour on credit. And what a change that bag of flour wrought! How cheerful the place became all at once! And how enthusiastically Dad spoke of the farm and the prospects of the coming season!

Four months had gone by. The fence had been up some time and ten acres of wheat put in; but there had been no rain, and not a grain had come up, or was likely to.

Nothing had been heard of Dan since his departure. Dad spoke about him to Mother. "The scamp!" he said, "to leave me just when I wanted help—after all the years I've slaved to feed him and clothe him, see what thanks I get! but, mark my word, he'll be glad to come back yet." But Mother would never say anything against Dan.

The weather continued dry. The wheat did n't come up, and Dad became despondent again.

The storekeeper called every week and reminded Dad of his promise. "I would give it you willingly," Dad would say, "if I had it, Mr. Rice; but what can I do? You can't knock blood out of a stone."

We ran short of tea, and Dad thought to buy more with the money Anderson owed him for some fencing he had done; but when he asked for it, Anderson was very sorry he had n't got it just then, but promised to let him have it as soon as he could sell his chaff. When Mother heard Anderson could n't pay, she DID cry, and said there was n't a bit of sugar in the house, nor enough cotton to mend the children's bits of clothes.

We could n't very well go without tea, so Dad showed Mother how to make a new kind. He roasted a slice of bread on the fire till it was like a black coal, then poured the boiling water over it and let it "draw" well. Dad said it had a capital flavour—HE liked it.

Dave's only pair of pants were pretty well worn off him; Joe had n't a decent coat for Sunday; Dad himself wore a pair of boots with soles tied on with wire; and Mother fell sick. Dad did all he could—waited on her, and talked hopefully of the fortune which would come to us some day; but once, when talking to Dave, he broke down, and said he did n't, in the name of the Almighty God, know what he would do! Dave could n't say anything—he moped about, too, and home somehow did n't seem like home at all.

When Mother was sick and Dad's time was mostly taken up nursing her; when there was nothing, scarcely, in the house; when, in fact, the wolf was at the very door;—Dan came home with a pocket full of money and swag full of greasy clothes. How Dad shook him by the hand and welcomed him back! And how Dan talked of "tallies", "belly-wool", and "ringers" and implored Dad, over and over again, to go shearing, or rolling up, or branding— ANYTHING rather than work and starve on the selection.

That's fifteen years ago, and Dad is still on the farm.

CHAPTER V.

The Night We Watched For Wallabies.

It had been a bleak July day, and as night came on a bitter westerly howled through the trees. Cold! was n't it cold! The pigs in the sty, hungry and half-fed (we wanted for ourselves the few pumpkins that had survived the drought) fought savagely with each other for shelter, and squealed all the time like—well, like pigs. The cows and calves left the place to seek shelter away in the mountains; while the draught horses, their hair standing up like barbed-wire, leaned sadly over the fence and gazed up at the green lucerne. Joe went about shivering in an old coat of Dad's with only one sleeve to it—a calf had fancied the other one day that Dad hung it on a post as a mark to go by while ploughing.

"My! it'll be a stinger to-night," Dad remarked to Mrs. Brown—who sat, cold-looking, on the sofa—as he staggered inside with an immense log for the fire. A log! Nearer a whole tree! But wood was nothing in Dad's eyes.

Mrs. Brown had been at our place five or six days. Old Brown called occasionally to see her, so we knew they could n't have quarrelled. Sometimes she did a little house-work, but more often she did n't. We talked it over together, but could n't make it out. Joe asked Mother, but she had no idea—so she said. We were full up, as Dave put it, of Mrs. Brown, and wished her out of the place. She had taken to ordering us about, as though she had something to do with us.

After supper we sat round the fire—as near to it as we could without burning ourselves—Mrs. Brown and all, and listened to the wind whistling outside. Ah, it was pleasant beside the fire listening to the wind! When Dad had warmed himself back and front he turned to us and said:

"Now, boys, we must go directly and light some fires and keep those wallabies back."

That was a shock to us, and we looked at him to see if he were really in earnest. He was, and as serious as a judge.

"TO-NIGHT!" Dave answered, surprisedly—"why to-night any more than last night or the night before? Thought you had decided to let them rip?"

"Yes, but we might as well keep them off a bit longer."

"But there's no wheat there for them to get now. So what's the good of watching them? There's no sense in THAT."

Dad was immovable.

"Anyway"—whined Joe—"I'M not going—not a night like this—not when I ain't got boots."

That vexed Dad. "Hold your tongue, sir!" he said—"you'll do as you're told."

But Dave had n't finished. "I've been following that harrow since sunrise this morning," he said, "and now you want me to go chasing wallabies about in the dark, a night like this, and for nothing else but to keep them from eating the ground. It's always the way here, the more one does the more he's wanted to

do," and he commenced to cry. Mrs. Brown had something to say. SHE agreed with Dad and thought we ought to go, as the wheat might spring up again.

"Pshah!" Dave blurted out between his sobs, while we thought of telling her to shut her mouth.

Slowly and reluctantly we left that roaring fireside to accompany Dad that bitter night. It WAS a night!—dark as pitch, silent, forlorn and forbidding, and colder than the busiest morgue. And just to keep wallabies from eating nothing! They HAD eaten all the wheat—every blade of it—and the grass as well. What they would start on next—ourselves or the cart-harness—was n't quite clear.

We stumbled along in the dark one behind the other, with our hands stuffed into our trousers. Dad was in the lead, and poor Joe, bare-shinned and bootless, in the rear. Now and again he tramped on a Bathurst-burr, and, in sitting down to extract the prickle, would receive a cluster of them elsewhere. When he escaped the burr it was only to knock his shin against a log or leave a toe-nail or two clinging to a stone. Joe howled, but the wind howled louder, and blew and blew.

Dave, in pausing to wait on Joe, would mutter:

"To HELL with everything! Whatever he wants bringing us out a night like this, I'm DAMNED if I know!"

Dad could n't see very well in the dark, and on this night could n't see at all, so he walked up against one of the old draught horses that had fallen asleep gazing at the lucerne. And what a fright they both got! The old horse took it worse than

Dad—who only tumbled down—for he plunged as though the devil had grabbed him, and fell over the fence, twisting every leg he had in the wires. How the brute struggled! We stood and listened to him. After kicking panels of the fence down and smashing every wire in it, he got loose and made off, taking most of it with him.

"That's one wallaby on the wheat, anyway," Dave muttered, and we giggled. WE understood Dave; but Dad did n't open his mouth.

We lost no time lighting the fires. Then we walked through the "wheat" and wallabies! May Satan reprove me if I exaggerate their number by one solitary pair of ears—but from the row and scatter they made there were a MILLION.

Dad told Joe, at last, he could go to sleep if he liked, at the fire. Joe went to sleep—HOW, I don't know. Then Dad sat beside him, and for long intervals would stare silently into the darkness. Sometimes a string of the vermin would hop past close to the fire, and another time a curlew would come near and screech its ghostly wail, but he never noticed them. Yet he seemed to be listening.

We mooched around from fire to fire, hour after hour, and when we wearied of heaving fire-sticks at the enemy we sat on our heels and cursed the wind, and the winter, and the night-birds alternately. It was a lonely, wretched occupation.

Now and again Dad would leave his fire to ask us if we could hear a noise. We could n't, except that of wallabies and mopokes. Then he would go back and listen again. He was restless, and, somehow, his heart was n't in the wallabies at all. Dave could n't make him out.

The night wore on. By-and-by there was a sharp rattle of wires, then a rustling noise, and Sal appeared in the glare of the fire. "DAD!" she said. That was all. Without a word, Dad bounced up and went back to the house with her.

"Something's up!" Dave said, and, half-anxious, half-afraid, we gazed into the fire and thought and thought. Then we stared, nervously, into the night, and listened for Dad's return, but heard only the wind and the mopoke.

At dawn he appeared again, with a broad smile on his face, and told us that mother had got another baby—a fine little chap. Then we knew why Mrs. Brown had been staying at our place.

CHAPTER VI.

Good Old Bess.

Supper was over at Shingle Hut, and we were all seated round the fire—all except Joe. He was mousing. He stood on the sofa with one ear to the wall in a listening attitude, and brandished a table-fork. There were mice—mobs of them—between the slabs and the paper—layers of newspapers that had been pasted one on the other for years until they were an inch thick; and whenever Joe located a mouse he drove the fork into the wall and pinned it—or reckoned he did.

Dad sat pensively at one corner of the fire-place—Dave at the other with his elbows on his knees and his chin resting in his palms.

"Think you could ride a race, Dave?" asked Dad.

"Yairs," answered Dave, without taking his eyes off the fire, or his chin from his palms—"could, I suppose, if I'd a pair o' lighter boots 'n these."

Again they reflected.

Joe triumphantly held up the mutilated form of a murdered mouse and invited the household to "Look!" No one heeded him.

"Would your Mother's go on you?"

"Might," and Dave spat into the fire.

"Anyway," Dad went on, "we must have a go at this handicap with the old mare; it's worth trying for, and, believe me, now! she'll surprise a few of their flash hacks, will Bess."

"Yairs, she can go all right." And Dave spat again into the fire.

"GO! I've never known anything to keep up with her. Why, bless my soul, seventeen years ago, when old Redwood owned her, there was n't a horse in the district could come within coo-ee of her. All she wants is a few feeds of corn and a gallop or two, and mark my words she'll show some of them the way."

Some horse-races were being promoted by the shanty-keeper at the Overhaul—seven miles from our selection. They were the first of the kind held in the district, and the stake for the principal event was five pounds. It was n't because Dad was a racing man or subject to turf hallucinations in any way that he thought of preparing Bess for the meeting. We sadly needed those five pounds, and, as Dad put it, if the mare could only win, it would be an easier and much quicker way of making a bit of money than waiting for a crop to grow.

Bess was hobbled and put into a two-acre paddock near the house. We put her there because of her wisdom. She was a chestnut, full of villainy, an absolutely incorrigible old rogue. If at any time she was wanted when in the grass paddock, it required the lot of us from Dad down to yard her, as well as the dogs, and every other dog in the neighbourhood. Not that she had any brumby element in her—she would have been easier to yard if she had—but she would drive steadily enough, alone or with other horses, until she saw the yard, when she would turn

and deliberately walk away. If we walked to head her she beat us by half a length; if we ran she ran, and stopped when we stopped. That was the aggravating part of her! When it was only to go to the store or the post-office that we wanted her, we could have walked there and back a dozen times before we could run her down; but, somehow, we generally preferred to work hard catching her rather than walk.

When we had spent half the day hunting for the curry-comb, which we did n't find, Dad began to rub Bess down with a corn-cob—a shelled one—and trim her up a bit. He pulled her tail and cut the hair off her heels with a knife; then he gave her some corn to eat, and told Joe he was to have a bundle of thistles cut for her every night. Now and again, while grooming her, Dad would step back a few paces and look upon her with pride.

"There's great breeding in the old mare," he would say, "great breeding; look at the shoulder on her, and the loin she has; and where did ever you see a horse with the same nostril? Believe me, she'll surprise a few of them!"

We began to regard Bess with profound respect; hitherto we had been accustomed to pelt her with potatoes and blue-metal.

The only thing likely to prejudice her chance in the race, Dad reckoned, was a small sore on her back about the size of a foal's foot. She had had that sore for upwards of ten years to our knowledge, but Dad hoped to have it cured before the race came off with a never-failing remedy he had discovered—burnt leather and fat.

Every day, along with Dad, we would stand on the fence near the house to watch Dave gallop Bess from the bottom of the lane to the barn—about a mile. We could always see him start, but immediately after he would disappear down a big gully, and we would see nothing more of the gallop till he came to within a hundred yards of us. And would n't Bess bend to it once she got up the hill, and fly past with Dave in the stirrups watching her shadow!—when there was one: she was a little too fine to throw a shadow always. And when Dave and Bess had got back and Joe had led her round the yard a few times, Dad would rub the corn-cob over her again and apply more burnt-leather and fat to her back.

On the morning preceding the race Dad decided to send Bess over three miles to improve her wind. Dave took her to the crossing at the creek—supposed to be three miles from Shingle Hut, but it might have been four or it might have been five, and there was a stony ridge on the way.

We mounted the fence and waited. Tommy Wilkie came along riding a plough-horse. He waited too.

"Ought to be coming now," Dad observed, and Wilkie got excited. He said he would go and wait in the gully and race Dave home. "Race him home!" Dad chuckled, as Tommy cantered off, "he'll never see the way Bess goes." Then we all laughed.

Just as someone cried "Here he is!" Dave turned the corner into the lane, and Joe fell off the fence and pulled Dad with him. Dad damned him and scrambled up again as fast as he could. After a while Tommy Wilkie hove in sight amid a cloud of dust. Then came Dave at scarcely faster than a trot, and flogging all he

knew with a piece of greenhide plough-rein. Bess was all-out and floundering. There was about two hundred yards yet to cover. Dave kept at her—THUD! THUD! Slower and slower she came. "Damn the fellow!" Dad said; "what's he beating her for?" "Stop it, you fool!" he shouted. But Dave sat down on her for the final effort and applied the hide faster and faster. Dad crunched his teeth. Once—twice—three times Bess changed her stride, then struck a branch-root of a tree that projected a few inches above ground, and over she went—CRASH! Dave fell on his head and lay spread out, motionless. We picked him up and carried him inside, and when Mother saw blood on him she fainted straight off without waiting to know if it were his own or not. Both looked as good as dead; but Dad, with a bucket of water, soon brought them round again.

It was scarcely dawn when we began preparing for a start to the races. Dave, after spending fully an hour trying in vain to pull on Mother's elastic-side boots, decided to ride in his own heavy bluchers. We went with Dad in the dray. Mother would n't go; she said she did n't want to see her son get killed, and warned Dad that if anything happened the blame would for ever be on his head.

We arrived at the Overhaul in good time. Dad took the horse out of the dray and tied him to a tree. Dave led Bess about, and we stood and watched the shanty-keeper unpacking gingerbeer. Joe asked Dad for sixpence to buy some, but Dad had n't any small change. We remained in front of the booth through most of the day, and ran after any corks that popped out and handed them in again to the shanty-keeper. He did n't offer us anything—not a thing!

"Saddle up for the Overhaul Handicap!" was at last sung out, and Dad, saddle on arm, advanced to where Dave was walking Bess about. They saddled up and Dave mounted, looking as pale as death.

"I don't like ridin' in these boots a bit," he said, with a quiver in his voice.

"Wot's up with 'em?" Dad asked.

"They're too big altogether."

"Well, take 'em off then!"

Dave jumped down and pulled them off-leaving his socks on.

More than a dozen horses went out, and when the starter said "Off!" did n't they go! Our eyes at once followed Bess. Dave was at her right from the jump—the very opposite to what Dad had told him. In the first furlong she put fully twenty yards of daylight between herself and the field—she came after the field. At the back of the course you could see the whole of Kyle's selection and two of Jerry Keefe's hay-stacks between her and the others. We did n't follow her any further.

After the race was won and they had cheered the winner, Dad was n't to be found anywhere.

Dave sat on the grass quite exhausted. "Ain't y' goin' to pull the saddle off?" Joe asked.

"No," he said. "I AIN'T. You don't want everyone to see her back, do you?"

Joe wished he had sixpence.

About an hour afterwards Dad came staggering along arm-in-arm with another man—an old fencing-mate of his, so he made out.

"Thur yar," he said, taking off his hat and striking Bess on the rump with it; "besh bred mare in the worl'."

The fencing-mate looked at her, but did n't say anything; he could n't.

"Eh?" Dad went on; "say sh'ain't? L'ere-ever y' name is—betcher pound sh'is."

Then a jeering and laughing crowd gathered round, and Dave wished he had n't come to the races.

"She ain't well," said a tall man to Dad—"short in her gallops." Then a short, bulky individual without whiskers shoved his face up into Dad's and asked him if Bess was a mare or a cow. Dad became excited, and only that old Anderson came forward and took him away there must have been a row.

Anderson put him in the dray and drove it home to Shingle Hut.

Dad reckons now that there is nothing in horse-racing, and declares it a fraud. He says, further, that an honest man, by training and racing a horse, is only helping to feed and fatten the rogues and vagabonds that live on the sport.

CHAPTER VII.

Cranky Jack.

It was early in the day. Traveller after traveller was trudging by Shingle Hut. One who carried no swag halted at the rails and came in. He asked Dad for a job. "I dunno," Dad answered—"What wages would you want?" The man said he would n't want any. Dad engaged him at once.

And SUCH a man! Tall, bony, heavy-jawed, shaven with a reaping-hook, apparently. He had a thick crop of black hair—shaggy, unkempt, and full of grease, grass, and fragments of dry gum-leaves. On his head were two old felt hats—one sewn inside the other. On his back a shirt made from a piece of blue blanket, with white cotton stitches striding up and down it like lines of fencing. His trousers were gloom itself; they were a problem, and bore reliable evidence of his industry. No ordinary person would consider himself out of work while in them. And the new-comer was no ordinary person. He seemed to have all the woe of the world upon him; he was as sad and weird-looking as a widow out in the wet.

In the yard was a large heap of firewood—remarkable truth!—which Dad told him to chop up. He began. And how he worked! The axe rang again—particularly when it left the handle—and pieces of wood scattered everywhere. Dad watched him chopping for a while, then went with Dave to pull corn.

For hours the man chopped away without once looking at the sun. Mother came out. Joy! She had never seen so much wood cut before. She was delighted. She made a cup of tea and took it to the man, and apologised for having no sugar to put in it. He paid no attention to her; he worked harder. Mother waited, holding the tea in her hand. A lump of wood nearly as big as a shingle flew up and shaved her left ear. She put the tea on the ground and went in search of eggs for dinner. (We were out of meat—the kangaroo-dog was lame. He had got "ripped" the last time we killed.)

The tea remained on the ground. Chips fell into it. The dog saw it. He limped towards it eagerly, and dipped the point of his nose in it. It burnt him. An aged rooster strutted along and looked sideways at it. HE distrusted it and went away. It attracted the pig—a sow with nine young ones. She waddled up, and poked the cup over with her nose; then she sat down on it, while the family joyously gathered round the saucer. Still the man chopped on.

Mother returned—without any eggs. She rescued the crockery from the pigs and turned curiously to the man. She said, "Why, you've let them take the tea!" No answer. She wondered.

Suddenly, and for the fiftieth time, the axe flew off. The man held the handle and stared at the woodheap. Mother watched him. He removed his hats, and looked inside them. He remained looking inside them.

Mother watched him more closely. His lips moved. He said, "LISTEN TO THEM! THEY'RE COMING! I KNEW THEY'D FOLLOW!"

"Who?" asked Mother, trembling slightly.

"THEY'RE IN THE WOOD!" he went on. "Ha, ha! I've got them. They'll never get out; NEVER GET OUT!"

Mother fled, screaming. She ran inside and called the children. Sal assisted her. They trooped in like wallabies—all but Joe. He was away earning money. He was getting a shilling a week from Maloney, for chasing cockatoos from the corn.

They closed and barricaded the doors, and Sal took down the gun, which Mother made her hide beneath the bed. They sat listening, anxiously and intently. The wind began to rise. A lump of soot fell from the chimney into the fireplace—where there was no fire. Mother shuddered. Some more fell. Mother jumped to her feet. So did Sal. They looked at each other in dismay. The children began to cry. The chain for hanging the kettle on started swinging to and fro. Mother's knees gave way. The chain continued swinging. A pair of bare legs came down into the fireplace—they were curled round the chain. Mother collapsed. Sal screamed, and ran to the door, but could n't open it. The legs left the chain and dangled in the air. Sal called "Murder!"

Her cry was answered. It was Joe, who had been over at Maloney's making his fortune. He came to the rescue. He dropped out of the chimney and shook himself. Sal stared at him. He was calm and covered from head to foot with soot and dirt. He looked round and said, "Thought yuz could keep me

out, did'n'y?" Sal could only look at him. "I saw yuz all run in," he was saying, when Sal thought of Mother, and sprang to her. Sal shook her, and slapped her, and threw water on her till she sat up and stared about. Then Joe stared.

Dad came in for dinner—which, of course, was n't ready. Mother began to cry, and asked him what he meant by keeping a madman on the place, and told him she KNEW he wanted to have them all murdered. Dad did n't understand. Sal explained. Then he went out and told the man to "Clear!" The man simply said, "No."

"Go on, now!" Dad said, pointing to the rails. The man smiled at the wood-heap as he worked. Dad waited. "Ain't y' going?" he repeated.

"Leave me alone when I'm chopping wood for the missus," the man answered; then smiled and muttered to himself. Dad left him alone and went inside wondering.

Next day Mother and Dad were talking at the barn. Mother, bare-headed, was holding some eggs in her apron. Dad was leaning on a hoe.

"I am AFRAID of him," Mother said; "it's not right you should keep him about the place. No one's safe with such a man. Some day he'll take it in his head to kill us all, and then—"

"Tut, tut, woman; poor old Jack! he's harmless as a baby."

"All right," (sullenly); "you'll see!"

Dad laughed and went away with the hoe on his shoulder to cut burr.

Middle of summer. Dad and Dave in the paddock mowing lucerne. Jack sinking post-holes for a milking-yard close to the house. Joe at intervals stealing behind him to prick him with straws through a rent in the rear of his patched moleskins. Little Bill—in readiness to run—standing off, enjoying the sport.

Inside the house sat Mother and Sal, sewing and talking of Maloney's new baby.

"Dear me," said Mother; "it's the tiniest mite of a thing I ever saw; why, bless me, anyone of y' at its age would have made three of—"

"MIND, Mother!" Sal shrieked, jumping up on the sofa. Mother screamed and mounted the table. Both gasped for breath, and leaning cautiously over peeped down at a big black snake which had glided in at the front door. Then, pale and scared-looking, they stared across at each other.

The snake crawled over to the safe and drank up some milk which had been spilt on the floor. Mother saw its full length and groaned. The snake wriggled to the leg of the table.

"Look out!" cried Sal, gathering up her skirts and dancing about on the sofa.

Mother squealed hysterically.

Joe appeared. He laughed.

"You wretch!" Mother yelled. "Run!—RUN, and fetch your father!"

Joe went and brought Jack.

"Oh-h, my God!"—Mother moaned, as Jack stood at the door, staring strangely at her. "Kill it!—why don't he kill it?"

Jack did n't move, but talked to himself. Mother shuddered.

The reptile crawled to the bedroom door. Then for the first time the man's eyes rested upon it. It glided into the bedroom, and Mother and Sal ran off for Dad.

Jack fixed his eyes on the snake and continued muttering to himself. Several times it made an attempt to mount the dressing-table. Finally it succeeded. Suddenly Jack's demeanour changed. He threw off his ragged hat and talked wildly. A fearful expression filled his ugly features. His voice altered.

"You're the Devil!" he said; "THE DEVIL! THE DEVIL! The missus brought you—ah-h-h!"

The snake's head passed behind the looking-glass. Jack drew nearer, clenching his fists and gesticulating. As he did he came full before the looking-glass and saw, perhaps for the first time in his life, his own image. An unearthly howl came from him. "ME FATHER!" he shouted, and bolted from the house.

Dad came in with the long-handled shovel, swung it about the room, and smashed pieces off the cradle, and tore the bed-curtains down, and made a great noise altogether. Finally, he killed the snake and put it on the fire; and Joe and the cat watched it wriggle on the hot coals.

Meanwhile, Jack, bare-headed, rushed across the yard. He ran over little Bill, and tumbled through the wire-fence on to the broad of his back. He roared like a wild beast, clutched at space, spat, and kicked his heels in the air.

"Let me up!—AH-H-H!—let go me throat!" he hissed.

The dog ran over and barked at him. He found his feet again, and, making off, ran through the wheat, glancing back over his shoulder as he tore along. He crossed into the grass paddock, and running to a big tree dodged round and round it. Then from tree to tree he went, and that evening at sundown, when Joe was bringing the cows home, Jack was still flying from "his father".

After supper.

"I wonder now what the old fool saw in that snake to send him off his head like that?" Dad said, gazing wonderingly into the fire. "He sees plenty of them, goodness knows."

"That was n't it. It was n't the snake at all," Mother said; "there was madness in the man's eyes all the while. I saw it the moment he came to the door." She appealed to Sal.

"Nonsense!" said Dad; "NONSENSE!" and he tried to laugh.

"Oh, of course it's NONSENSE," Mother went on; "everything I say is nonsense. It won't be nonsense when you come home some day and find us all on the floor with our throats cut."

"Pshaw!" Dad answered; "what's the use of talking like that?" Then to Dave: "Go out and see if he's in the barn!"

Dave fidgetted. He did n't like the idea. Joe giggled.

"Surely you're not FRIGHTENED?" Dad shouted.

Dave coloured up.

"No—don't think so," he said; and, after a pause, "YOU go and see."

It was Dad's turn to feel uneasy. He pretended to straighten the fire, and coughed several times. "Perhaps it's just as well," he said, "to let him be to-night."

Of course, Dad was n't afraid; he SAID he was n't, but he drove the pegs in the doors and windows before going to bed that night.

Next morning, Dad said to Dave and Joe, "Come 'long, and we'll see where he's got to."

In a gully at the back of the grass-paddock they found him. He was ploughing—sitting astride the highest limb of a fallen tree, and, in a hoarse voice and strange, calling out—"Gee, Captain!—come here, Tidy!—WA-AY!"

"Blowed if I know," Dad muttered, coming to a standstill. "Wonder if he is clean mad?"

Dave was speechless, and Joe began to tremble.

They listened. And as the man's voice rang out in the quiet gully and the echoes rumbled round the ridge and the affrighted birds flew up, the place felt eerie somehow.

"It's no use bein' afraid of him," Dad went on. "We must go and bounce him, that's all." But there was a tremor in Dad's voice which Dave did n't like.

"See if he knows us, anyway."—and Dad shouted, "HEY-Y!"

Jack looked up and immediately scrambled from the limb. That was enough for Dave. He turned and made tracks. So did Dad and Joe. They ran. No one could have run harder. Terror overcame Joe. He squealed and grabbed hold of Dad's shirt, which was ballooning in the wind.

"Let go!" Dad gasped. "DAMN Y', let me GO!"—trying to shake him off. But Joe had great faith in his parent, and clung to him closely.

When they had covered a hundred yards or so, Dave glanced back, and seeing that Jack was n't pursuing them, stopped and chuckled at the others.

"Eh?" Dad said, completely winded—"Eh?" Then to Dave, when he got some breath:

"Well, you ARE an ass of a fellow. (PUFF!). What th' DEVIL did y' RUN f?"

"Wot did I run f? What did YOU run f?"

"Bah!" and Dad boldly led the way back.

"Now look here (turning fiercely upon Joe), don't you come catching hold of me again, or if y' DO I'll knock y'r d—d head off!...Clear home altogether, and get under the bed if y're as frightened as THAT."

Joe slunk behind.

But when Dad DID approach Jack, which was n't until he had talked a great deal to him across a big log, the latter did n't show any desire to take life, but allowed himself to be escorted home and locked in the barn quietly enough.

Dad kept Jack confined in the barn several days, and if anyone approached the door or the cracks he would ask:

"Is me father there yet?"

"Your father's dead and buried long ago, man," Dad used to tell him.

"Yes," he would say, "but he's alive again. The missus keeps him in there"—indicating the house.

And sometimes when Dad was not about Joe would put his mouth to a crack and say:

"Here's y'r FATHER, Jack!" Then, like a caged beast, the man would howl and tramp up and down, his eyes starting out of his head, while Joe would bolt inside and tell Mother that "Jack's getting out," and nearly send her to her grave.

But one day Jack DID get out, and, while Mother and Sal were ironing came to the door with the axe on his shoulder.

They dropped the irons and shrank into a corner and cowered piteously—too scared even to cry out.

He took no notice of them, but, moving stealthily on tip-toes, approached the bedroom door and peeped in. He paused just a moment to grip the axe with both hands. Then with a howl and a bound he entered the room and shattered the looking-glass into fragments.

He bent down and looked closely at the pieces.

"He's dead now," he said calmly, and walked out. Then he went to work at the post-holes again, just as though nothing had happened.

Fifteen years have passed since then, and the man is still at Shingle Hut. He was the best horse Dad ever had. He slaved from daylight till dark; keeps no Sunday; knows no companion; lives chiefly on meat and machine oil; domiciles in the barn; and has never asked for a rise in his wages. His name we never knew. We call him "Jack." The neighbours called him "CRANKY Jack."

CHAPTER VIII.

A Kangaroo-Hunt from Shingle Hut.

We always looked forward to Sunday. It was our day of sport. Once, I remember, we thought it would never come. We longed restlessly for it, and the more we longed the more it seemed to linger.

A meeting of selectors had been held; war declared against the marsupial; and a hunt on a grand scale arranged for this particular Sabbath. Of course those in the neighbourhood hunted the kangaroo every Sunday, but "on their own," and always on foot, which had its fatigues. This was to be a raid EN MASSE and on horseback. The whole country-side was to assemble at Shingle Hut and proceed thence. It assembled; and what a collection! Such a crowd! such gear! such a tame lot of horses! and such a motley swarm of lean, lank, lame kangaroo-dogs!

We were not ready. The crowd sat on their horses and waited at the slip-rails. Dogs trooped into the yard by the dozen. One pounced on a fowl; another lamed the pig; a trio put the cat up a peach-tree; one with a thirst mounted the water-cask and looked down it, while the bulk of the brutes trotted inside and disputed with Mother who should open the safe.

Dad loosed our three, and pleased they were to feel themselves free. They had been chained up all the week, with scarcely anything to eat. Dad did n't believe in too much feeding.

He had had wide experience in dogs and coursing "at home" on his grandfather's large estates, and always found them fleetest when empty. OURS ought to have been fleet as locomotives.

Dave, showing a neat seat, rode out of the yard on Bess, fresh and fat and fit to run for a kingdom. They awaited Dad. He was standing beside HIS mount—Farmer, the plough-horse, who was arrayed in winkers with green-hide reins, and an old saddle with only one flap. He was holding an earnest argument with Joe...Still the crowd waited. Still Dad and Joe argued the point...There was a murmur and a movement and much merriment. Dad was coming; so was Joe—perched behind him, "double bank," rapidly wiping the tears from his eyes with his knuckles.

Hooray! They were off. Paddy Maloney and Dave took the lead, heading for kangaroo country along the foot of Dead Man's Mountain and through Smith's paddock, where there was a low wire fence to negotiate. Paddy spread his coat over it and jumped his mare across. He was a horseman, was Pat. The others twisted a stick in the wires, and proceeded carefully to lead their horses over. When it came to Farmer's turn he hesitated. Dad coaxed him. Slowly he put one leg across, as if feeling his way, and paused again. Joe was on his back behind the saddle. Dad tugged hard at the winkers. Farmer was inclined to withdraw his leg. Dad was determined not to let him. Farmer's heel got caught against the wire, and he began to pull back and grunt—so did Dad. Both pulled hard. Anderson and old Brown ran to Dad's assistance. The trio planted their heels in the ground and leaned back.

Joe became afraid. He clutched at the saddle and cried, "Let me off!" "Stick to him!" said Paddy Maloney, hopping over the fence, "Stick to him!" He kicked Farmer what he afterwards called "a sollicker on the tail." Again he kicked him. Still Farmer strained and hung back. Once more he let him have it. Then—off flew the winkers, and over went Dad and Anderson and old Brown, and down rolled Joe and Farmer on the other side of the fence. The others leant against their horses and laughed the laugh of their lives. "Worse 'n a lot of d—d jackasses," Dad was heard to say. They caught Farmer and led him to the fence again. He jumped it, and rose feet higher than he had any need to, and had not old Brown dodged him just when he did he would be a dead man now.

A little further on the huntsmen sighted a mob of kangaroos. Joy and excitement. A mob? It was a swarm! Away they hopped. Off scrambled the dogs, and off flew Paddy Maloney and Dave—the rest followed anyhow, and at varying speeds.

That all those dogs should have selected and followed the same kangaroo was sad and humiliating. And such a waif of a thing, too! Still, they stuck to it. For more than a mile, down a slope, the weedy marsupial outpaced them, but when it came to the hill the daylight between rapidly began to lessen. A few seconds more and all would have been over, but a straggling, stupid old ewe, belonging to an unneighbourly squatter, darted up from the shade of a tree right in the way of Maloney's Brindle, who was leading. Brindle always preferred mutton to marsupial, so he let the latter slide and secured the ewe. The death-scene was most imposing. The ground around was strewn with small tufts of white wool. There was a complete circle of eager,

wriggling dogs—all jammed together, heads down, and tails elevated. Not a scrap of the ewe was visible. Paddy Maloney jumped down and proceeded to batter the brutes vigorously with a waddy. As the others arrived, they joined him. The dogs were hungry, and fought for every inch of the sheep. Those not laid out were pulled away, and! when old Brown had dragged the last one off by the hind legs, all that was left of that ewe was four feet and some skin.

Dad shook his head and looked grave—so did Anderson. After a short rest they decided to divide into parties and work the ridges. A start was made. Dad's contingent—consisting of himself and Joe, Paddy Maloney, Anderson, old Brown, and several others—started a mob. This time the dogs separated and scampered off in all directions. In quick time Brown's black slut bailed up an "old man" full of fight. Nothing was more desirable. He was a monster, a king kangaroo; and as he raised himself to his full height on his toes and tail he looked formidable—a grand and majestic demon of the bush. The slut made no attempt to tackle him; she stood off with her tongue out. Several small dogs belonging to Anderson barked energetically at him, even venturing occasionally to run behind and bite his tail. But, further than grabbing them in his arms and embracing them, he took no notice. There he towered, his head back and chest well out, awaiting the horsemen. They came, shouting and hooraying. He faced them defiantly. Anderson, aglow with excitement, dismounted and aimed a lump of rock at his head, which laid out one of the little dogs. They pelted him with sticks and stones till their arms were tired, but they might just as well have pelted a

dead cow. Paddy Maloney took out his stirrup. "Look out!" he cried. They looked out. Then, galloping up, he swung the iron at the marsupial, and nearly knocked his horse's eye out.

Dad was disgusted. He and Joe approached the enemy on Farmer. Dad carried a short stick. The "old man" looked him straight in the face. Dad poked the stick at him. He promptly grabbed hold of it, and a piece of Dad's hand as well. Farmer had not been in many battles—no Defence Force man ever owned him. He threw up his head and snorted, and commenced a retreat. The kangaroo followed him up and seized Dad by the shirt. Joe evinced signs of timidity. He lost faith in Dad, and, half jumping, half falling, he landed on the ground, and set out speedily for a tree. Dad lost the stick, and in attempting to brain the brute with his fist he overbalanced and fell out of the saddle. He struggled to his feet, and clutched his antagonist affectionately by both paws—standing well away. Backwards and forwards and round and round they moved. "Use your knife!" Anderson called out, getting further away himself. But Dad dared not relax his grip. Paddy Maloney ran behind the brute several times to lay him out with a waddy, but each time he turned and fled before striking the blow. Dad thought to force matters, and began kicking his assailant vigorously in the stomach. Such dull, heavy thuds! The kangaroo retaliated, putting Dad on the defensive. Dad displayed remarkable suppleness about the hips. At last the brute fixed his deadly toe in Dad's belt.

It was an anxious moment, but the belt broke, and Dad breathed freely again. He was acting entirely on the defensive, but an awful consciousness of impending misfortune assailed

him. His belt was gone, and—his trousers began to slip—slip—slip! He called wildly to the others for God's sake to do something. They helped with advice. He yelled "Curs!" and "Cowards!" back at them. Still, as he danced around with his strange and ungainly partner, his trousers kept slipping—slipping. For the fiftieth time and more he glanced eagerly over his shoulder for some haven of safety. None was near. And then—oh, horror!—down THEY slid calmly and noiselessly. Poor Dad! He was at a disadvantage; his leg work was hampered. He was hobbled. Could he only get free of them altogether! But he could n't—his feet were large. He took a lesson from the foe and jumped—jumped this way and that way, and round about, while large drops of perspiration rolled off him. The small dogs displayed renewed and ridiculous ferocity, often mistaking Dad for the marsupial. At last Dad became exhausted—there was no spring left in him. Once he nearly went down. Twice he tripped. He staggered again—down he was going—down—down, down and down he fell! But at the same moment, and, as though they had dropped from the clouds, Brindle and five or six other dogs pounced on the "old man." The rest may be imagined.

Dad lay on the ground to recover his wind, and when he mounted Farmer again and silently turned for home, Paddy Maloney was triumphantly seated on the carcass of the fallen enemy, exultingly explaining how he missed the brute's head with the stirrup-iron, and claiming the tail.

CHAPTER IX.

Dave's Snakebite.

One hot day, as we were finishing dinner, a sheriff's bailiff rode up to the door. Norah saw him first. She was dressed up ready to go over to Mrs. Anderson's to tea. Sometimes young Harrison had tea at Anderson's—Thursdays, usually. This was Thursday; and Norah was starting early, because it was "a good step of a way".

She reported the visitor. Dad left the table, munching some bread, and went out to him. Mother looked out of the door; Sal went to the window; Little Bill and Tom peeped through a crack; Dave remained at his dinner; and Joe knavishly seized the opportunity of exploring the table for leavings, finally seating himself in Dad's place, and commencing where Dad had left off.

"Jury summons," said the meek bailiff, extracting a paper from his breast-pocket, and reading, "Murtagh Joseph Rudd, selector, Shingle Hut...Correct?"

Dad nodded assent.

"Got any water?"

There was n't a drop in the cask, so Dad came in and asked Mother if there was any tea left. She pulled a long, solemn, Sunday-school face, and looked at Joe, who was holding the teapot upside-down, shaking the tea-leaves into his cup.

"Tea, Dad?" he chuckled—"by golly!"

Dad did n't think it worth while going out to the bailiff again. He sent Joe.

"Not any at all?"

"Nothink," said Joe.

"H'm! Nulla bona, eh?" And the Law smiled at its own joke and went off thirsty.

Thus it was that Dad came to be away one day when his great presence of mind and ability as a bush doctor was most required at Shingle Hut.

Dave took Dad's place at the plough. One of the horses—a colt that Dad bought with the money he got for helping with Anderson's crop—had only just been broken. He was bad at starting. When touched with the rein he would stand and wait until the old furrow-horse put in a few steps; then plunge to get ahead of him, and if a chain or a swingle-tree or something else did n't break, and Dave kept the plough in, he ripped and tore along in style, bearing in and bearing out, and knocking the old horse about till that much-enduring animal became as cranky as himself, and the pace terrible. Down would go the plough-handles, and, with one tremendous pull on the reins, Dave would haul them back on to their rumps. Then he would rush up and kick the colt on the root of the tail, and if that did n't make him put his leg over the chains and kick till he ran a hook into his heel and lamed himself, or broke something, it caused him to rear up and fall back on the plough and snort and strain and struggle till there was not a stitch left on him but the winkers.

Now, if Dave was noted for one thing more than another it was for his silence. He scarcely ever took the trouble to speak. He hated to be asked a question, and mostly answered by nodding his head. Yet, though he never seemed to practise, he could, when his blood was fairly up, swear with distinction and effect. On this occasion he swore through the whole afternoon without repeating himself.

Towards evening Joe took the reins and began to drive. He had n't gone once around when, just as the horses approached a big dead tree that had been left standing in the cultivation, he planted his left foot heavily upon a Bathurst-burr that had been cut and left lying. It clung to him. He hopped along on one leg, trying to kick it off; still it clung to him. He fell down. The horses and the tree got mixed up, and everything was confusion.

Dave abused Joe remorselessly. "Go on!" he howled, waving in the air a fistful of grass and weeds which he had pulled from the nose of the plough; "clear out of this altogether!—you're only a damn nuisance."

Joe's eyes rested on the fistful of grass. They lit up suddenly.

"L-l-look out, Dave," he stuttered; "y'-y' got a s-s-snake."

Dave dropped the grass promptly. A deaf-adder crawled out of it. Joe killed it. Dave looked closely at his hand, which was all scratches and scars. He looked at it again; then he sat on the beam of the plough, pale and miserable-looking.

"D-d-did it bite y', Dave?" No answer.

Joe saw a chance to distinguish himself, and took it. He ran home, glad to be the bearer of the news, and told Mother that "Dave's got bit by a adder—a sudden-death adder—right on top o' the finger."

How Mother screamed! "My God! whatever shall we do? Run quick," she said, "and bring Mr. Maloney. Dear! oh dear! oh dear!"

Joe had not calculated on this injunction. He dropped his head and said sullenly: "Wot, walk all the way over there?"

Before he could say another word a tin-dish left a dinge on the back of his skull that will accompany him to his grave if he lives to be a thousand.

"You wretch, you! Why don't you run when I tell you?"

Joe sprang in the air like a shot wallaby.

"I'll not go AT ALL now—y' see!" he answered, starting to cry. Then Sal put on her hat and ran for Maloney.

Meanwhile Dave took the horses out, walked inside, and threw himself on the sofa without uttering a word. He felt ill.

Mother was in a paroxysm of fright. She threw her arms about frantically and cried for someone to come. At last she sat down and tried to think what she could do. She thought of the very thing, and ran for the carving-knife, which she handed to Dave with shut eyes. He motioned her with a disdainful movement of the elbow to take it away.

Would Maloney never come! He was coming, hat in hand, and running for dear life across the potato-paddock. Behind him was his man. Behind his man—Sal, out of breath. Behind her, Mrs. Maloney and the children.

"Phwat's the thrubble?" cried Maloney. "Bit be a dif—adher? O, be the tares of war!" Then he asked Dave numerous questions as to how it happened, which Joe answered with promptitude and pride. Dave simply shrugged his shoulders and turned his face to the wall. Nothing was to be got out of him.

Maloney held a short consultation with himself. Then—"Hould up yer hand!" he said, bending over Dave with a knife. Dave thrust out his arm violently, knocked the instrument to the other side of the room, and kicked wickedly.

"The pison's wurrkin'," whispered Maloney quite loud.

"Oh, my gracious!" groaned Mother.

"The poor crathur," said Mrs. Maloney.

There was a pause.

"Phwhat finger's bit?" asked Maloney. Joe thought it was the littlest one of the lot.

He approached the sofa again, knife in hand.

"Show me yer finger," he said to Dave.

For the first time Dave spoke. He said:

"Damn y'—what the devil do y' want? Clear out and lea' me 'lone."

Maloney hesitated. There was a long silence. Dave commenced breathing heavily.

"It's maikin' 'm slape," whispered Maloney, glancing over his shoulder at the women.

"Don't let him! Don't let him!" Mother wailed.

"Salvation to 's all!" muttered Mrs. Maloney, piously crossing herself.

Maloney put away the knife and beckoned to his man, who was looking on from the door. They both took a firm hold of Dave and stood him upon his feet. He looked hard and contemptuously at Maloney for some seconds. Then with gravity and deliberation Dave said: "Now wot 'n th' devil are y' up t'? Are y' mad?"

"Walk 'm along, Jaimes—walk 'm—along," was all Maloney had to say. And out into the yard they marched him. How Dave did struggle to get away!—swearing and cursing Maloney for a cranky Irishman till he foamed at the mouth, all of which the other put down to snake-poison. Round and round the yard and up and down it they trotted him till long after dark, until there was n't a struggle left in him.

They placed him on the sofa again, Maloney keeping him awake with a strap. How Dave ground his teeth and kicked and swore whenever he felt that strap! And they sat and watched him.

It was late in the night when Dad came from town. He staggered in with the neck of a bottle showing out of his pocket. In his hand was a piece of paper wrapped round the end of some yards of sausage. The dog outside carried the other end.

"An' 'e ish'n't dead?" Dad said, after hearing what had befallen Dave. "Don' b'leevsh id—wuzhn't bit. Die 'fore shun'own ifsh desh ad'er bish 'm."

"Bit!" Dave said bitterly, turning round to the surprise of everyone. "I never said I was BIT. No one said I was—only those snivelling idiots and that pumpkin-headed Irish pig there."

Maloney lowered his jaw and opened his eyes.

"Zhackly. Did'n' I (HIC) shayzo, 'Loney? Did'n' I, eh, ol' wom'n!" Dad mumbled, and dropped his chin on his chest.

Maloney began to take another view of the matter. He put a leading question to Joe.

"He MUSTER been bit," Joe answered, "'cuz he had the d-death adder in his hand."

More silence.

"Mush die 'fore shun'own," Dad murmured.

Maloney was thinking hard. At last he spoke. "Bridgy!" he cried, "where's th' childer?" Mrs. Maloney gathered them up.

Just then Dad seemed to be dreaming. He swayed about. His head hung lower, and he muttered, "Shen'I'm'n, yoush disharged wish shanksh y'cun'ry."

The Maloneys left.

Dave is still alive and well, and silent as ever; and if any one question is more intolerable and irritating to him than another, it is to be asked if he remembers the time he was bitten by deaf-adder.

CHAPTER X.

Dad And The Donovans.

A sweltering summer's afternoon. A heat that curled and withered the very weeds. The corn-blades drooping, sulking still. Mother and Sal ironing, mopping their faces with a towel and telling each other how hot it was. The dog stretched across the doorway. A child's bonnet on the floor—the child out in the sun. Two horsemen approaching the slip-rails.

Dad had gone down the gully to Farmer, who had been sick for four days. The ploughing was at a standstill in consequence, for we had only two draught-horses. Dad erected a shelter over him, made of boughs, to keep the sun off. Two or three times a day he cut greenstuff for him—which the cows ate. He humped water to him which he sullenly refused to drink; and did all in his power to persuade Farmer to get up and go on with the ploughing. I don't know if Dad knew anything of mesmerism, but he used to stand for long intervals dumbly staring the old horse full in the eyes till in a commanding voice he would bid him, "Get up!" But Farmer lacked the patriotism of the back-block poets. He was obdurate, and not once did he "awake," not to mention "arise".

This afternoon, as Dad approached his dumb patient, he suddenly put down the bucket of water which he was carrying and ran, shouting angrily. A flock of crows flew away from Farmer and "cawed" from a tree close by. Dad was excited, and

when he saw that one of the animal's eyes was gone and a stream of blood trickled over its nose he sat down and hid his face in his big rough hands.

"CAW, CAW!" came from the tree.

Dad rose and looked up.

"CURSE you!" he hissed—"you black wretches of hell!"

"CAW, CAW, CAW"

He ran towards the tree as though he would hurl it to the ground, and away flew the crows.

Joe arrived.

"W-w-wuz they at him, Dad?"

Dad turned on him, trembling with rage.

"Oh, YOU son of the Devil!" he commenced. "YOU worthless pup, you! Look there! Do you see that?" (He pointed to the horse.) "Did n't I tell you to mind him? Did n'—"

"Yes," snivelled Joe; "but Anderson's dog had a k-k-k-angaroo bailed up."

"DAMN you, be off out of this!" And Dad aimed a block of wood at Joe which struck him on the back as he made away. But nothing short of two broken legs would stop Joe, who the next instant had dashed among the corn like an emu into a scrub.

Dad returned to the house, foaming and vowing to take the gun and shoot Joe down like a wallaby. But when he saw two horses hanging up he hesitated and would have gone away again had Mother not called out that he was wanted. He went in reluctantly.

Red Donovan and his son, Mick, were there. Donovan was the publican, butcher, and horse-dealer at the Overhaul. He was reputed to be well-in, though some said that if everybody had their own he would n't be worth much. He was a glib-tongued Irishman who knew everything—or fondly imagined he did—from the law to horse-surgery. There was money to be made out of selections, he reckoned, if selectors only knew how to make it—the majority, he proclaimed, did n't know enough to get under a tree when it rained. As a dealer, he was a hard nut, never giving more than a "tenner" for a twenty pound beast, or selling a ten pound one for less than twenty pounds. And few knew Donovan better than did Dad, or had been taken in by him oftener; but on this occasion Dad was in no easy or benevolent frame of mind.

He sat down, and they talked of crops and the weather, and beat about the bush until Donovan said:

"Have you any fat steers to sell?"

Dad had n't. "But," he added, "I can sell you a horse."

"Which one?" asked Donovan, for he knew the horses as well as Dad did—perhaps better.

"The bay—Farmer."

"How much?"

"Seven pounds." Now, Farmer was worth fourteen pounds, if worth a shilling—that is, before he took sick—and Donovan knew it well.

"Seven," he repeated ponderingly. "Give you six."

Never before did Dad show himself such an expert in dissimulation. He shook his head knowingly, and enquired of Donovan if he would take the horse for nothing.

"Split the difference, then—make it six-ten?"

Dad rose and looked out the window.

"There he is now," he remarked sadly, "in the gully there."

"Well, what's it to be—six-ten or nothing?" renewed Donovan.

"All right, then," Dad replied, demurely, "take him!"

The money was paid there and then and receipts drawn up. Then, saying that Mick would come for the horse on the day following, and after offering a little gratuitous advice on seed-wheat and pig-sticking, the Donovans left.

Mick came the next day, and Dad showed him Farmer, under the bushes. He was n't dead, because when Joe sat on him he moved. "There he is," said Dad, grinning.

Mick remained seated on his horse, bewildered-looking, staring first at Farmer, then at Dad.

"Well?" Dad remarked, still grinning. Then Mick spoke feelingly.

"YOU SWINDLING OLD CRAWLER!" he said, and galloped away. It was well for him he got a good start.

For long after that we turned the horses and cows into the little paddock at night, and if ever the dog barked Dad would jump up and go out in his shirt.

We put them back into the paddock again, and the first night they were there two cows got out and went away, taking with them the chain that fastened the slip-rails. We never saw or heard of them again; but Dad treasured them in his heart. Often, when he was thoughtful, he would ponder out plans for getting even with the Donovans—we knew it was the Donovans. And Fate seemed to be of Dad's mind; for the Donovans got into "trouble", and were reported to be "doing time." That pleased Dad; but the vengeance was a little vague. He would have liked a finger in the pie himself.

Four years passed. It was after supper, and we were all husking corn in the barn. Old Anderson and young Tom Anderson and Mrs. Maloney were helping us. We were to assist them the following week. The barn was illuminated by fat-lamps, which made the spiders in the rafters uneasy and disturbed the slumbers of a few fowls that for months had insisted on roosting on the cross-beam.

Mrs. Maloney was arguing with Anderson. She was claiming to have husked two cobs to his one, when the dogs started barking savagely. Dad crawled from beneath a heap of husks and went out. The night was dark. He bade the dogs "Lie down." They barked louder. "Damn you—lie down!" he roared. They shut up. Then a voice from the darkness said:

"Is that you, Mr. Rudd?"

Dad failed to recognise it, and went to the fence where the visitor was. He remained there talking for fully half-an-hour. Then he returned, and said it was young Donovan.

"DONOVAN! MICK Donovan?" exclaimed Anderson. And Mother and Mrs. Maloney and Joe echoed "MICK Donovan?" They WERE surprised.

"He's none too welcome," said Anderson, thinking of his horses and cows. Mother agreed with him, while Mrs. Maloney repeated over and over again that she was always under the impression that Mick Donovan was in gaol along with his bad old father. Dad was uncommunicative. There was something on his mind. He waited till the company had gone, then consulted with Dave.

They were outside, in the dark, and leant on the dray. Dad said in a low voice: "He's come a hundred mile to-day, 'n' his horse is dead-beat, 'n' he wants one t' take him t' Back Creek t'morrer 'n' leave this one in his place...Wot d'y' think?" Dave seemed to think a great deal, for he said nothing.

"Now," continued Dad, "it's me opinion the horse is n't his; it's one he's shook—an' I've an idea." Then he proceeded to instruct Dave in the idea. A while later he called Joe and drilled him in the idea.

That night, young Donovan stayed at Shingle Hut. In the morning Dad was very affable. He asked Donovan to come and show him his horse, as he must see it before thinking of

exchanging. They proceeded to the paddock together. The horse was standing under a tree, tired-looking. Dad stood and looked at Donovan for fully half-a-minute without speaking.

"Why, damn it!" he exclaimed, at last, "that's MY OWN horse...You don't mean...S'help me! Old Bess's foal!" Donovan told him he was making a mistake.

"Mistake be hanged!" replied Dad, walking round the animal. "Not much of a mistake about HIM!"

Just here Dave appeared, as was proper.

"Do you know this horse?" Dad asked him. "Yes, of course," he answered, surprisedly, with his eyes open wide, "Bess's foal!—of course it is."

"There you are!" said Dad, grinning triumphantly.

Donovan seemed uneasy.

Joe in his turn appeared. Dad put the same question to him. Of course Joe knew Bess's foal—"the one that got stole."

There was a silence.

"Now," said Dad, looking very grave, "what have y' got t' say? Who'd y' get him off? Show's y'r receipt."

Donovan had nothing to say; he preferred to be silent.

"Then," Dad went on, "clear out of this as fast as you can go, an' think y'rself lucky."

He cleared, but on foot.

Dad gazed after him, and, as he left the paddock, said:

"One too many f' y' that time, Mick Donovan!" Then to Dave, who was still looking at the horse: "He's a stolen one right enough, but he's a beauty, and we'll keep him; and if the owner ever comes for him, well—if he is the owner—he can have him, that's all."

We had the horse for eighteen months and more. One day Dad rode him to town. He was no sooner there than a man came up and claimed him. Dad objected. The man went off and brought a policeman. "Orright"—Dad said—"TAKE him." The policeman took him. He took Dad too. The lawyer got Dad off, but it cost us five bags of potatoes. Dad did n't grudge them, for he reckoned we'd had value. Besides, he was even with the Donovans for the two cows.

CHAPTER XI.

A Splendid Year For Corn.

We had just finished supper. Supper! dry bread and sugarless tea. Dad was tired out and was resting at one end of the sofa; Joe was stretched at the other, without a pillow, and his legs tangled up among Dad's. Bill and Tom squatted in the ashes, while Mother tried to put the fat-lamp into burning order by poking it with a table-fork.

Dad was silent; he seemed sad, and lay for some time gazing at the roof. He might have been watching the blaze of the glorious moon or counting the stars through the gaps in the shingles, but he was n't—there was no such sentiment in Dad. He was thinking how his long years of toil and worry had been rewarded again and again by disappointment—wondering if ever there would be a turn in his luck, and how he was going to get enough out of the land that season to pay interest and keep Mother and us in bread and meat.

At last he spoke, or rather muttered disjointedly, "Plen-ty—to eat—in the safe." Then suddenly, in a strange and hollow voice, he shouted, "THEY' RE DEAD—ALL OF THEN! I STARVED THEM!"

Mother DID get a fright. She screamed. Then Dad jumped up, rubbing his eyes, and asked what was the matter. Nothing was the matter THEN. He had dozed and talked in his sleep,

that was all; he had n't starved anyone. Joe did n't jump up when Mother screamed—not altogether; he raised himself and reached for Dad's pillow, then lay down and snored serenely till bed-time.

Dad sat gloomily by the fire and meditated. Mother spoke pleadingly to him and asked him not to fret. He ran his fingers uneasily through his hair and spat in the ashes. "Don't fret? When there's not a bit to eat in the place—when there's no way of getting anything, and when—merciful God!—every year sees things worse than they were before."

"It's only fancy," Mother went on. "And you've been brooding and brooding till it seems far worse than it really is."

"It's no fancy, Ellen." Then, after a pause—"Was the thirty acres of wheat that did n't come up fancy? Is it only fancy that we've lost nearly every beast in the paddock? Was the drought itself a fancy? No—no." And he shook his head sadly and stared again into the fire.

Dad's inclination was to leave the selection, but Mother pleaded for another trial of it—just one more. She had wonderful faith in the selection, had Mother. She pleaded until the fire burned low, then Dad rose and said: "Well, we'll try it once more with corn, and if nothing comes of it why then we MUST give it up." Then he took the spade and raked the fire together and covered it with ashes—we always covered the fire over before going to bed so as to keep it alight. Some mornings, though, it would be out, when one of us would have to go across to Anderson's and borrow a fire-stick. Any of us but Joe—he

was sent only once, and on that occasion he stayed at Anderson's to breakfast, and on his way back successfully burnt out two grass paddocks belonging to a J.P.

So we began to prepare the soil for another crop of corn, and Dad started over the same old ground with the same old plough. How I remember that old, screwed and twisted plough! The land was very hard, and the horses out of condition. We wanted a furrow-horse. Smith had one—a good one. "Put him in the furrow," he said to Dad, "and you can't PULL him out of it." Dad wished to have such a horse. Smith offered to exchange for our roan saddle mare—one we found running in the lane, and advertised as being in our paddock, and no one claimed it. Dad exchanged.

He yoked the new horse to the plough, and it took to the furrow splendidly—but that was all; it did n't take to anything else. Dad gripped the handles—"Git up!" he said, and tapped Smith's horse with the rein. Smith's horse pranced and marked time well, but did n't tighten the chains. Dad touched him again. Then he stood on his fore-legs and threw about a hundredweight of mud that clung to his heels at Dad's head. That aggravated Dad, and he seized the plough-scraper, and, using both hands, calmly belted Smith's horse over the ribs for two minutes, by the sun. He tried him again. The horse threw himself down in the furrow. Dad took the scraper again, welted him on the rump, dug it into his back-bone, prodded him in the side, then threw it at him disgustedly. Then Dad sat down awhile and breathed heavily. He rose again and pulled Smith's horse by the head. He

was pulling hard when Dave and Joe came up. Joe had a bow-and-arrow in his hand, and said!, "He's a good furrer 'orse, eh, Dad? Smith SAID you could n't pull him out of it."

Shall I ever forget the look on Dad's face! He brandished the scraper and sprang wildly at Joe and yelled, "Damn y', you WHELP! what do you want here?"

Joe left. The horse lay in the furrow. Blood was dropping from its mouth. Dave pointed it out, and Dad opened the brute's jaws and examined them. No teeth were there. He looked on the ground round about—none there either. He looked at the horse's mouth again, then hit him viciously with his clenched fist and said, "The old ——, he never DID have any!" At length he unharnessed the brute as it lay—pulled the winkers off, hurled them at its head, kicked it once—twice—three times—and the furrow-horse jumped up, trotted away triumphantly, and joyously rolled in the dam where all our water came from, drinking-water included.

Dad went straightaway to Smith's place, and told Smith he was a dirty, mean, despicable swindler—or something like that. Smith smiled. Dad put one leg through the slip-rails and promised Smith, if he'd only come along, to split palings out of him. But Smith did n't. The instinct of self-preservation must have been deep in that man Smith. Then Dad went home and said he would shoot the —— horse there and then, and went looking for the gun. The horse died in the paddock of old age, but Dad never ploughed with him again.

Dad followed the plough early and late. One day he was giving the horses a spell after some hours' work, when Joe came to say that a policeman was at the house wanting to see him. Dad thought of the roan mare, and Smith, and turned very pale. Joe said: "There's "Q.P." on his saddle-cloth; what's that for, Dad?" But he did n't answer—he was thinking hard. "And," Joe went on, "there's somethin' sticking out of his pocket—Dave thinks it'll be 'ancuffs." Dad shuddered. On the way to the house Joe wished to speak about the policeman, but Dad seemed to have lock-jaw. When he found the officer of the law only wanted to know the number of stock he owned, he talked freely—he was delighted. He said, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," and "Jusso, sir," to everything the policeman said.

Dad wished to learn some law. He said: "Now, tell me this: supposing a horse gets into my paddock—or into your paddock—and I advertise that horse and nobody claims him, can't I put my brand on him?" The policeman jerked back his head and stared at the shingles long enough to recall all the robberies he had committed, and said: "Ye can—that's so—ye can."

"I knew it," answered Dad; "but a lawyer in town told Maloney, over there, y' could n't."

"COULD N'T?" And the policeman laughed till he nearly had the house down, only stopping to ask, while the tears ran over his well-fed cheeks, "Did he charge him forrit?" and laughed again. He went away laughing, and for all I know the wooden-head may be laughing yet.

Everything was favourable to a good harvest. The rain fell just when it was wanted, and one could almost see the corn growing. How it encouraged Dad, and what new life it seemed to give him! In the cool of the evenings he would walk along the headlands and admire the forming cobs, and listen to the rustling of the rows of drooping blades as they swayed and beat against each other in the breeze. Then he would go home filled with fresh hopes and talk of nothing but the good prospect of that crop.

And how we worked! Joe was the only one who played. I remember him finding something on a chain one day. He had never seen anything like it before. Dad told him it was a steel-trap and explained the working of it. Joe was entranced—an invaluable possession! A treasure, he felt, that the Lord must specially have sent him to catch things with. He caught many things with it—willie-wagtails, laughing-jackasses, fowls, and mostly the dog. Joe was a born naturalist—a perfect McCooey in his way, and a close observer of the habits and customs of animals and living things. He observed that whenever Jacob Lipp came to our place he always, when going home, ran along the fence and touched the top of every post with his hand. The Lipps had newly arrived from Germany, and their selection adjoined ours. Jacob was their "eldest", about fourteen, and a fat, jabbering, jolly-faced youth he was. He often came to our place and followed Joe about. Joe never cared much for the company of anyone younger than himself, and therefore fiercely resented the indignity. Jacob could speak only German—Joe understood only pure unadulterated Australian. Still Jacob insisted on talking and telling Joe his private affairs.

This day, Mrs. Lipp accompanied Jacob. She came to have a "yarn" with Mother. They did n't understand each other either; but it did n't matter much to them—it never does matter much to women whether they understand or not; anyway, they laughed most of the time and seemed to enjoy themselves greatly. Outside Jacob and Joe mixed up in an argument. Jacob shoved his face close to Joe's and gesticulated and talked German at the rate of two hundred words a minute. Joe thought he understood him and said: "You want to fight?" Jacob seemed to have a nightmare in German.

"Orright, then," Joe said, and knocked him down.

Jacob seemed to understand Australian better when he got up, for he ran inside, and Joe put his ear to a crack, but did n't hear him tell Mother.

Joe had an idea. He would set the steel-trap on a wire-post and catch Jacob. He set it. Jacob started home. One, two, three posts he hit. Then he hit the trap. It grabbed him faithfully by three fingers.

Angels of Love! did ever a boy of fourteen yell like it before! He sprang in the air—threw himself on the ground like a roped brumby—jumped up again and ran all he knew, frantically wringing the hand the trap clung to. What Jacob reckoned had hold of him Heaven only can tell. His mother thought he must have gone mad and ran after him. Our Mother fairly tore after her. Dad and Dave left a dray-load of corn and joined in the hunt. Between them they got Jacob down and took him out of the trap. Dad smashed the infernal machine, and then went to look for Joe. But Joe was n't about.

The corn shelled out 100 bags—the best crop we had ever had; but when Dad came to sell it seemed as though every farmer in every farming district on earth had had a heavy crop, for the market was glutted—there was too much corn in Egypt—and he could get no price for it. At last he was offered Ninepence ha'penny per bushel, delivered at the railway station. Ninepence ha'penny per bushel, delivered at the railway station! Oh, my country! and fivepence per bushel out of that to a carrier to take it there! AUSTRALIA, MY MOTHER!

Dad sold—because he could n't afford to await a better market; and when the letter came containing a cheque in payment, he made a calculation, then looked pitifully at Mother, and muttered—"SEVEN POUN'S TEN!"

CHAPTER XII.

Kate's Wedding.

Our selection was a great place for dancing. We could all dance—from Dan down—and there was n't a figure or a movement we did n't know. We learned young. Mother was a firm believer in early tuition. She used to say it was nice for young people to know how to dance, and be able to take their part when they went out anywhere, and not be awkward and stupid-looking when they went into society. It was awful, she thought, to see young fellows and big lumps of girls like the Bradys stalk into a ballroom and sit the whole night long in a corner, without attempting to get up. She did n't know how mothers COULD bring children up so ignorantly, and did n't wonder at some of them not being able to find husbands for their daughters.

But we had a lot to feel thankful for. Besides a sympathetic mother, every other facility was afforded us to become accomplished. Abundance of freedom; enthusiastic sisters; and no matter how things were going—whether the corn would n't come up, or the wheat had failed, or the pumpkins had given out, or the water-hole run dry—we always had a concertina in the house. It never failed to attract company. Paddy Maloney and the well-sinkers, after belting and blasting all day long, used to drop in at night, and throw the table outside, and take the girls up, and prance about the floor with them till all hours.

Nearly every week Mother gave a ball. It might have been every night only for Dad. He said the jumping about destroyed the ground-floor—wore it away and made the room like a well. And whenever it rained hard and the water rushed in he had to bail it out. Dad always looked on the dark side of things. He had no ear for music either. His want of appreciation of melody often made the home miserable when it might have been the merriest on earth. Sometimes it happened that he had to throw down the plough-reins for half-an-hour or so to run round the wheat-paddock after a horse or an old cow; then, if he found Dave, or Sal, or any of us, sitting inside playing the concertina when he came to get a drink, he would nearly go mad.

"Can't y' find anything better t' do than everlastingly playing at that damn thing?" he would shout. And if we did n't put the instrument down immediately he would tear it from our hands and pitch it outside. If we DID lay it down quietly he would snatch it up and heave it out just as hard. The next evening he would devote all his time to patching the fragments together with sealing-wax.

Still, despite Dad's antagonism, we all turned out good players. It cost us nothing either. We learnt from each other. Kate was the first that learnt. SHE taught Sal. Sal taught Dave, and so on. Sandy Taylor was Kate's tutor. He passed our place every evening going to his selection, where he used to sleep at night (fulfilling conditions), and always stopped at the fence to yarn with Kate about dancing. Sandy was a fine dancer himself, very light on his feet and easy to waltz with—so the girls made out. When the dancing subject was exhausted Sandy would drag

some hair out of his horse's mane and say, "How's the concertina?" "It's in there," Kate would answer. Then turning round she would call out, "J—OE, bring the concer'!"

In an instant Joe would strut along with it. And Sandy, for the fiftieth time, would examine it and laugh at the kangaroo-skin straps that Dave had tacked to it, and the scraps of brown paper that were plastered over the ribs of it to keep the wind in; and, cocking his left leg over the pommel of his saddle, he would sound a full blast on it as a preliminary. Then he would strike up "The Rocky Road to Dublin", or "The Wind Among the Barley," or some other beautiful air, and grind away untiringly until it got dark—until mother came and asked him if he would n't come in and have supper. Of course, he always would. After supper he would play some more. Then there would be a dance.

A ball was to be held at Anderson's one Friday night, and only Kate and Dave were asked from our place. Dave was very pleased to be invited; it was the first time he had been asked anywhere, and he began to practise vigorously. The evening before the ball Dad sent him to put the draught horses in the top paddock. He went off merrily with them. The sun was just going down when he let them go, and save the noise of the birds settling to rest the paddock was quiet. Dave was filled with emotion and enthusiastic thoughts about the ball.

He threw the winkers down and looked around. For a moment or two he stood erect, then he bowed gracefully to the saplings on his right, then to the stumps and trees on his left, and humming a tune, ambled across a small patch of ground that was bare and black, and pranced back again. He opened his arms

and, clasping some beautiful imaginary form in them, swung round and round like a windmill. Then he paused for breath, embraced his partner again, and "galloped" up and down. And young Johnson, who had been watching him in wonder from behind a fence, bolted for our place.

"Mrs. Rudd! Mrs. Rudd!" he shouted from the verandah. Mother went out.

"Wot's—wot's up with Dave?"

Mother turned pale.

"There's SOMETHING—!"

"My God!" Mother exclaimed—"WHATEVER has happened?"

Young Johnson hesitated. He was in doubt.

"Oh! What IS it?" Mother moaned.

"Well" (he drew close to her) "he's—he's MAD!"

"OH-H!"

"He IS. I seen 'im just now up in your paddick, an' he's clean off he's pannikin."

Just then Dave came down the track whistling. Young Johnson saw him and fled.

For some time Mother regarded Dave with grave suspicion, then she questioned him closely.

"Yairs," he said, grinning hard, "I was goin' through th' FUST SET."

It was when Kate was married to Sandy Taylor that we realised what a blessing it is to be able to dance. How we looked forward to that wedding! We were always talking about it, and were very pleased it would be held in our own house, because all of us could go then. None of us could work for thinking of it—even Dad seemed to forget his troubles about the corn and Mick Brennan's threat to summon him for half the fence. Mother said we would want plenty of water for the people to drink, so Sandy yoked his horse to the slide, and he, Dad, and Joe started for the springs.

The slide was the fork of a tree, alias a wheel-less water-trolley. The horse was hitched to the butt end, and a batten nailed across the prongs kept the cask from slipping off going uphill. Sandy led the way and carried the bucket; Dad went ahead to clear the track of stones; and Joe straddled the cask to keep her steady.

It always took three to work the slide.

The water they brought was a little thick—old Anderson had been down and stirred it up pulling a bullock out; but Dad put plenty ashes in the cask to clear it.

Each of us had his own work to do. Sandy knocked the partition down and decorated the place with boughs; Mother and the girls cooked and covered the walls with newspapers, and Dad gathered cow-dung and did the floor.

Two days before the wedding. All of us were still working hard. Dad was up to his armpits in a bucket of mixture, with a stack of cow-dung on one side, and a heap of sand and the

shovel on the other. Dave and Joe were burning a cow that had died just in front of the house, and Sandy had gone to town for his tweed trousers.

A man in a long, black coat, white collar, and new leggings rode up, spoke to Dad, and got off. Dad straightened up and looked awkward, with his arms hanging wide and the mixture dripping from them. Mother came out. The cove shook hands with her, but he did n't with Dad. They went inside—not Dad, who washed himself first.

Dave sent Joe to ask Dad who the cove was. Dad spoke in a whisper and said he was Mr. Macpherson, the clergyman who was to marry Kate and Sandy. Dave whistled and piled more wood on the dead cow. Mother came out and called Dave and Joe. Dave would n't go, but sent Joe.

Dave threw another log on the cow, then thought he would see what was going on inside.

He stood at the window and looked in. He could n't believe his eyes at first, and put his head right in. There were Dad, Joe, and the lot of them down on their marrow-bones saying something after the parson. Dave was glad that he did n't go in.

How the parson prayed! Just when he said "Lead us not into temptation" the big kangaroo-dog slipped in and grabbed all the fresh meat on the table; but Dave managed to kick him in the ribs at the door. Dad groaned and seemed very restless.

When the parson had gone Dad said that what he had read about "reaping the same as you sow" was all rot, and spoke about the time when we sowed two bushels of barley in the lower paddock and got a big stack of rye from it.

The wedding was on a Wednesday, and at three o'clock in the afternoon. Most of the people came before dinner; the Hamiltons arrived just after breakfast. Talk of drays!—the little paddock could n't hold them.

Jim Mullins was the only one who came in to dinner; the others mostly sat on their heels in a row and waited in the shade of the wire-fence. The parson was the last to come, and as he passed in he knocked his head against the kangaroo-leg hanging under the verandah. Dad saw it swinging, and said angrily to Joe: "Did n't I tell you to take that down this morning?"

Joe unhooked it and said: "But if I hang it anywhere else the dog'll get it."

Dad tried to laugh at Joe, and said, loudly, "And what else is it for?" Then he hustled Joe off before he could answer him again.

Joe did n't understand.

Then Dad said (putting the leg in a bag): "Do you want everyone to know we eat it, —— you?"

Joe understood.

The ceremony commenced. Those who could squeeze inside did so—the others looked in at the window and through the cracks in the chimney.

Mrs. M'Doolan led Kate out of the back-room; then Sandy rose from the fire-place and stood beside her. Everyone thought Kate looked very nice—and orange blossoms! You'd think she was an orange-tree with a new bed-curtain thrown over it. Sandy looked well, too, in his snake-belt and new tweeds; but he seemed uncomfortable when the pin that Dave put in the back of his collar came out.

The parson did n't take long; and how they scrambled and tumbled over each other at the finish! Charley Mace said that he got the first kiss; Big George said HE did; and Mrs. M'Doolan was certain she would have got it only for the baby.

Fun! there WAS fun! The room was cleared and they promenaded for a dance—Sandy and Kate in the lead. They continued promenading until one of the well-sinkers called for the concertina—ours had been repaired till you could get only three notes out of it; but Jim Burke jumped on his horse and went home for his accordion.

Dance! they did dance!—until sun-rise. But unless you were dancing you could n't stay inside, because the floor broke up, and talk about dust!—before morning the room was like a drafting-yard.

It was a great wedding; and though years have since passed, all the neighbours say still it was the best they were ever at.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Summer Old Bob Died.

It was a real scorcher. A soft, sweltering summer's day. The air quivered; the heat drove the fowls under the dray and sent the old dog to sleep upon the floor inside the house. The iron on the skillion cracked and sweated—so did Dad and Dave down the paddock, grubbing—grubbing, in 130 degrees of sunshine. They were clearing a piece of new land—a heavily-timbered box-tree flat. They had been at it a fortnight, and if any music was in the ring of the axe or the rattle of the pick when commencing, there was none now.

Dad wished to be cheerful and complacent. He said (putting the pick down and dragging his flannel off to wring it): "It's a good thing to sweat well." Dave did n't say anything. I don't know what he thought, but he looked up at Dad—just looked up at him—while the perspiration filled his eyes and ran down over his nose like rain off a shingle; then he hitched up his pants and "wired in" again.

Dave was a philosopher. He worked away until the axe flew off the handle with a ring and a bound, and might have been lost in the long grass for ever only Dad stopped it with his shin. I fancy he did n't mean to stop it when I think how he jumped—it was the only piece of excitement there had been the whole of that relentlessly solemn fortnight. Dad got vexed—he was in a hurry with the grubbing—and said he never could get anything

done without something going wrong. Dave was n't sorry the axe came off—he knew it meant half-an-hour in the shade fixing it on again. "Anyway," Dad went on, "we'll go to dinner now."

On the way to the house he several times looked at the sky—that cloudless, burning sky—and said—to no one in particular, "I wish to God it would rain!" It sounded like an aggravated prayer. Dave did n't speak, and I don't think Dad expected he would.

Joe was the last to sit down to dinner, and he came in steaming hot. He had chased out of sight a cow that had poked into the cultivation. Joe mostly went about with green bushes in his hat, to keep his head cool, and a few gum-leaves were now sticking in his moist and matted hair.

"I put her out, Dad!" he said, casting an eager glare at everything on the table. "She tried to jump and got stuck on the fence, and broke it all down. On'y I could n't get anything, I'd er broke 'er head—there was n't a thing, on'y dead cornstalks and cow-dung about." Then he lunged his fork desperately at a blowfly that persistently hovered about his plate, and commenced.

Joe had a healthy appetite. He had charged his mouth with a load of cold meat, when his jaws ceased work, and, opening his mouth as though he were sleepy, he leaned forward and calmly returned it all to the plate. Dad got suspicious and asked Joe what was up; but Joe only wiped his mouth, looked sideways at his plate, and pushed it away.

All of us stopped eating then, and stared at each other. Mother said, "Well, I—I wrapped a cloth round it so nothing could get in, and put it in the safe—I don't know where on earth to put the meat, I'm sure; if I put it in a bag and hang it up that thief of a dog gets it."

"Yes," Dad observed, "I believe he'd stick his nose into hell itself, Ellen, if he thought there was a bone there—and there ought to be lots by this time." Then he turned over the remains of that cold meat, and, considering we had all witnessed the last kick of the slaughtered beast, it was surprising what animation this part of him yet retained. In vain did Dad explore for a really dead piece—there was life in all of it.

Joe was n't satisfied. He said he knew where there was a lot of eggs, and disappeared down the yard. Eggs were not plentiful on our selection, because we too often had to eat the hens when there was no meat—three or four were as many as we ever saw at one time. So on this day, when Joe appeared with a hatful, there was excitement. He felt himself a hero. We thought him a little saviour.

"My!" said Mother, "where did you get all those?"

"Get 'em! I've had these planted for three munce—they're a nest I found long ago; I thought I would n't say anythink till we really wanted 'em."

Just then one of the eggs fell out of the hat and went off "pop" on the floor.

Dave nearly upset the table, he rose so suddenly; and covering his nose with one hand he made for the door; then he scowled back over his shoulder at Joe. He utterly scorned his brother Joe. All of us deserted the table except Dad—he stuck to his place manfully; it took a lot to shift HIM.

Joe must have had a fine nerve. "That's on'y one bad 'n'," he said, taking the rest to the fireplace where the kettle stood. Then Dad, who had remained calm and majestic, broke out. "Damn y', boy!" he yelled, "take th' awful things outside—YOU tinker!" Joe took them out and tried them all, but I forget if he found a good one.

Dad peered into the almost-empty water-cask and again muttered a short prayer for rain. He decided to do no more grubbing that day, but to run wire around the new land instead. The posts had been in the ground some time, and were bored. Dave and Sarah bored them. Sarah was as good as any man—so Dad reckoned. She could turn her hand to anything, from sewing a shirt to sinking a post-hole. She could give Dave inches in arm measurements, and talk about a leg! She HAD a leg—a beauty! It was as thick at the ankle as Dad's was at the thigh, nearly.

Anyone who would know what real amusement is should try wiring posts. What was to have been the top wire (the No. 8 stuff) Dad commenced to put in the bottom holes, and we ran it through some twelve or fifteen posts before he saw the mistake—then we dragged it out slowly and savagely; Dad swearing adequately all the time.

At last everything went splendidly. We dragged the wire through panel after panel, and at intervals Dad would examine the blistering sky for signs of rain. Once when he looked up a red bullock was reaching for his waistcoat, which hung on a branch of a low tree. Dad sang out. The bullock poked out his tongue and reached higher. Then Dad told Joe to run. Joe ran—so did the bullock, but faster, and with the waistcoat that once was a part of Mother's shawl half-way down his throat. Had the shreds and ribbons that dangled to it been a little longer, he might have trodden on them and pulled it back, but he did n't. Joe deemed it his duty to follow that red bullock till it dropped the waistcoat, so he hammered along full split behind. Dad and Dave stood watching until pursued and pursuer vanished down the gully; then Dad said something about Joe being a fool, and they pulled at the wire again. They were nearing a corner post, and Dad was hauling the wire through the last panel, when there came the devil's own noise of galloping hoofs. Fifty or more cattle came careering along straight for the fence, bellowing and kicking up their heels in the air, as cattle do sometimes after a shower of rain. Joe was behind them—considerably—still at full speed and yelping like a dog. Joe loved excitement.

For weeks those cattle had been accustomed to go in and out between the posts; and they did n't seem to have any thoughts of wire as they bounded along. Dave stood with gaping mouth. Dad groaned, and the wire's-end he was holding in his hand flew up with a whiz and took a scrap of his ear away. The cattle got mixed up in the wires. Some toppled over; some were

caught by the legs; some by the horns. They dragged the wire twenty and thirty yards away, twisted it round logs, and left a lot of the posts pointing to sunset.

Oh, Dad's language then! He swung his arms about and foamed at the mouth. Dave edged away from him.

Joe came up waving triumphantly a chewed piece of the waistcoat. "D-d-did it g-give them a buster, Dad?" he said, the sweat running over his face as though a spring had broken out on top of his head. Dad jumped a log and tried to unbuckle his strap and reach for Joe at the same time, but Joe fled.

That threw a painful pall over everything. Dad declared he was sick and tired of the whole thing, and would n't do another hand's-turn. Dave meditated and walked along the fence, plucking off scraps of skin and hair that here and there clung to the bent and battered wire.

We had just finished supper when old Bob Wren, a bachelor who farmed about two miles from us, arrived. He used to come over every mail-night and bring his newspaper with him. Bob could n't read a word, so he always got Dad to spell over the paper to him. WE did n't take a newspaper.

Bob said there were clouds gathering behind Flat Top when he came in, and Dad went out and looked, and for the fiftieth time that day prayed in his own way for rain. Then he took the paper, and we gathered at the table to listen. "Hello," he commenced, "this is M'Doolan's paper you've got, Bob."

Bob rather thought it was n't.

"Yes, yes, man, it IS," Dad put in; "see, it's addressed to him."

Bob leaned over and LOOKED at the address, and said: "No, no, that's mine; it always comes like that." Dad laughed. We all laughed. He opened it, anyway. He had n't read for five minutes when the light flickered nearly out. Sarah reckoned the oil was about done, and poured water in the lamp to raise the kerosene to the wick, but that did n't last long, and, as there was no fat in the house, Dad squatted on the floor and read by the firelight.

He plodded through the paper tediously from end to end, reading the murders and robberies a second time. The clouds that old Bob said were gathering when he came in were now developing to a storm, for the wind began to rise, and the giant iron-bark tree that grew close behind the house swayed and creaked weirdly, and threw out those strange sobs and moans that on wild nights bring terror to the hearts of bush children. A glimmer of lightning appeared through the cracks in the slabs. Old Bob said he would go before it came on, and started into the inky darkness.

"It's coming!" Dad said, as he shut the door and put the peg in after seeing old Bob out. And it came—in no time. A fierce wind struck the house. Then a vivid flash of lightning lit up every crack and hole, and a clap of thunder followed that nearly shook the place down.

Dad ran to the back door and put his shoulder against it; Dave stood to the front one; and Sarah sat on the sofa with her arms around Mother, telling her not to be afraid. The wind blew

furiously—its one aim seemed the shifting of the house. Gust after gust struck the walls and left them quivering. The children screamed. Dad called and shouted, but no one could catch a word he said. Then there was one tremendous crack—we understood it—the iron-bark tree had gone over. At last, the shingled roof commenced to give. Several times the ends rose (and our hair too) and fell back into place again with a clap. Then it went clean away in one piece, with a rip like splitting a ribbon, and there we stood, affrighted and shelterless, inside the walls. Then the wind went down and it rained—rained on us all night.

Next morning Joe had been to the new fence for the axe for Dad, and was off again as fast as he could run, when he remembered something and called out, "Dad, old B-B-Bob's just over there, lyin' down in the gully."

Dad started up. "It's 'im all right—I w-w-would n'ter noticed, only Prince s-s-smelt him."

"Quick and show me where!" Dad said.

Joe showed him.

"My God!" and Dad stood and stared. Old Bob it was—dead. Dead as Moses.

"Poor old Bob!" Dad said. "Poor-old-fellow!" Joe asked what could have killed him? "Poor-old-Bob!"

Dave brought the dray, and we took him to the house—or what remained of it.

Dad could n't make out the cause of death—perhaps it was lightning. He held a POST-MORTEM, and, after thinking hard for a long while, told Mother he was certain, anyway, that old Bob would never get up again. It was a change to have a dead man about the place, and we were very pleased to be first to tell anyone who did n't know the news about old Bob.

We planted him on his own selection beneath a gum-tree, where for years and years a family of jackasses nightly roosted, Dad remarking: "As there MIGHT be a chance of his hearin', it'll be company for the poor old cove."

CHAPTER XIV.

When Dan Came Home.

One night after the threshing. Dad lying on the sofa, thinking; the rest of us sitting at the table. Dad spoke to Joe.

"How much," he said, "is seven hundred bushels of wheat at six shillings?"

Joe, who was looked upon as the brainy one of our family, took down his slate with a hint of scholarly ostentation.

"What did y' say, Dad—seven 'undred BAGS?"

"Bushels! BUSHELs!"

"Seven 'un-dered bush-els-of wheat—WHEAT was it, Dad?"

"Yes, WHEAT!"

"Wheat at...At WHAT, Dad?"

"Six shillings a bushel."

"Six shil-lings-a.... A, Dad? We've not done any at A; she's on'y showed us PER!"

"PER bushel, then!"

"Per bush-el. That's seven 'undered bushels of wheat at six shillin's per bushel. An' y' wants ter know, Dad—?"

"How much it'll be, of course."

"In money, Dad, or—er——?"

"Dammit, yes; MONEY!" Dad raised his voice.

For a while, Joe thought hard, then set to work figuring and rubbing out, figuring and rubbing out. The rest of us eyed him, envious of his learning.

Joe finished the sum.

"Well?" from Dad.

Joe cleared his throat. We listened.

"Nine thousan' poun'."

Dave laughed loud. Dad said, "Pshaw!" and turned his face to the wall. Joe looked at the slate again.

"Oh! I see," he said, "I did n't divide by twelve t' bring t' pounds," and laughed himself.

More figuring and rubbing out.

Finally Joe, in loud, decisive tones, announced, "FOUR thousand, NO 'undered an' twenty poun', fourteen shillin's an'—"

"Bah! YOU blockhead!" Dad blurted out, and jumped off the sofa and went to bed.

We all turned in.

We were not in bed long when the dog barked and a horse entered the yard. There was a clink of girth-buckles; a saddle thrown down; then a thump, as though with a lump of blue-metal, set the dog yelping lustily. We lay listening till a voice called out at the door—"All in bed?" Then we knew it was Dan,

and Dad and Dave sprang out in their shirts to let him in. All of us jumped up to see Dan. This time he had been away a long while, and when the slush-lamp was lit and fairly going, how we stared and wondered at his altered looks! He had grown a long whisker, and must have stood inches higher than Dad.

Dad was delighted. He put a fire on, made tea, and he and Dan talked till near daybreak—Dad of the harvest, and the Government dam that was promised, and the splendid grass growing in the paddock; Dan of the great dry plains, and the shearing-sheds out back, and the chaps he had met there. And he related in a way that made Dad's eyes glisten and Joe's mouth open, how, with a knocked-up wrist, he shore beside Proctor and big Andy Purcell, at Welltown, and rung the shed by half a sheep.

Dad ardently admired Dan.

Dan was only going to stay a short while at home, he said, then was off West again. Dad tried to persuade him to change his mind; he would have him remain and help to work the selection. But Dan only shook his head and laughed.

Dan accompanied Dad to the plough every morning, and walked cheerfully up and down the furrows all day, talking to him. Sometimes he took a turn at the plough, and Dad did the talking. Dad just loved Dan's company.

A few days went by. Dan still accompanied Dad to the plough; but did n't walk up and down with him. He selected a shade close by, and talked to Dad from there as he passed on his rounds. Sometimes Dan used to forget to talk at all—he would be asleep—and Dad would wonder if he was unwell. Once he

advised him to go up to the house and have a good camp. Dan went. He stretched himself on the sofa, and smoked and spat on the floor and played the concertina—an old one he won in a raffle.

Dan did n't go near the plough any more. He stayed inside every day, and drank the yeast, and provided music for the women. Sometimes he would leave the sofa, and go to the back-door and look out, and watch Dad tearing up and down the paddock after the plough; then he'd yawn, and wonder aloud what the diggins it was the old man saw in a game like that on a hot day; and return to the sofa, tired. But every evening when Dad knocked off and brought the horses to the barn Dan went out and watched him unharnessing them.

A month passed. Dad was n't so fond of Dan now, and Dan never talked of going away. One day Anderson's cows wandered into our yard and surrounded the hay-stack. Dad saw them from the paddock and cooeed, and shouted for those at the house to drive them away. They did n't hear him. Dad left the plough and ran up and pelted Anderson's cows with stones and glass-bottles, and pursued them with a pitch-fork till, in a mad rush to get out, half the brutes fell over the fence and made havoc with the wire. Dad spent an hour mending it; then went to the verandah and savagely asked Mother if she had lost her ears. Mother said she had n't. "Then why the devil could n't y' hear me singin' out?" Mother thought it must have been because Dan was playing the concertina. "Oh, DAMN his concertina!" Dad squealed, and kicked Joe's little kitten, that was rubbing itself fondly against his leg, clean through the house.

Dan found the selection pretty slow—so he told Mother—and thought he would knock about a bit. He went to the store and bought a supply of ammunition, which he booked to Dad, and started shooting. He stood at the door and put twenty bullets into the barn; then he shot two bears near the stock-yard with twenty more bullets, and dragged both bears down to the house and left them at the back-door. They stayed at the back-door until they went very bad; then Dad hooked himself to them and dragged them down the gully.

Somehow, Dad began to hate Dan! He scarcely ever spoke to him now, and at meal-times never spoke to any of us. Dad was a hard man to understand. We could n't understand him. "And with DAN at home, too!" Sal used to whine. Sal verily idolised Dan. Hero-worship was strong in Sal.

One night Dad came in for supper rather later than usual. He'd had a hard day, and was done up. To make matters worse, when he was taking the collar off Captain the brute tramped heavily on his toe, and took the nail off. Supper was n't ready. The dining-room was engaged. Dan was showing Sal how the Prince of Wales schottische was danced in the huts Out Back. For music, Sal was humming, and the two were flying about the room. Dad stood at the door and looked on, with blood in his eye.

"Look here!" he thundered suddenly, interrupting Dan—"I've had enough of you!" The couple stopped, astonished, and Sal cried, "DAD!" But Dad was hot. "Out of this!" (placing his hand on Dan, and shoving him). "You've loafed long enough on me! Off y' go t' th' devil!"

Dan went over to Anderson's and Anderson took him in and kept him a week. Then Dan took Anderson down at a new game of cards, and went away West again.

CHAPTER XV.

Our Circus.

Dave had been to town and came home full of circus. He sat on the ground beside the tubs while Mother and Sal were washing, and raved about the riding and the tumbling he had seen. He talked enthusiastically to Joe about it every day for three weeks. Dave rose very high in Joe's estimation.

Raining. All of us inside. Sal on the sofa playing the concertina; Dad squatting on the edge of a flat stone at the corner of the fireplace; Dave on another opposite; both gazing into the fire, which was almost out, and listening intently to the music; the dog, dripping wet, coiled at their feet, shivering; Mother sitting dreamily at the table, her palm pressed against her cheek, also enjoying the music.

Sal played on until the concertina broke. Then there was a silence.

For a while Dave played with a piece of charcoal. At last he spoke.

"Well," he said, looking at Dad, "what about this circus?"

Dad chuckled.

"But what d' y' THINK?"

"Well" (Dad paused), "yes" (chuckled again)—"very well."

"A CIRCUS!" Sal put in—"a PRETTY circus YOUS'D have!"

Dave fired up.

"YOU go and ride the red heifer, strad-legs, same as y' did yesterday," he snarled, "an' let all the country see y'."

Sal blushed.

Then to Dad:

"I'm certain, with Paddy Maloney in it, we could do it right enough, and make it pay, too."

"Very well, then," said Dad, "very well. There's th' tarpaulin there, and plenty bales and old bags whenever you're ready."

Dave was delighted, and he and Dad and Joe ran out to see where the tent could be pitched, and ran in again wetter than the dog.

One day a circus-tent went up in our yard. It attracted a lot of notice. Two of the Johnsons and old Anderson and others rode in on draught-horses and inspected it. And Smith's spring-cart horse, that used to be driven by every day, stopped in the middle of the lane and stared at it; and, when Smith stood up and belted him with the double of the reins, he bolted and upset the cart over a stump. It was n't a very white tent. It was made of bags and green bushes, and Dad and Dave and Paddy Maloney were two days putting it up.

We all assisted in the preparations for the circus. Dad built seats out of forked sticks and slabs, and Joe gathered jam-tins which Mother filled with fat and moleskin wicks to light up with.

Everyone in the district knew about our circus, and longed for the opening night. It came. A large fire near the slip-rails, shining across the lane and lighting up a corner of the wheat-paddock, showed the way in.

Dad stood at the door to take the money. The Andersons—eleven of them—arrived first. They did n't walk straight in. They hung about for a while. Then Anderson sidled up to Dad and talked into his ear. "Oh! that's all right," Dad said, and passed them all in without taking any money.

Next came the Maloneys, and, as Paddy belonged to the circus, they also walked in without paying, and secured front seats.

Then Jim Brown and Sam Holmes, and Walter Nutt, and Steve Burton, and eight others strolled along. Dad owed all of them money for binding, which they happened to remember. "In yours go," Dad said, and in the lot went. The tent filled quickly, and the crowd awaited the opening act.

Paddy Maloney came forward with his hair oiled and combed, and rang the cow-bell.

Dave, bare-footed and bare-headed, in snow-white moles and red shirt, entered standing majestically upon old Ned's back. He got a great reception. But Ned was tired and refused to canter. He joggled lazily round the ring. Dave shouted at him and rocked about. He was very unsteady. Paddy Maloney flogged Ned with the leg-rope. But Ned had been flogged often before. He got slower and slower. Suddenly, he stood and

cocked his tail, and to prevent himself falling, Dave jumped off. Then the audience yelled while Dave dragged Ned into the dressing-room and punched him on the nose.

Paddy Maloney made a speech. He said: "Well, the next item on the programme'll knock y' bandy. Keep quiet, you fellows, now, an' y'll see somethin'."

They saw Joe. He stepped backwards into the ring, pulling at a string. There was something on the string. "Come on!" Joe said, tugging. The "something" would n't come. "Chuck 'im in!" Joe called out. Then the pet kangaroo was heaved in through the doorway, and fell on its head and raised the dust. A great many ugly dogs rushed for it savagely. The kangaroo jumped up and bounded round the ring. The dogs pursued him noisily. "GERROUT!" Joe shouted, and the crowd stood up and became very enthusiastic. The dogs caught the kangaroo, and were dragging him to earth when Dad rushed in and kicked them in twos to the top of the tent. Then, while Johnson expostulated with Dad for laming his brindle slut, the kangaroo dived through a hole in the tent and rushed into the house and into the bedroom, and sprang on the bed among a lot of babies and women's hats.

When the commotion subsided Paddy Maloney rang the cow-bell again, and Dave and "Podgy," the pet sheep, rode out on Nugget. Podgy sat with hind-legs astride the horse and his head leaning back against Dave's chest. Dave (standing up) bent over him with a pair of shears in his hand. He was to shear Podgy as the horse cantered round.

Paddy Maloney touched Nugget with the whip, and off he went—"rump-ti-dee, dump-ti-dee." Dave rolled about a lot the first time round, but soon got his equilibrium. He brandished the shears and plunged the points of them into Podgy's belly-wool—also into Podgy's skin. "Bur-UR-R!" Podgy blurted and struggled violently. Dave began to topple about. He dropped the shears. The audience guffawed. Then Dave jumped; but Podgy's horns got caught in his clothes and made trouble. Dave hung on one side of the horse and the sheep dangled on the other. Dave sang out, so did Podgy. And the horse stopped and snorted, then swung furiously round and round until five or six pairs of hands seized his head and held him.

Dave did n't repeat the act. He ran away holding his clothes together.

It was a very successful circus. Everyone enjoyed it and wished to see it again—everyone but the Maloneys. They said it was a swindle, and ran Dad down because he did n't divide with Paddy the 3s. 6d. he took at the door.

CHAPTER XVI.

When Joe Was In Charge.

Joe was a naturalist. He spent a lot of time—time that Dad considered should have been employed cutting burr or digging potatoes—in ear-marking bears and bandicoots, and catching goannas and letting them go without their tails, or coupled in pairs with pieces of greenhide. The paddock was full of goannas in harness and slit-eared bears. THEY belonged to Joe.

Joe also took an interest in snakes, and used to poke amongst logs and brush-fences in search of rare specimens. Whenever he secured a good one he put it in a cage and left it there until it died or got out, or Dad threw it, cage and all, right out of the parish.

One day, while Mother and Sal were out with Dad, Joe came home with a four-foot black snake in his hand. It was a beauty. So sleek and lithe and lively! He carried it by the tail, its head swinging close to his bare leg, and the thing yearning for a grab at him. But Joe understood the ways of a reptile.

There was no cage—Dad had burnt the last one—so Joe walked round the room wondering where to put his prize. The cat came out of the bedroom and mewed and followed him for the snake. He told her to go away. She did n't go. She reached for the snake with her paw. It bit her. She spat and sprang in the air and rushed outside with her back up. Joe giggled and wondered how long the cat would live.

The Rev. Macpherson, on his way to christen M'Kenzie's baby, called in for a drink, and smilingly asked after Joe's health.

"Hold this kuk-kuk-cove, then," Joe said, handing the parson the reptile, which was wriggling and biting at space, "an' I'll gug-gug-get y' one." But when Mr. Macpherson saw the thing was alive he jumped back and fell over the dog which was lying behind him in the shade. Bluey grabbed him by the leg, and the parson jumped up in haste and made for his horse—followed by Bluey. Joe cried, "KUM 'ere!"—then turned inside.

Mother and Sal entered. They had come to make Dad and themselves a cup of tea. They quarrelled with Joe, and he went out and started playing with the snake. He let it go, and went to catch it by the tail again, but the snake caught HIM—by the finger.

"He's bit me!" Joe cried, turning pale. Mother screeched, and Sal bolted off for Dad, while the snake glided silently up the yard.

Anderson, passing on his old bay mare, heard the noise, and came in. He examined Joe's finger, bled the wound, and was bandaging the arm when Dad rushed in.

"Where is he?" he said. "Oh, you d—d whelp! You wretch of a boy! MY God!"

"'Twasn' MY fault." And Joe began to blubber.

But Anderson protested. There was no time, he said, to be lost barneying; and he told Dad to take his old mare Jean and go at once for Sweeney. Sweeney was the publican at Kangaroo Creek, with a reputation for curing snake-bite. Dad ran out,

mounted Jean and turned her head for Sweeney's. But, at the slip-rails, Jean stuck him up, and would n't go further. Dad hit her between the ears with his fist, and got down and ran back.

"The boy'll be dead, Anderson," he cried, rushing inside again.

"Come on then," Anderson said, "we'll take off his finger."

Joe was looking drowsy. But, when Anderson took hold of him and placed the wounded finger on a block, and Dad faced him with the hammer and a blunt, rusty old chisel, he livened up.

"No, Dad, NO!" he squealed, straining and kicking like an old man kangaroo. Anderson stuck to him, though, and with Sal's assistance held his finger on the block till Dad carefully rested the chisel on it and brought the hammer down. It did n't sever the finger—it only scraped the nail off—but it did make Joe buck. He struggled desperately and got away.

Anderson could n't run at all; Dad was little faster; Sal could run like a greyhound in her bare feet, but, before she could pull her boots off, Joe had disappeared in the corn.

"Quick!" Dad shouted, and the trio followed the patient. They hunted through the corn from end to end, but found no trace of him. Night came. The search continued. They called, and called, but nothing answered save the ghostly echoes, the rustling of leaves, the slow, sonorous notes of a distant bear, or the neighing of a horse in the grass-paddock.

At midnight they gave up, and went home, and sat inside and listened, and looked distracted.

While they sat, "Whisky," a blackfellow from Billson's station, dropped in. He was taking a horse down to town for his boss, and asked Dad if he could stay till morning. Dad said he could. He slept in Dave's bed; Dave slept on the sofa.

"If Joe ain't dead, and wuz t' come in before mornin'," Dave said, "there won't be room for us all."

And before morning Joe DID come in. He entered stealthily by the back-door, and crawled quietly into bed.

At daybreak Joe awoke, and nudged his bed-mate and said:

"Dave, the cocks has crowed!" No answer. He nudged him again.

"Dave, the hens is all off the roost!" Still no reply.

Daylight streamed in through the cracks. Joe sat up—he was at the back—and stared about. He glanced at the face of his bed-mate and chuckled and said:

"Who's been blackenin' y', Dave?"

He sat grinning awhile, then stood up, and started pulling on his trousers, which he drew from under his pillow. He had put one leg into them when his eyes rested on a pair of black feet uncovered at the foot of the bed. He stared at them and the black face again—then plunged for the door and fell. Whisky was awake and grinned over the side of the bed at him.

"Wot makit you so fritent like that?" he said, grinning more.

Joe ran into Mother's room and dived in behind her and Dad. Dad swore, and kicked Joe and jammed him against the slabs with his heels, saying:

"My GAWD! You DEVIL of a feller, how (KICK) dare you (KICK) run (KICK) run (KICK, KICK, KICK) away yesterday, eh?" (KICK).

But he was very glad to see Joe all the same; we all felt that Shingle Hut would not have been the same place at all without Joe.

It was when Dad and Dave were away after kangaroo-scalps that Joe was most appreciated. Mother and Sal felt it such a comfort to have a man in the house—even if it was only Joe.

Joe was proud of his male prerogatives. He looked after the selection, minded the corn, kept Anderson's and Dwyer's and Brown's and old Mother Murphy's cows out of it, and chased goannas away from the front door the same as Dad used to do—for Joe felt that he was in Dad's place, and postponed his customary familiarities with the goannas.

It was while Joe was in charge that Casey came to our place. A starved-looking, toothless little old man with a restless eye, talkative, ragged and grey; he walked with a bend in his back (not a hump), and carried his chin in the air. We never saw a man like him before. He spoke rapidly, too, and watched us all as he talked. Not exactly a "traveller;" he carried no swag or billycan, and wore a pair of boots much too large. He seemed to have been "well brought up"—he took off his hat at the door and bowed low to Mother and Sal, who were sitting inside, sewing.

They gave a start and stared. The dog, lying at Mother's feet, rose and growled. Bluey was n't used to the ways of people well brought up.

The world had dealt harshly with Casey, and his story went to Mother's heart. "God buless y'," he said when she told him he could have some dinner; "but I'll cut y' wood for it; oh, I'll cut y' wood!" And he went to the wood-heap and started work. A big heap and a blunt axe; but it did n't matter to Casey. He worked hard, and did n't stare about, and did n't reduce the heap much, either; and when Sal called him to dinner he could n't hear—he was too busy. Joe had to go and bring him away.

Casey sat at the table and looked up at the holes in the roof, through which the sun was shining.

"Ought t' be a cool house," he remarked.

Mother said it was.

"Quite a bush house."

"Oh, yes," Mother said—"we're right in the bush here."

He began to eat and, as he ate, talked cheerfully of selections and crops and old times and bad times and wire fences and dead cattle. Casey was a versatile ancient. When he was finished he shifted to the sofa and asked Mother how many children she had. Mother considered and said, "Twelve." He thought a dozen enough for anyone, and, said that HIS mother, when he left home, had twenty-one—all girls but him. That was forty years ago, and he did n't know how many she had since. Mother and Sal smiled. They began to like old Casey.

Casey took up his hat and went outside, and did n't say "Good-day" or "Thanks" or anything. He did n't go away, either. He looked about the yard. A panel in the fence was broken. It had been broken for five years. Casey seemed to know it. He started mending that panel. He was mending it all the evening.

Mother called to Joe to bring in some wood. Casey left the fence, hurried to the wood-heap, carried in an armful, and asked Mother if she wanted more. Then he returned to the fence.

"J-OE," Mother screeched a little later, "look at those cows tryin' to eat the corn."

Casey left the fence again and drove the cows away, and mended the wire on his way back.

At sundown Casey was cutting more wood, and when we were at supper he brought it in and put some on the fire, and went out again slowly.

Mother and Sal talked about him.

"Better give him his supper," Sal said, and Mother sent Joe to invite him in. He did n't come in at once. Casey was n't a forward man. He stayed to throw some pumpkin to the pigs.

Casey slept in the barn that night. He slept in it the next night, too. He did n't believe in shifting from place to place, so he stayed with us altogether. He took a lively interest in the selection. The house, he said, was in the wrong place, and he showed Mother where it ought to have been built. He suggested shifting it, and setting a hedge and ornamental trees in front and fruit trees at the back, and making a nice place of it. Little things like that pleased Mother. "Anyway," she would sometimes say to

Sal, "he's a useful old man, and knows how to look after things about the place." Casey did. Whenever any watermelons were ripe, he looked after THEM and hid the skins in the ground. And if a goanna or a crow came and frightened a hen from her nest Casey always got the egg, and when he had gobbled it up he would chase that crow or goanna for its life and shout lustily.

Every day saw Casey more at home at our place. He was a very kind man, and most obliging. If a traveller called for a drink of water, Casey would give him a cup of milk and ask him to wait and have dinner. If Maloney, or old Anderson, or anybody, wished to borrow a horse, or a dray, or anything about the place, Casey would let them have it with pleasure, and tell them not to be in a hurry about returning it.

Joe got on well with Casey. Casey's views on hard work were the same as Joe's. Hard work, Joe thought, was n't necessary on a selection.

Casey knew a thing or two—so he said. One fine morning, when all the sky was blue and the butcher-birds whistling strong, Dwyer's cows smashed down a lot of the fence and dragged it into the corn. Casey, assisted by Joe, put them all in the yard, and hammered them with sticks. Dwyer came along.

"Those cattle belong to me," he said angrily.

"They belongs t' ME," Casey answered, "until you pay damages." Then he put his back to the slip-rails and looked up aggressively into Dwyer's face. Dwyer was a giant beside Casey. Dwyer did n't say anything—he was n't a man of words—but started throwing the rails down to let the cows out. Casey flew at

him. Dwyer quietly shoved him away with his long, brown arm. Casey came again and fastened on to Dwyer. Joe mounted the stockyard. Dwyer seized Casey with both hands; then there was a struggle—on Casey's part. Dwyer lifted him up and carried him away and set him down on his back, then hastened to the rails. But before he could throw them down Casey was upon him again. Casey never knew when he was beaten. Dwyer was getting annoyed. He took Casey by the back of the neck and squeezed him. Casey humped his shoulders and gasped. Dwyer stared about. A plough-rein hung on the yard. Dwyer reached for it. Casey yelled, "Murder!" Dwyer fastened one end of the rope round Casey's body—under the arms—and stared about again. And again "Murder!" from Casey. Joe jumped off the yard to get further away. A tree, with a high horizontal limb, stood near. Dad once used it as a butcher's gallows. Dwyer gathered the loose rein into a coil and heaved it over the limb, and hauled Casey up. Then he tied the end of the rope to the yard and drove out the cows.

"When y' want 'im down," Dwyer said to Joe as he walked away, "cut the rope."

Casey groaned, and one of his boots dropped off. Then he began to spin round—to wind up and unwind and wind up again. Joe came near and eyed the twirling form with joy.

Mother and Sal arrived, breathless and excited. They screeched at Joe.

"Undo th' r-r-rope," Joe said, "an' he'll come w-w—WOP."

Sal ran away and procured a sheet, and Mother and she held it under Casey, and told Joe to unfasten the rope and lower him as steadily as he could. Joe unfastened the rope, but somehow it pinched his fingers and he let go, and Casey fell through the sheet. For three weeks Casey was an invalid at our place. He would have been invalided there for the rest of his days only old Dad came home and induced him to leave. Casey did n't want to go; but Dad had a persuasive way with him that generally proved effectual.

Singularly enough, Dad complained that kangaroos were getting scarce where he was camped; while our paddocks were full of them. Joe started a mob nearly every day, as he walked round overseeing things; and he pondered. Suddenly he had an original inspiration—originality was Joe's strong point. He turned the barn into a workshop, and buried himself there for two days. For two whole days he was never "at home," except when he stepped out to throw the hammer at the dog for yelping for a drink. The greedy brute! it was n't a week since he'd had a billyful—Joe told him. On the morning of the third day the barn-door swung open, and forth came a kangaroo, with the sharpened carving knife in its paws. It hopped across the yard and sat up, bold and erect, near the dog-kennel. Bluey nearly broke his neck trying to get at it. The kangaroo said: "Lay down, you useless hound!" and started across the cultivation!, heading for the grass-paddock in long, erratic jumps. Half-way across the cultivation it spotted a mob of other kangaroos, and took a firmer grip of the carver.

Bluey howled and plunged until Mother came out to see what was the matter. She was in time to see a solitary kangaroo hop in a drunken manner towards the fence, so she let the dog go and cried, "Sool him, Bluey! Sool him!" Bluey sooled him, and Mother followed with the axe to get the scalp. As the dog came racing up, the kangaroo turned and hissed, "G' home, y' mongrel!" Bluey took no notice, and only when he had nailed the kangaroo dextrously by the thigh and got him down did it dawn upon the marsupial that Bluey was n't in the secret. Joe tore off his head-gear, called the dog affectionately by name, and yelled for help; but Bluey had not had anything substantial to eat for over a week, and he worried away vigorously.

Then the kangaroo slashed out with the carving-knife, and hacked a junk off Bluey's nose. Bluey shook his head, relaxed his thigh-grip, and grabbed the kangaroo by the ribs. How that kangaroo did squeal! Mother arrived. She dropped the axe, threw up both hands, and shrieked. "Pull him off! he's eating me!" gasped the kangaroo. Mother shrieked louder, and wrung her hands; but it had no effect on Bluey. He was a good dog, was Bluey!

At last, Mother got him by the tail and dragged him off, but he took a mouthful of kangaroo with him as he went.

Then the kangaroo raised itself slowly on to its hands and knees. It was very white and sick-looking, and Mother threw her arms round it and cried, "Oh, Joe! My child! my child!"

It was several days before Joe felt better. When he did, Bluey and he went down the gully together, and, after a while, Joe came back—like Butler—alone.

CHAPTER XVII.

Dad's "Fortune."

Dad used to say that Shingle Hut was the finest selection on Darling Downs; but WE never could see anything fine about it—except the weather in drought time, or Dad's old saddle mare. SHE was very fine. The house was built in a gully so that the bailiffs (I suppose) or the blacks—who were mostly dead—could n't locate it. An old wire-fence, slanting all directions, staggered past the front door. At the rear, its foot almost in the back door, sloped a barren ridge, formerly a squatter's sheep-yard. For the rest there were sky, wallaby-scrub, gum-trees, and some acres of cultivation. But Dad must have seen something in it, or he would n't have stood feasting his eyes on the wooded waste after he had knocked off work of an evening. In all his wanderings—and Dad had been almost everywhere; swimming flooded creeks and rivers, humping his swag from one end of Australia to the other; at all games going except bank-managing and bushranging—he had seen no place timbered like Shingle Hut.

"Why," he used to say, "it's a fortune in itself. Hold on till the country gets populated, and firewood is scarce, there'll be money in it then—mark my words!"

Poor Dad! I wonder how long he expected to live?

At the back of Shingle Hut was a tract of Government land—mostly mountains—marked on the map as the Great Dividing Range. Splendid country, Dad considered it—BEAUTIFUL country—and part of a grand scheme he had in his head. I defy you to find a man more full of schemes than Dad was.

The day had been hot. Inside, the mosquitoes were bad; and, after supper, Dad and Dave were outside, lying on some bags. They had been grubbing that day, and were tired. The night was nearly dark. Dad lay upon his back, watching the stars; Dave upon his stomach, his head resting on his arms. Both silent. One of the draught-horses cropped the couch-grass round about them. Now and again a flying-fox circled noiselessly overhead, and "MOPOKE!—MOPOKE!" came dismally from the ridge and from out the lonely-looking gully. A star fell, lighting up a portion of the sky, but Dad did not remark it. In a while he said:

"How old are you, Dave?" Dave made a mental calculation before answering.

"S'pose I must be eighteen now ...Why?"

A silence.

"I've been thinking of that land at the back—if we had that I believe we could make money."

"Yairs—if we HAD."

Another silence.

"Well, I mean to have it, and that before very long."

Dave raised his head, and looked towards Dad.

"There's four of you old enough to take up land, and where could you get better country than that out there for cattle? Why" (turning on his side and facing Dave) "with a thousand acres of that stocked with cattle and this kept under cultivation we'd make money—we'd be RICH in a very few years."

Dave raised himself on his elbow.

"Yairs—with CAT'TLE," he said.

"Just so" (Dad sat up with enthusiasm), "but to get the LAND is the first thing, and that's easy enough ONLY" (lowering his voice) "it'll have to be done QUIETLY and without letting everyone 'round know we're going in for it." ("Oh! yairs, o' course," from Dave.) "THEN" (and Dad lifted his voice and leaned over) "run a couple of wires round it, put every cow we've here on it straight away; get another one or two when the barley's sold, and let them breed."

"'Bout how many'd that be t' start 'n?"

"Well, EIGHT good cows at the least—plenty, too. It's simply WONDERFUL how cattle breed if they're let alone. Look at Murphy, for instance. Started on that place with two young heifers—those two old red cows that you see knocking about now. THEY'RE the mothers of all his cattle. Anderson just the same...Why, God bless my soul! we would have a better start than any one of them ever had—by a long way."

Dave sat up. He began to share Dad's enthusiasm.

"Once get it STOCKED, and all that is to be done then is simply to look after the fence, ride about among the cattle every day, see they're right, brand the calves, and every year muster the mob, draft out the fat bullocks, whip them into town, and get our seven and eight pounds a head for them."

"That'd suit me down to the ground, ridin' about after cattle," Dave said.

"Yes, get our seven and eight pounds, maybe nine or ten pounds a-piece. And could ever we do that pottering about on the place?" Dad leaned over further and pressed Dave's knee with his hand.

"Mind you!" (in a very confidential tone) "I'm not at all satisfied the way we're dragging along here. It's utter nonsense, and, to speak the truth" (lowering his voice again) "I'VE BEEN SICK OF THE WHOLE DAMN THING LONG AGO."

A minute or two passed.

"It would n't matter," Dad continued, "if there was no way of doing better; but there IS. The thing only requires to be DONE, and why not DO it?" He paused for an answer.

"Well," Dave said, "let us commence it straight off—t'morrow. It's the life that'd suit ME."

"Of course it WOULD...and there's money in it...no mistake about it!"

A few minutes passed. Then they went inside, and Dad took Mother into his confidence, and they sat up half the night discussing the scheme.

Twelve months later. The storekeeper was at the house wanting to see Dad. Dad was n't at home. He never was when the storekeeper came; he generally contrived to be away, up the paddock somewhere or amongst the corn—if any was growing. The storekeeper waited an hour or so, but Dad did n't turn up. When he was gone, though, Dad walked in and asked Mother what he had said. Mother was seated on the sofa, troubled-looking.

"He must be paid by next week," she said, bursting into tears, "or the place'll be sold over our heads."

Dad stood with his back to the fire-place, his hand locked behind him, watching the flies swarming on the table.

Dave came in. He understood the situation at a glance. The scene was not new to him. He sat down, leant forward, picked a straw off the flor and twisted it round and round his finger, reflecting.

Little Bill put his head on Mother's lap, and asked for a piece of bread...He asked a second time.

"There IS no bread, child," she said.

"But me wants some, mumma."

Dad went outside and Dave followed. They sat on their heels, their backs to the barn, thoughtfully studying the earth.

"It's the same thing"—Dad said, reproachfully—"from one year's end to the other...alwuz a BILL!"

"Thought last year we'd be over all this by now!" from Dave.

"So we COULD...Can NOW...It only wants that land to be taken up; and, as I've said often and often, these cows taken —"

Dad caught sight of the storekeeper coming back, and ran into the barn.

Six months later. Dinner about ready. "Take up a thousand acres," Dad was saying; "take it up——"

He was interrupted by a visitor.

"Are you Mister Rudd?" Dad said he was.

"Well, er—I've a FI. FA. against y'!"

Dad didn't understand.

The Sheriff's officer drew a document from his inside breast-pocket and proceeded to read:

"To Mister James Williams, my bailiff. Greeting: By virtue of Her Majesty's writ of FIERI FACIAS, to me directed, I command you that of the goods and chattels, money, bank-note or notes or other property of Murtagh Joseph Rudd, of Shingle Hut, in my bailiwick, you cause to be made the sum of forty pounds ten shillings, with interest thereon," &c.

Dad understood.

Then the bailiff's man rounded up the cows and the horses, and Dad and the lot of us leant against the fence and in sadness watched Polly and old Poley and the rest for the last time pass out the slip-rails.

"That puts an end to the land business!" Dave said gloomily.

Steele Rudd

On Our Selection

But Dad never spoke.

CHAPTER XVIII.

We Embark in the Bear Industry.

When the bailiff came and took away the cows and horses, and completely knocked the bottom out of Dad's land scheme, Dad did n't sit in the ashes and sulk. He was n't that kind of person. He DID at times say he was tired of it all, and often he wished it far enough, too! But, then, that was all mere talk on Dad's part. He LOVED the selection. To every inch—every stick of it—he was devoted. 'T was his creed. He felt certain there was money in it—that out of it would come his independence. Therefore, he did n't rollup and, with Mother by the hand and little Bill on his back, stalk into town to hang round and abuse the bush. He walked up and down the yard thinking and thinking. Dad was a man with a head.

He consulted Mother and Dave, and together they thought more.

"The thing is," Dad said, "to get another horse to finish the bit of ploughing. We've got ONE; Anderson will lend the grey mare, I know."

He walked round the room a few times.

"When that's done, I think I see my way clear; but THAT'S the trouble."

He looked at Dave. Dave seemed as though he had a solution. But Joe spoke.

"Kuk-kuk-could n't y' b-reak in some kang'roos, Dad? There's pul-lenty in th' pup-paddick."

"Could n't you shut up and hold your tongue and clear out of this, you brat?" Dad roared. And Joe hung his head and shut up.

"Well, y' know"—Dave drawled—"there's that colt wot Maloney offered us before to quieten. Could get 'im. 'E's a big lump of a 'orse if y' could do anythin' with 'im. THEY gave 'im best themselves."

Dad's eyes shone.

"That's th' horse," he cried. "GET him! To-morrow first thing go for him! I'LL make something of him!"

"Don't know"—Dave chuckled—"he's a——"

"Tut, tut; you fetch him."

"Oh, I'll FETCH 'im." And Dave, on the strength of having made a valuable suggestion, dragged Joe off the sofa and stretched himself upon it.

Dad went on thinking awhile. "How much," he at last asked, "did Johnson get for those skins?"

"Which?" Dave answered. "Bears or kangaroos?"

"Bears."

"Five bob, was n't it? Six for some."

"What, A-PIECE?"

"Yairs."

"Why, God bless my soul, what have we been thinking about? FIVE SHILLINGS? Are you sure?"

"Yairs, rather."

"What, bear-skins worth that and the paddock here and the lanes and the country over-run with them—FULL of the damn things—HUNDREDS of them—and we, all this time—all these years—working and slaving and scraping and-and" (he almost shouted), "DAMN me! What asses we HAVE been, to be sure." (Dave stared at him.) "Bear-skins FIVE SHILLINGS each, and _____"

"That's all right enough," Dave interrupted, "but——"

"Of COURSE it's all right enough NOW," Dad yelled, "now when we see it."

"But look!" and Dave sat up and assumed an arbitrary attitude. He was growing suspicious of Dad's ideas. "To begin with, how many bears do you reckon on getting in a day?"

"In a day"—reflectively—"twenty at the least."

"Twenty. Well, say we only got HALF that, how much d' y' make?"

"MAKE?" (considering). "Two pounds ten a day...fifteen or twenty pounds a week...yes, TWENTY POUNDS, reckoning at THAT even. And do you mean to tell ME that we would n't get more than TEN bears a day? Why we'd get more than that in the lane—get more up ONE tree."

Dave grinned.

"Can't you SEE? DAMN it, boy, are you so DENSE?"

Dave saw. He became enthusiastic. He wondered why it had never struck us before. Then Dad smiled, and we sat to supper and talked about bears.

"We'll not bother with that horse NOW," said Dad; "the ploughing can go; I'm DONE with it. We've had enough poking and puddling about. We'll start this business straightaway." And the following morning, headed by the dog and Dad, armed with a tomahawk, we started up the paddock.

How free we felt! To think we were finished for ever with the raking and carting of hay—finished tramping up and down beside Dad, with the plough-reins in our hands, flies in our eyes and burr in our feet—finished being the target for Dad's blasphemy when the plough or the horses or the harness went wrong—was delightful! And the adventure and excitement which this new industry promised operated strongly upon us. We rioted and careered like hunted brumbies through the trees, till warned by Dad to "keep our eyes about;" then we settled down, and Joe found the first bear. It was on an ironbark tree, around the base of which we soon were clamouring.

"Up y' go!" Dad said, cheerfully helping Dave and the tomahawk into the first fork.

Dave ascended and crawled cautiously along the limb the bear was on and began to chop. WE armed ourselves with heavy sticks and waited. The dog sat on his tail and stared and whined at the bear. The limb cracked, and Dave ceased chopping and shouted "Look out!" We shouldered arms. The

dog was in a hurry. He sprang in the air and landed on his back. But Dave had to make another nick or two. Then with a loud crack the limb parted and came sweeping down. The dog jumped to meet it. He met it, and was laid out on the grass. The bear scrambled to its feet and made off towards Bill. Bill squealed and fell backwards over a log. Dad rushed in and kicked the bear up like a football. It landed near Joe. Joe's eyes shone with the hunter's lust of blood. He swung his stick for a tremendous blow—swung it mightily and high—and nearly knocked his parent's head off. When Dad had spat blood enough to make sure that he had only lost one tooth, he hunted Joe; but Joe was too fleet, as usual.

Meanwhile, the bear had run up another tree—about the tallest old gum in the paddock. Dad snapped his fingers angrily and cried: "Where the devil was the DOG?"

"Oh, where the devil wuz the DORG?" Dave growled, sliding down the tree—"where th' devil wuz YOU? Where wuz the lot o' y'?"

"Ah, well!" Dad said "—there's plenty more we can get. Come along." And off we went. The dog pulled himself together and limped after us.

Bears were plentiful enough, but we wandered far before we found another on a tree that Dave could climb, and, when we DID, somehow or other the limb broke when he put his weight on it, and down he came, bear and all. Of course we were not ready, and that bear, like the other, got up another tree. But Dave did n't. He lay till Dad ran about two miles down a gully to

a dam and filled his hat with muddy water and came tearing back with it empty—till Anderson and Mother came and helped to carry him home.

We did n't go out any more after bears. Dave, when he was able, went and got Maloney's colt and put him in the plough. And, after he had kicked Dad and smashed all the swingle-trees about the place, and got right out of his harness a couple of times and sulked for two days, he went well enough beside Anderson's old grey mare.

And that season, when everyone else's wheat was red with rust—when Anderson and Maloney cut theirs for hay—when Johnson put a firestick in his—ours was good to see. It ripened; and the rain kept off, and we reaped 200 bags. Salvation!

CHAPTER XIX.

Nell and Ned.

That harvest of two hundred bags of wheat was the turning-point in the history of our selection. Things somehow seemed to go better; and Dad's faith was gradually justified—to some extent. We accumulated out-buildings and added two new rooms to the hut, and Dad was able to lend old Anderson five pounds in return for a promise to pay seven pounds ten shillings in six months' time. We increased the stock, too, by degrees; and—crowning joy!—we got a horse or two you could ride to the township.

With Nell and Ned we reckoned we had two saddle-horses—those were their names, Nell and Ned, a mare and a colt. Fine hacks they were, too! Anybody could ride them, they were so quiet. Dad reckoned Ned was the better of the two. He was well-bred, and had a pedigree and a gentle disposition, and a bald-face, and a bumble-foot, and a raw wither, and a sore back that gave him a habit of "flinching"—a habit that discounted his uselessness a great deal, because, when we were n't at home, the women could n't saddle him to run the cows in. Whenever he saw the saddle or heard the girth-buckles rattle he would start to flinch. Put the cloth on his back—folded or otherwise—and, no matter how smart you might be, it would be off before you could cover it with the saddle, and he would n't have flicked it with his tail, or pulled it off with his teeth, or done anything to it. He just flinched—made the skin on his back—where there was any—QUIVER. Throw on the saddle without a cloth, and he would

"give" in the middle like a broken rail—bend till his belly almost touched the ground, and remain bent till mounted; then he'd crawl off and gradually straighten up as he became used to you. Were you tender-hearted enough to feel compunction in sitting down hard on a six-year-old sore, or if you had an aversion to kicking the suffering brute with both heels and belting his hide with a yard or two of fencing-wire to get him to show signs of animation, you would dismount and walk—perhaps, weep. WE always rode him right out, though.

As a two-year-old Ned was Dad's hope. Pointing proudly to the long-legged, big-headed, ugly moke mooching by the door, smelling the dust, he would say: "Be a fine horse in another year! Little sleepy-looking yet; that's nothing!"

"Stir him up a bit, till we see how he canters," he said to Joe one day. And when Joe stirred him up—rattled a piece of rock on his jaw that nearly knocked his head off—Dad took after Joe and chased him through the potatoes, and out into the grass-paddock, and across towards Anderson's; then returned and yarded the colt, and knocked a patch of skin off him with a rail because he would n't stand in a corner till he looked at his eye. "Would n't have anything happen to that colt for a fortune!" he said to himself. Then went away, forgetting to throw the rails down. Dave threw them down a couple of days after.

WE preferred Nell to Ned, but Dad always voted for the colt. "You can trust him; he'll stand anywhere," he used to say. Ned WOULD! Once, when the grass-paddock was burning, he stood until he took fire. Then he stood while we hammered him with boughs to put the blaze out. It took a lot to frighten Ned.

His presence of mind rarely deserted him. Once, though, he got a start. He was standing in the shade of a tree in the paddock when Dad went to catch him. He seemed to be watching Dad, but was n't. He was ASLEEP. "Well, old chap," said Dad, "how ARE y'?" and proceeded to bridle him. Ned opened his mouth and received the bit as usual, only some of his tongue came out and stayed out. "Wot's up w' y'?" and Dad tried to poke it in with his finger, but it came out further, and some chewed grass dropped into his hand. Dad started to lead him then, or rather to PULL him, and at the first tug he have the reins Ned woke with a snort and broke away. And when the other horses saw him looking at Dad with his tail cocked, and his head up, and the bridle-reins hanging, they went for their lives through the trees, and Blossom's foal got staked.

Another day Dad was out on Ned, looking for the red heifer, and came across two men fencing—a tall, powerful-looking man with a beard, and a slim young fellow with a smooth face. Also a kangaroo-pup. As Dad slowly approached, Ned swaying from side to side with his nose to the ground, the elder man drove the crowbar into the earth and stared as if he had never seen a man on horseback before. The young fellow sat on a log and stared too. The pup ran behind a tree and growled.

"Seen any cattle round here?" Dad asked.

"No," the man said, and grinned.

"Did n't notice a red heifer?"

"No," grinning more.

The kangaroo-pup left the tree and sniffed at Ned's heels.

"Won't kick, will he?" said the man.

The young fellow broke into a loud laugh and fell off the log.

"No," Dad replied—"he's PERFECTLY quiet."

"He LOOKS quiet."

The young fellow took a fit of coughing.

After a pause. "Well, you did n't see any about, then?" and Dad wheeled Ned round to go away.

"No, I DID N'T, old man," the other answered, and snatched hold of Ned's tail and hung back with all his might. Ned grunted and strained and tore the ground up with his toes; Dad spurred and leathered him with a strap, looking straight ahead. The man hung on. "Come 'long," Dad said. The pup barked. "COME 'long with YER!" Dad said. The young fellow fell off the log again. Ned's tail cracked. Dad hit him between the ears. The tail cracked again. A piece of it came off; then Ned stumbled and went on his head. "What the DEVIL——!" Dad said, looking round. But only the young fellow was laughing.

Nell was different from Ned. She was a bay, with yellow flanks and a lump under her belly; a bright eye, lop ears, and heavy, hairy legs. She was a very wise mare. It was wonderful how much she know. She knew when she was wanted; and she would go away the night before and get lost. And she knew when she was n't wanted; then she'd hang about the back-door licking a hole in the ground where the dish-water was thrown, or fossicking at the barn for the corn Dad had hidden, or scratching her neck or her rump against the cultivation paddock slip-rails.

She always scratched herself against those slip-rails—sometimes for hours—always until they fell down. Then she'd walk in and eat. And how she COULD eat!

As a hack, Nell was unreliable. You could n't reckon with certainty on getting her to start. All depended on the humour she was in and the direction you wished to take—mostly the direction. If towards the grass-paddock or the dam, she was off helter-skelter. If it was n't, she'd go on strike—put her head down and chew the bit. Then, when you'd get to work on her with a waddy—which we always did—she'd walk backwards into the house and frighten Mother, or into the waterhole and dirty the water. Dad said it was the fault of the cove who broke her in. Dad was a just man. The "cove" was a union shearer—did it for four shillings and six pence. Wanted five bob, but Dad beat him down. Anybody else would have asked a pound.

When Nell DID make up her mind to go, it was with a rush, and, if the slip-rails were on the ground, she'd refuse to take them. She'd stand and look out into the lane. You'd have to get off and drag the rails aside (about twenty, counting broken ones). Then she'd fancy they were up, and would shake her head and mark time until you dug your heels into her; then she'd gather herself together and jump high enough for a show—over nothing!

Dave was to ride Nell to town one Christmas to see the sports. He had n't seen any sports before, and went to bed excited and rose in the middle of the night to start. He dressed in the dark, and we heard him going out, because he fell over Sandy

and Kate. They had come on a visit, and were sleeping on the floor in the front room. We also heard him throw the slip-rails down.

There was a heavy fog that morning. At breakfast we talked about Dave, and Dad "s'posed" he would just about be getting in; but an hour or two after breakfast the fog cleared, and we saw Dave in the lane hammering Nell with a stick. Nell had her rump to the fence and was trying hard to kick it down. Dad went to him. "Take her gently; take her GENTLY, boy," he shouted. "PSHAW! take her GENTLY!" Dave shouted back. "Here"—he jumped off her and handed Dad the reins—"take her away and cut her throat." Then he cried, and then he picked up a big stone and rushed at Nell's head. But Dad interfered.

But the day Dad mounted Nell to bring a doctor to Anderson! She started away smartly—the wrong road. Dad jerked her mouth and pulled her round roughly. He was in a hurry—Nell was n't. She stood and shook her head and switched her tail. Dad rattled a waddy on her and jammed his heels hard against her ribs. She dropped her head and cow-kicked. Then he coaxed her. "Come on, old girl," he said; "come on,"—and patted her on the neck. She liked being patted. That exasperated Dad. He hit her on the head with his fist. Joe ran out with a long stick. He poked her in the flank. Nell kicked the stick out of his hands and bolted towards the dam. Dad pulled and swore as she bore him along. And when he did haul her in, he was two hundred yards further from the doctor. Dad turned her round and once more used the waddy. Nell was obdurate, Dad exhausted. Joe joined them, out of breath. He poked Nell with

the stick again. She "kicked up." Dad lost his balance. Joe laughed. Dad said, "St-o-op!" Joe was energetic. So was Nell. She kicked up again—strong—and Dad fell off.

"Wot, could'n' y' s-s-s-stick to 'er, Dad?" Joe asked.

"STICK BE DAMNED—run—CATCH her!—D——N y!"

Joe obeyed.

Dad made another start, and this time Nell went willingly. Dad was leading her!

Those two old horses are dead now. They died in the summer when there was lots of grass and water—just when Dad had broken them into harness—just when he was getting a good team together to draw logs for the new railway line!

CHAPTER XX.

The Cow We Bought.

When Dad received two hundred pounds for the wheat he saw nothing but success and happiness ahead. His faith in the farm and farming swelled. Dad was not a pessimist—when he had two hundred pounds.

"Say what they like," he held forth to Anderson and two other men across the rails one evening—"talk how they will about it, there's money to be made at farming. Let a man WORK and use his HEAD and know what to sow and when to sow it, and he MUST do well." (Anderson stroked his beard in grave silence; HE had had no wheat). "Why, once a farmer gets on at all he's the most independent man in the whole country."

"Yes! Once he DOES!" drawled one of the men,—a weird, withered fellow with a scraggy beard and a reflective turn of mind.

"Jusso," Dad went on, "but he must use his HEAD; it's all in th' head." (He tapped his own skull with his finger). "Where would I be now if I had n't used me head this last season?"

He paused for an answer. None came.

"I say," he continued, "it's a mistake to think nothing's to be made at farming, and any man" ("Come to supper, D—AD!"—'t was Sal's voice) "ought t' get on where there's land like this."

"LAND!" said the same man—"where IS it?"

"Where IS it?" Dad warmed up—"where IS N'T it? Is n't this land?" (Looking all round.) "Is n't the whole country land from one end to the other? And is there another country like it anywhere?"

"There is n't!" said the man.

"Is there any other country in th' WORLD" (Dad lifted his voice) "where a man, if he likes, can live" ("Dad, tea!") "without a shilling in his pocket and without doing a tap of work from one year's end to the other?"

Anderson did n't quite understand, and the weird man asked Dad if he meant "in gaol."

"I mean," Dad said, "that no man should starve in this country when there's kangaroos and bears and"—(Joe came and stood beside Dad and asked him if he was DEAF)—"and goannas and snakes in thousands. Look here!" (still to the weird man), "you say that farming"—(Mother, bare-headed, came out and stood beside Joe, and asked Anderson if Mrs. Anderson had got a nurse yet, and Anderson smiled and said he believed another son had just arrived, but he had n't seen it)—"that farming don't pay"—(Sal came along and stood near Mother and asked Anderson who the baby was like)—"don't pay in this country?"

The man nodded.

"It will pay any man who——"

Interruption.

Anderson's big dog had wandered to the house, and came back with nearly all that was for supper in his mouth.

Sal squealed.

"DROP IT—DROP IT, Bob!" Anderson shouted, giving chase. Bob dropped it on the road.

"DAMN IT!" said Dad, glaring at Mother, "wot d' y' ALL want out 'ere?...Y-YOU brute!" (to the dog, calmly licking its lips).

Then Anderson and the two men went away.

But when we had paid sixty pounds to the storekeeper and thirty pounds in interest; and paid for the seed and the reaping and threshing of the wheat; and bought three plough-horses, and a hack for Dave; and a corn-sheller, and a tank, and clothes for us all; and put rations in the house; and lent Anderson five pounds; and improved Shingle Hut; and so on; very little of the two hundred pounds was left.

Mother spoke of getting a cow. The children, she said, could n't live without milk and when Dad heard from Johnson and Dwyer that Eastbrook dairy cattle were to be sold at auction, he said he would go down and buy one.

Very early. The stars had scarcely left the sky. There was a lot of groping and stumbling about the room. Dad and Dave had risen and were preparing to go to the sale.

I don't remember if the sky was golden or gorgeous at all, or if the mountain was clothed in mist, or if any fragrance came from the wattle-trees when they were leaving; but Johnson,

without hat or boots, was picking splinters off the slabs of his hut to start his fire with, and a mile further on Smith's dog was barking furiously. He was a famous barker. Smith trained him to keep the wallabies off. Smith used to chain him to a tree in the paddock and hang a piece of meat to the branches, and leave him there all night.

Dad and Dave rode steadily along and arrived at Eastbrook before mid-day. The old station was on its last legs. "The flags were flying half-mast high." A crowd of people were there. Cart-horses with harness on, and a lot of tired-looking saddle-hacks, covered with dry sweat, were fastened to cart-wheels, and to every available post and place. Heaps of old iron, broken-down drays and buggies and wheel-barrows, pumps and pieces of machinery, which Dad reckoned were worth a lot of money, were scattered about. Dad yearned to gather them all up and cart them home. Rows of unshaven men were seated high on the rails of the yards. The yards were filled with cattle—cows, heifers, bulls, and calves, all separate—bellowing, and, in a friendly way, raking skins and hair off each other with their horns.

The station-manager, with a handful of papers and a pencil behind his ear, hurried here and there, followed by some of the crowd, who asked him questions which he did n't answer. Dad asked him if this was the place where the sale was to be. He looked all over Dad.

A man rang a bell violently, shouting, "This way for the dairy cows!" Dad went that way, closely followed by Dave, who was silent and strange. A boy put a printed catalogue into Dad's

hand, which he was doubtful about keeping until he saw Andy Percil with one. Most of the men seated on the rails jumped down into an empty yard and stood round in a ring. In one corner the auctioneer mounted a box, and read the conditions of sale, and talked hard about the breed of the cattle. Then:

"How much for the imported cow, Silky? No.1 on the catalogue. How much to start her, gentlemen?"

Silky rushed into the yard with a shower of sticks flying after her and glared about, finally fixing her gaze on Dad, who was trying to find her number in the catalogue.

"A pure-bred 'Heereford,' four years old, by 'The Duke out of Dolly, to calve on the eighth of next month," said the auctioneer. "How much to start her?"

All silent. Buyers looked thoughtful. The auctioneer ran his restless eyes over them.

Dad and Dave held a whispered consultation; then Dad made a movement. The auctioneer caught his eye and leant forward.

"FIVE BOB!" Dad shouted. There was a loud laugh. The auctioneer frowned. "We're selling COWS, old man," he said, "not running a shilling-table."

More laughter. It reached Dave's heart, and he wished he had n't come with Dad.

Someone bid five pounds, someone else six; seven-eight-nine went round quickly, and Silky was sold for ten pounds.

"Beauty" rushed in.

Two station-hands passed among the crowd, each with a bucket of beer and some glasses. Dad hesitated when they came to him, and said he did n't care about it. Dave the same.

Dad ran "Beauty" to three pound ten shillings (all the money he had), and she was knocked down at twelve pounds.

Bidding became lively.

Dave had his eye on the men with the beer—he was thirsty. He noticed no one paid for what was drunk, and whispered his discovery to Dad. When the beer came again, Dad reached out and took a glass. Dave took one also.

"Have another!" said the man.

Dave grinned, and took another.

Dad ran fifteen cows, successively, to three pounds ten shillings.

The men with the beer took a liking to Dave. They came frequently to him, and Dave began to enjoy the sale.

Again Dad stopped bidding at three pounds ten shillings.

Dave began to talk. He left his place beside Dad and, hat in hand, staggered to the middle of the yard. "WOH!" he shouted, and made an awkward attempt to embrace a red cow which was under the hammer.

"SEV'N POUN'—SEV'N POUN'—SEV'N POUN'," shouted the auctioneer, rapidly. "Any advance on sev'n POUN'?"

"WENNY (hic) QUID," Dave said.

"At sev'n poun' she's GOING?"

"Twenny (hic) TWO quid," Dave said.

"You have n't twenty-two PENCE," snorted the auctioneer.

Then Dave caught the cow by the tail, and she pulled him about the yard until two men took him away.

The last cow put up was, so the auctioneer said, station-bred and in full milk. She was a wild-looking brute, with three enormous teats and a large, fleshy udder. The catalogue said her name was "Dummy."

"How much for 'Dummy,' the only bargain in the mob—how much for her, gentlemen?"

Dad rushed "Dummy." "Three poun' ten," he said, eagerly.

The auctioneer rushed Dad. "YOURS," he said, bringing his hammer down with a bang; "you deserve her, old man!" And the station-manager chuckled and took Dad's name—and Dad's money.

Dad was very pleased, and eager to start home. He went and found Dave, who was asleep in a hay-stack, and along with Steven Burton they drove the cow home, and yarded her in the dark.

Mother and Sal heard the noise, and came with a light to see Dad's purchase, but as they approached "Dummy" threatened to carry the yard away on her back, and Dad ordered them off.

Dad secured the rails by placing logs and the harrow against them, then went inside and told Mother what a bargain he'd made.

In the morning Dad took a bucket and went to milk "Dummy." All of us accompanied him. He crawled through the rails while "Dummy" tore the earth with her fore-feet and threw lumps of it over the yard. But she was n't so wild as she seemed, and when Dad went to work on her with a big stick she walked into the bail quietly enough. Then he sat to milk her, and when he took hold of her teats she broke the leg-rope and kicked him clean off the block and tangled her leg in the bucket and made a great noise with it. Then she bellowed and reared in the bail and fell down, her head screwed the wrong way, and lay with her tongue out moaning.

Dad rose and spat out dirt.

"Dear me!" Mother said. "it's a WILD cow y' bought."

"Not at all," Dad answered; "she's a bit touchy, that's all."

"She tut-tut—TUTCHED YOU orright, Dad," Joe said from the top of the yard.

Dad looked up. "Get down outer THAT!" he yelled. "No wonder the damn cow's frightened."

Joe got down.

Dad brought "Dummy" to her senses with a few heavy kicks on her nose, and proceeded to milk her again. "Dummy" kicked and kicked. Dad tugged and tugged at her teats, but no milk came. Dad could n't understand it. "Must be frettin'," he said.

Joe owned a pet calf about a week old which lived on water and a long rope. Dad told him to fetch it to see if it would suck. Joe fetched it, and it sucked ravenously at "Dummy's" flank, and joyfully wagged its tail. "Dummy" resented it. She plunged until the leg-rope parted again, when the calf got mixed up in her legs, and she trampled it in the ground. Joe took it away. Dad turned "Dummy" out and bailed her up the next day—and every day for a week—with the same result. Then he sent for Larry O'Laughlin, who posed as a cow doctor.

"She never give a drop in her life," Larry said. "Them's BLIND tits she have."

Dad one day sold "Dummy" for ten shillings and bought a goat, which Johnson shot on his cultivation and made Dad drag away.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Parson and the Scone.

It was dinner-time. And were n't we hungry!—particularly Joe! He was kept from school that day to fork up hay-work hard enough for a man—too hard for some men—but in many things Joe was more than a man's equal. Eating was one of them. We were all silent. Joe ate ravenously. The meat and pumpkin disappeared, and the pile of hot scones grew rapidly less. Joe regarded it with anxiety. He stole sly glances at Dad and at Dave and made a mental calculation. Then he fixed his eyes longingly on the one remaining scone, and ate faster and faster....Still silence. Joe glanced again at Dad.

The dogs outside barked. Those inside, lying full-stretch beneath the table, instantly darted up and rushed out. One of them carried off little Bill—who was standing at the table with his legs spread out and a pint of tea in his hand—as far as the door on its back, and there scraped him off and spilled tea over him. Dad spoke. He said, "Damn the dogs!" Then he rose and looked out the window. We all rose—all except Joe. Joe reached for the last scone.

A horseman dismounted at the slip-rails.

"Some stranger," Dad muttered, turning to re-seat himself.

"Why, it's—it's the minister!" Sal cried—"the minister that married Kate!"

Dad nearly fell over. "Good God!" was all he said, and stared hopelessly at Mother. The minister—for sure enough it was the Rev. Daniel Macpherson—was coming in. There was commotion. Dave finished his tea at a gulp, put on his hat, and left by the back-door. Dad would have followed, but hesitated, and so was lost. Mother was restless—"on pins and needles."

"And there ain't a bite to offer him," she cried, dancing hysterically about the table—"not a bite; nor a plate, nor a knife, nor a fork to eat it with!" There was humour in Mother at times. It came from the father's side. He was a dentist.

Only Joe was unconcerned. He was employed on the last scone. He commenced it slowly. He wished it to last till night. His mouth opened and received it fondly. He buried his teeth in it and lingered lovingly over it. Mother's eyes happened to rest on him. Her face brightened. She flew at Joe and cried:

"Give me that scone!—put it back on the table this minute!"

Joe became concerned. He was about to protest. Mother seized him by the hair (which had n't been cut since Dan went shearing) and hissed:

"Put—it—back—sir!" Joe put it back.

The minister came in. Dad said he was pleased to see him—poor Dad!—and enquired if he had had dinner. The parson had not, but said he did n't want any, and implored Mother not to put herself about on his account. He only required a cup of tea—nothing else whatever. Mother was delighted, and got the tea gladly. Still she was not satisfied. She would be hospitable. She said:

"Won't you try a scone with it, Mr. Macpherson?" And the parson said he would—"just one."

Mother passed the rescued scone along, and awkwardly apologised for the absence of plates. She explained that the Andersons were threshing their wheat, and had borrowed all our crockery and cutlery—everybody's, in fact, in the neighbourhood—for the use of the men. Such was the custom round our way. But the minister did n't mind. On the contrary, he commended everybody for fellowship and good-feeling, and felt sure that the district would be rewarded.

It took the Rev. Macpherson no time to polish off the scone. When the last of it was disappearing Mother became uneasy again. So did Dad. He stared through the window at the parson's sleepy-looking horse, fastened to the fence. Dad wished to heaven it would break away, or drop dead, or do anything to provide him with an excuse to run out. But it was a faithful steed. It stood there leaning on its forehead against a post. There was a brief silence.

Then the minister joked about his appetite—at which only Joe could afford to smile—and asked, "May I trouble you for just another scone?"

Mother muttered something like "Yes, of course," and went out to the kitchen just as if there had been some there. Dad was very uncomfortable. He patted the floor with the flat of his foot and wondered what would happen next. Nothing happened for a good while. The minister sipped and sipped his tea till none was left...

Dad said: "I'll see what's keeping her," and rose—glad if ever man was glad—to get away. He found Mother seated on the ironbark table in the kitchen. They did n't speak. They looked at each other sympathisingly.

"Well?" Dad whispered at last; "what are you going to do?" Mother shook her head. She did n't know.

"Tell him straight there ain't any, an' be done with it," was Dad's cheerful advice. Mother several times approached the door, but hesitated and returned again.

"What are you afraid of?" Dad would ask; "he won't eat y'." Finally she went in.

Then Dad tiptoed to the door and listened. He was listening eagerly when a lump of earth—a piece of the cultivation paddock—fell dangerously near his feet. It broke and scattered round him, and rattled inside against the papered wall. Dad jumped round. A row of jackasses on a tree near by laughed merrily. Dad looked up. They stopped. Another one laughed clearly from the edge of the tall corn. Dad turned his head. It was Dave. Dad joined him, and they watched the parson mount his horse and ride away.

Dad drew a deep and grateful breath. "Thank God!" he said.

CHAPTER XXII.

Callaghan's Colt.

It was the year we put the bottom paddock under potatoes. Dad was standing contemplating the tops, which were withering for want of rain. He shifted his gaze to the ten acres sown with corn. A dozen stalks or so were looking well; a few more, ten or twelve inches high, were coming in cob; the rest had n't made an appearance.

Dad sighed and turned away from the awful prospect. He went and looked into the water-cask. Two butterflies, a frog or two, and some charcoal were at the bottom. No water. He sighed again, took the yoke and two kerosene-tins, and went off to the springs.

About an hour and a half after he returned with two half-tins of muddy, milky-looking water—the balance had been splashed out as he got through the fences—and said to Mother (wiping the sweat off his face with his shirt-sleeve)—

"Don't know, I'm SURE, what things are going t' come t';...no use doing anything...there's no rain...no si——" he lifted his foot and with cool exactness took a place-kick at the dog, which was trying to fall into one of the kerosene-tins, head first, and sent it and the water flying. "Oh you ——!" The rest is omitted in the interests of Poetry.

Day after. Fearful heat; not a breath of air; fowl and beast sought the shade; everything silent; the great Bush slept. In the west a stray cloud or two that had been hanging about gathered, thickened, darkened.

The air changed. Fowl and beast left the shade; tree-tops began to stir—to bend—to sway violently. Small branches flew down and rolled before the wind. Presently it thundered afar off. Mother and Sal ran out and gathered the clothes, and fixed the spout, and looked cheerfully up at the sky.

Joe sat in the chimney-corner thumping the ribs of a cattle-pup, and pinching its ears to make it savage. He had been training the pup ever since its arrival that morning.

The plough-horses, yoked to the plough, stood in the middle of the paddock, beating the flies off with their tails and leaning against each other.

Dad stood at the stock-yard—his brown arms and bearded chin resting on a middle-rail—passively watching Dave and Paddy Maloney breaking-in a colt for Callaghan—a weedy, wild, herring-gutted brute that might have been worth fifteen shillings. Dave was to have him to hack about for six months in return for the breaking-in. Dave was acquiring a local reputation for his skill in handling colts.

They had been at "Callaghan"—as they christened the colt—since daylight, pretty well; and had crippled old Moll and lamed Maloney's Dandy, and knocked up two they borrowed from Anderson—yarding the rubbish; and there was n't a fence within miles of the place that he had n't tumbled over and smashed.

But, when they did get him in, they lost no time commencing to quieten him. They cursed eloquently, and threw the bridle at him, and used up all the missiles and bits of hard mud and sticks about the yard, pelting him because he would n't stand.

Dave essayed to rope him "the first shot," and nearly poked his eye out with the pole; and Paddy Maloney, in attempting to persuade the affrighted beast to come out of the cow-bail, knocked the cap of its hip down with the milking-block. They caught him then and put the saddle on. Callaghan trembled. When the girths were tightened they put the reins under the leathers, and threw their hats at him, and shouted, and "hooshed" him round the yard, expecting he would buck with the saddle. But Callaghan only trotted into a corner and snorted. Usually, a horse that won't buck with a saddle is a "snag." Dave knew it. The chestnut he tackled for Brown did nothing with the saddle. HE was a snag. Dave remembered him and reflected. Callaghan walked boldly up to Dave, with his head high in the air, and snorted at him. He was a sorry-looking animal—cuts and scars all over him; hip down; patches and streaks of skin and hair missing from his head. "No buck in him!" unctuously observed Dad, without lifting his chin off the rail. "Ain't there?" said Paddy Maloney, grinning cynically. "Just you wait!"

It seemed to take the heart out of Dave, but he said nothing. He hitched his pants and made a brave effort to spit—several efforts. And he turned pale.

Paddy was now holding Callaghan's head at arms'-length by the bridle and one ear, for Dave to mount.

A sharp crack of thunder went off right overhead. Dave did n't hear it.

"Hello!" Dad said, "We're going to have it—hurry up!"

Dave did n't hear him. He approached the horse's side and nervously tried the surcingle—a greenhide one of Dad's workmanship. "Think that'll hold?" he mumbled meekly.

"Pshaw!" Dad blurted through the rails—"Hold! Of course it'll hold—hold a team o' bullocks, boy."

"S all right, Dave; 's all right—git on!" From Paddy Maloney, impatiently.

Paddy, an out-and-out cur amongst horses himself, was anxious to be relieved of the colt's head. Young horses sometimes knock down the man who is holding them. Paddy was aware of it.

Dave took the reins carefully, and was about to place his foot in the stirrup when his restless eye settled on a wire-splice in the crupper—also Dad's handiwork. He hesitated and commenced a remark. But Dad was restless; Paddy Maloney anxious (as regarded himself); besides, the storm was coming.

Dad said: "Damn it, what are y' 'FRAID o', boy? THAT'll hold—jump on."

Paddy said: "NOW, Dave, while I've 'is 'ead round."

Joe (just arrived with the cattle-pup) chipped in.

He said: "Wot, is he fuf-fuf-fuf-f-rikent of him, Dad?"

Dave heard them. A tear like a hailstone dropped out of his eye.

"It's all damn well t' TALK," he fired off; "come in and RIDE th'——horse then, if y' s'——GAME!"

A dead silence.

The cattle-pup broke away from Joe and strolled into the yard. It barked feebly at Callaghan, then proceeded to worry his heels. It seemed to take Callaghan for a calf. Callaghan kicked it up against the rails. It must have taken him for a cow then.

Dave's blood was up. He was desperate. He grabbed the reins roughly, put his foot in the stirrup, gripped the side of the pommel, and was on before you could say "Woolloongabba."

With equal alacrity, Paddy let the colt's head go and made tracks, chuckling. The turn things had taken delighted him. Excitement (and pumpkin) was all that kept Paddy alive. But Callaghan did n't budge—at least not until Dave dug both heels into him. Then he made a blind rush and knocked out a panel of the yard—and got away with Dave. Off he went, plunging, galloping, pig-jumping, breaking loose limbs and bark off trees with Dave's legs. A wire-fence was in his way. It parted like the Red Sea when he came to it—he crashed into it and rolled over. The saddle was dangling under his belly when he got up; Dave and the bridle were under the fence. But the storm had come, and such a storm! Hailstones as big as apples nearly—first one here and there, and next moment in thousands.

Paddy Maloney and Joe ran for the house; Dave, with an injured ankle and a cut head, limped painfully in the same direction; but Dad saw the plough-horses turning and twisting about in their chains and set out for them. He might as well have started off the cross the continent. A hailstone, large enough to kill a cow, fell with a thud a yard or two in advance of him, and he slewed like a hare and made for the house also. He was getting it hot. Now and again his hands would go up to protect his head, but he could n't run that way—he could n't run much any way.

The others reached the house and watched Dad make from the back-door. Mother called to him to "Run, run!" Poor Dad! He was running. Paddy Maloney was joyful. He danced about and laughed vociferously at the hail bouncing off Dad. Once Dad staggered—a hail-boulder had struck him behind the ear—and he looked like dropping. Paddy hit himself on the leg, and vehemently invited Dave to "Look, LOOK at him!" But Dad battled along to the haystack, buried his head in it, and stayed there till the storm was over—wriggling and moving his feet as though he were tramping chaff.

Shingles were dislodged from the roof of the house, and huge hailstones pelted in and put the fire out, and split the table, and fell on the sofa and the beds.

Rain fell also, but we did n't catch any in the cask—the wind blew the spout away. It was a curled piece of bark. Nevertheless, the storm did good. We did n't lose ALL the potatoes. We got SOME out of them. We had them for dinner one Sunday.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Agricultural Reporter.

It had been a dull, miserable day, and a cold westerly was blowing. Dave and Joe were at the barn finishing up for the day.

Dad was inside grunting and groaning with toothache. He had had it a week, and was nearly mad. For a while he sat by the fire, prodding the tooth with his pocket-knife; then he covered his jaw with his hand and went out and walked about the yard.

Joe asked him if he had seen Nell's foal anywhere that day. He did n't answer.

"Did y' see the brown foal any place ter-day, Dad?"

"Damn the brown foal!"—and Dad went inside again.

He walked round and round the table and in and out the back room till Mother nearly cried with pity.

"Is n't it any easier at all, Father?" she said commiseratingly.

"How the devil can it be easier?...Oh-h!"

The kangaroo-dog had coiled himself snugly on a bag before the fire. Dad kicked him savagely and told him to get out. The dog slunk sulkily to the door, his tail between his legs, and his back humped as if expecting another kick. He got it. Dad sat in the ashes then, and groaned lamentably. The dog walked in at the back door and dropped on the bag again.

Joe came in to say that "Two coves out there wants somethink."

Dad paid no attention.

The two "coves"—a pressman, in new leggings, and Canty, the storekeeper—came in. Mother brought a light. Dad moaned, but did n't look up.

"Well, Mr. Rudd," the pressman commenced (he was young and fresh-looking), "I'm from the (something-or-other) office. I'm—er—after information about the crops round here. I suppose—er——"

"Oh-h-h!" Dad groaned, opening his mouth over the fire, and pressing the tooth hard with his thumb.

The pressman stared at him for awhile; then grinned at the storekeeper, and made a derisive face at Dad's back. Then—"What have you got in this season, Mr. Rudd? Wheat?"

"I don't know....Oh-h—it's awful!"

Another silence.

"Did n't think toothache so bad as THAT," said the man of news, airily, addressing Mother. "Never had it much myself, you see!"

He looked at Dad again; then winked slyly at Canty, and said to Dad, in an altered tone: "Whisky's a good thing for it, old man, if you've got any."

Nothing but a groan came from Dad, but Mother shook her head sadly in the negative.

"Any oil of tar?"

Mother brightened up. "There's a little oil in the house," she said, "but I don't know if we've any tar. Is there, Joe—in that old drum?"

"Nurh."

The Press looked out the window. Dad commenced to butcher his gums with the pocket-knife, and threatened to put the fire out with blood and saliva.

"Let's have a look at the tooth, old man," the pressman said, approaching Dad.

Dad submitted.

"Pooh!—I'll take that out in one act!...To Joe—"Got a good strong piece of string?"

Joe could n't find a piece of string, but produced a kangaroo-tail sinew that had been tied round a calf's neck.

The pressman was enthusiastic. He buzzed about and talked dentistry in a most learned manner. Then he had another squint at Dad's tooth.

"Sit on the floor here," he said, "and I won't be a second. You'll feel next to no pain."

Dad complied like a lamb.

"Hold the light down here, missis—a little lower. You gentlemen" (to Canty and Dave) "look after his legs and arms. Now, let your head come back—right back, and open your mouth—wide as you can." Dad obeyed, groaning the whole

time. It was a bottom-tooth, and the dentist stood behind Dad and bent over him to fasten the sinew round it. Then, twisting it on his wrist, he began to "hang on" with both hands. Dad struggled and groaned—then broke into a bellow and roared like a wild beast. But the dentist only said, "Keep him down!" and the others kept him down.

Dad's neck was stretching like a gander's, and it looked as if his head would come off. The dentist threw his shoulders into it like a crack oarsman—there was a crack, a rip, a tear, and, like a young tree leaving the ground, two huge, ugly old teeth left Dad's jaw on the end of that sinew.

"Holy!" cried the dentist, surprised, and we stared. Little Bill made for the teeth; so did Joe, and there was a fight under the table.

Dad sat in a lump on the floor propping himself up with his hands; his head dropped forward, and he spat feebly on the floor.

The pressman laughed and slapped Dad on the back, and asked "How do you feel, old boy?" Dad shook his head and spat and spat. But presently he wiped his eyes with his shirt-sleeve and looked up. The pressman told Mother she ought to be proud of Dad. Dad struggled to his feet then, pale but smiling. The pressman shook hands with him, and in no time Dad was laughing and joking over the operation. A pleased look was in Mother's face; happiness filled the home again, and we grew quite fond of that pressman—he was so jolly and affable, and made himself so much at home, Mother said.

"Now, sit over, and we'll have supper," said Dad, proud of having some fried steak to offer the visitors. We had killed a cow the evening before—one that was always getting bogged in the dam and taking up much of Dad's time dragging her out and cutting greenstuff to keep her alive. The visitors enjoyed her. The pressman wanted salt. None was on the table. Dad told Joe to run and get some—to be quick. Joe went out, but in a while returned. He stood at the door with the hammer in his hand and said:

"Did you shift the r-r-r-rock-salt from where S-Spotty was lickin' it this evenin', Dave?"

Dave reached for the bread.

"Don't bother—don't bother about it," said the pressman. "Sit down, youngster, and finish your supper."

"No bother at all," Dad said; but Joe sat down, and Dad scowled at him.

Then Dad got talking about wheat and wallabies—when, all at once, the pressman gave a jump that rattled the things on the table.

"Oh-h-h!...I'VE got it now!" he said, dropping his knife and fork and clapping his hands over his mouth. "Ooh!"

We looked at him. "Got what?" Dad asked, a gleam of satisfaction appearing in his eyes.

"The toothache!—the d——d toothache!...Oh-h!"

"Ha! ha! Hoo! hoo! hoo!" Dad roared. In fact, we all roared—all but the pressman. "OH-H!" he said, and went to the fire. Dad laughed some more.

We ate on. The pressman continued to moan.

Dad turned on his seat. "What paper, mister, do you say you come from?"

"OH-H!...Oh-h, Lord!"

"Well, let me see; I'll have in altogether, I daresay, this year, about thirty-five acres of wheat—I suppose as good a wheat _____"

"Damn the wheat!...OOH!"

"Eh!" said Dad, "why, I never thought toothache was THET bad! You reminds me of this old cow we be eatin'. SHE moaned just like thet all the time she was layin' in the gully, afore I knocked 'er on the head."

Canty, the storekeeper, looked up quickly, and the pressman looked round slowly—both at Dad.

"Here," continued Dad—"let's have a look at yer tooth, old man!"

The pressman rose. His face was flushed and wild-looking. "Come on out of this—for God's sake!" he said to Canty—"if you're ready."

"What," said Dad, hospitably, "y're not going, surely!" But they were. "Well, then—thirty-five acres of wheat, I have, and" (putting his head out the door and calling after them) "NEXT year—next year, all being well, please God, I'll have SIXTY!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A Lady at Shingle Hut.

Miss Ribbone had just arrived.

She was the mistress of the local school, and had come to board with us a month. The parents of the score of more of youngsters attending the school had arranged to accommodate her, month about, and it was our turn. And did n't Mother just load us up how we were to behave—particularly Joe.

Dad lumbered in the usual log for the fire, and we all helped him throw it on—all except the schoolmistress. Poor thing! She would have injured her long, miserable, putty-looking fingers! Such a contrast between her and Sall! Then we sat down to supper—that old familiar repast, hot meat and pumpkin.

Somehow we did n't feel quite at home; but Dad got on well. He talked away learnedly to Miss Ribbone about everything. Told her, without swearing once, how, when at school in the old country, he fought the schoolmaster and leathered him well. A pure lie, but an old favourite of Dad's, and one that never failed to make Joe laugh. He laughed now. And such a laugh!—a loud, mirthless, merciless noise. No one else joined in, though Miss Ribbone smiled a little. When Joe recovered he held out his plate.

"More pumpkin, Dad."

"If—what, sir?" Dad was prompting him in manners.

"If?" and Joe laughed again. "Who said 'if'?—I never."

Just then Miss Ribbone sprang to her feet, knocking over the box she had been sitting on, and stood for a time as though she had seen a ghost. We stared at her. "Oh," she murmured at last, "it was the dog! It gave me such a fright!"

Mother sympathised with her and seated her again, and Dad fixed his eye on Joe.

"Did n't I tell you," he said, "to keep that useless damned mongrel of a dog outside the house altogether—eh?—did n't I? Go this moment and tie the brute up, you vagabond!"

"I did tie him up, but he chewed the greenhide."

"Be off with you, you—" (Dad coughed suddenly and scattered fragments of meat and munched pumpkin about the table) "at once, and do as I tell you, you——"

"That'll do, Father—that'll do," Mother said gently, and Joe took Stump out to the barn and kicked him, and hit him against the corn-sheller, and threatened to put him through it if he did n't stop squealing.

He was a small dog, a dog that was always on the watch—for meat; a shrewd, intelligent beast that never barked at anyone until he got inside and well under the bed. Anyway, he had taken a fancy to Miss Ribbone's stocking, which had fallen down while he was lying under the table, and commenced to worry it. Then he discovered she had a calf, and started to eat THAT. She did n't tell US though—she told Mrs. Macpherson, who imparted the secret to mother. I suppose Stump did n't understand stockings,

because neither Mother nor Sal ever wore any, except to a picnic or somebody's funeral; and that was very seldom. The Creek was n't much of a place for sport.

"I hope as you'll be comfortable, my dear," Mother observed as she showed the young lady the back-room where she was to sleep. "It ain't s' nice as we should like to have it f' y'; we had n't enough spare bags to line it all with, but the cracks is pretty well stuffed up with husks an' one thing an' 'nother, and I don't think you'll find any wind kin get in. Here's a bear-skin f' your feet, an' I've nailed a bag up so no one kin see-in in the morning. S' now, I think you'll be pretty snug."

The schoolmistress cast a distressed look at the waving bag-door and said:

"Th-h-ank you-very much."

What a voice! I've heard kittens that had n't their eyes open make a fiercer noise.

Mother must have put all the blessed blankets in the house on the school-teacher's bed. I don't know what she had on her own, but we only had the old bag-quilt and a stack of old skirts, and other remnants of the family wardrobe, on ours. In the middle of the night, the whole confounded pile of them rolled off, and we nearly froze. Do what we boys would—tie ourselves in knots and coil into each other like ropes—we could n't get warm. We sat up in the bed in turns, and glared into the darkness towards the schoolmistress's room, which was n't more than three yards away; then we would lie back again and shiver. We were having a time. But at last we heard a noise from the

young lady's room. We listened—all we knew. Miss Ribbone was up and dressing. We could hear her teeth chattering and her knees knocking together. Then we heard her sneak back to bed again and felt disappointed and colder than ever, for we had hoped she was getting up early, and would n't want the bed any longer that night. Then we too crawled out and dressed and tried it that way.

In answer to Mother at breakfast, next morning, Miss Ribbone said she had "slept very well indeed."

We did n't say anything.

She was n't much of an eater. School-teachers are n't as a rule. They pick, and paw, and fiddle round a meal in a way that gives a healthy-appetited person the jim-jams. She did n't touch the fried pumpkin. And the way she sat there at the table in her watch-chain and ribbons made poor old Dave, who sat opposite her in a ragged shirt without a shirt-button, feel quite miserable and awkward.

For a whole week she did n't take anything but bread and tea—though there was always plenty good pumpkin and all that. Mother used to speak to Dad about it, and wonder if she ate the little pumpkin-tarts she put up for her lunch. Dad could n't understand anyone not eating pumpkin, and said HE'D tackle GRASS before he'd starve.

"And did ever y' see such a object?" Mother went on. "The hands an' arms on her! Dear me! Why, I do believe if our Sal was to give her one squeeze she'd kill her. Oh, but the finery and

clothes! Y' never see the like! Just look at her!" And Dad, the great oaf, with Joe at his heels, followed her into the young lady's bedroom.

"Look at that!" said Mother, pointing to a couple of dresses hanging on a nail—"she wears THEM on week-days, no less; and here" (raising the lid of a trunk and exposing a pile of clean and neatly-folded clothing that might have been anything, and drawing the articles forth one by one)—"look at them! There's that—and that—and this—and——"

"I say, what's this, Mother?" interrupted Joe, holding up something he had discovered.

"And that—an'——"

"Mother!"

"And this——"

"Eh, Mother?"

"Don't bother me, boy, it's her tooth-brush," and Mother pitched the clothes back into the trunk and glared round. Meanwhile, Joe was hard at his teeth with the brush.

"Oh, here!" and she dived at the bed and drew a night-gown from beneath the pillow, unfolded it, and held it up by the neck for inspection.

Dad, with his huge, ungainly, hairy paws behind him, stood mute, like the great pitiful elephant he was, and looked at the tucks and the rest—stupidly. "Where before did y'ever see such tucks and frills and lace on a night-shirt? Why, you'd think 't

were for goin' to picnics in, 'stead o' goin' to bed with. Here, too! here's a pair of brand new stays, besides the ones she's on her back. Clothes!—she's nothin' else but clothes."

Then they came out, and Joe began to spit and said he thought there must have been something on that brush.

Miss Ribbone did n't stay the full month—she left at the end of the second week; and Mother often used to wonder afterwards why the creature never came to see us.

CHAPTER XXV.

The Man with the Bear-Skin Cap.

One evening a raggedly-dressed man, with a swag on his back, a bear-skin cap on his head, and a sheath-knife in his belt, came to our place and took possession of the barn. Dad ordered him off. The man offered to fight Dad for the barn. Dad ran in and got the gun. Then the man picked up his swag and went away. The incident caused much talk for a few days, but we soon forgot all about it; and the man with the bear-skin cap passed from our minds.

Church service was to be held at our selection. It was the first occasion, in fact, that the Gospel had come to disturb the contentedly irreligious mind of our neighbourhood. Service was to open at 3 p.m.; at break-of-day we had begun to get ready.

Nothing but bustle and hurry. Buttons to be sewn on Dave's shirt; Dad's pants—washed the night before and left on the clothes-line all night to bleach—lost; Little Bill's to be patched up generally; Mother trotting out to the clothes-line every minute to see if Joe's coat was dry. And, what was unusual, Dave, the easy-going, took a notion to spruce himself up. He wandered restlessly from one room to another, robed in a white shirt which was n't starched or ironed, trying hard to fix a collar to it. He had n't worn the turn-out for a couple of years, and, of course, had grown out of it, but this did n't seem to strike him. He tugged and fumbled till he lost patience; then he sat on the bed and railed at the women, and wished that the shirt and

the collar, and the church-service and the parson, were in Heaven. Mother offered to fasten the collar, but when she took hold of it—forgetting that her hands were covered with dough and things—Dave flew clean off the handle! And when Sal advised him to wear his coloured shirt, same as Dad was going to do, and reminded him that Mary Anderson might n't come at all, he aimed a pillow at her and knocked Little Bill under the table, and scattered husks all over the floor. Then he fled to the barn and refused dinner.

Mid-day, and Dad's pants not found. We searched inside and outside and round about the pig-sty, and the hay-stack, and the cow-yard; and eyed the cows, and the pet kangaroo, and the draught-horses with suspicion; but saw nothing of the pants. Dad was angry, but had to make the most of an old pair of Dave's through the legs of which Dad thrust himself a lot too far. Mother and Sal said he looked well enough in them, but laughed when he went outside.

The people commenced to arrive on horseback and in drays. The women went on to the verandah with their babies; the men hung round outside and waited. Some sat under the peach-tree and nibbled sticks and killed green-heads; others leant against the fence; while a number gathered round the pig-sty and talked about curing bacon.

The parson came along. All of them stared at him; watched him unsaddle his horse and hunt round for a place to fasten the beast. They regarded the man in the long black coat with awe and wonder.

Everything was now ready, and, when Dad carried in the side-boards of the dray and placed them on boxes for seat accommodation, the clergyman awaited his congregation, which had collected at the back-door. Anderson stepped in; the rest followed, timid-looking, and stood round the room till the clergyman motioned them to sit. They sat and watched him closely.

"We'll now join in singing hymn 499," said the parson, commencing to sing himself. The congregation listened attentively, but did n't join in. The parson jerked his arms encouragingly at them, which only made them the more uneasy. They did n't understand. He snapped his arms harder, as he lifted his voice to the rafters; still they only stared. At last Dad thought he saw through him. He bravely stood up and looked hard at the others. They took the hint and rose clumsily to their feet, but just then the hymn closed, and, as no one seemed to know when to sit again, they remained standing.

They were standing when a loud whip-crack sounded close to the house, and a lusty voice roared:

"Wah Tumbler! Wah Tumbler! Gee back, Brandy! Gee back, you——!——!!——!!!"

People smiled. Then a team of bullocks appeared on the road. The driver drawled, "Wa-a-a-y!" and the team stopped right in front of the door. The driver lifted something weighty from the dray and struggled to the verandah with it and dropped it down. It was a man. The bullock-driver, of course, did n't

know that a religious service was being conducted inside, and the chances are he did n't much care. He only saw a number of faces looking out, and talked at them.

"I've a —— cove here," he said, "that I found lying on the —— plain. Gawd knows what's up with him—I don't. A good square feed is about what he wants, I reckon." Then he went back for the man's swag.

Dad, after hesitating, rose and went out. The others followed like a flock of sheep; and the "shepherd" brought up the rear. Church was out. It gathered around the seeming corpse, and stared hard at it. Dad and Dave spoke at the same time.

"Why," they said, "it's the cove with the bear-skin cap!" Sure enough it was. The clergyman knelt down and felt the man's pulse; then went and brought a bottle from his valise—he always carried the bottle, he said, in case of snake-bite and things like that—and poured some of the contents down the man's throat. The colour began to come to the man's face. The clergyman gave him some more, and in a while the man opened his eyes. They rested on Dad, who was bending benignly over him. He seemed to recognise Dad. He stared for some time at him, then said something in a feeble whisper, which the clergyman interpreted—"He wishes you—" looking at Dad—"to get what's in his swag if he dies." Dad nodded, and his thoughts went sadly back to the day he turned the poor devil out of the barn.

They carried the man inside and placed him on the sofa. But soon he took a turn. He sank quickly, and in a few moments he was dead. In a few moments more nearly everyone had gone.

"While you are here," Dad said to the clergyman, in a soft voice, "I'll open the swag." He commenced to unroll it—it was a big blanket—and when he got to the end there were his own trousers—the lost ones, nothing more. Dad's eyes met Mother's; Dave's met Sal's; none of them spoke. But the clergyman drew his own conclusions; and on the following Sunday, at Nobby-Nobby, he preached a stirring sermon on that touching bequest of the man with the bear-skin cap.

CHAPTER XXVI.

One Christmas.

Three days to Christmas; and how pleased we were! For months we had looked forward to it. Kate and Sandy, whom we had only seen once since they went on their selection, were to be home. Dave, who was away shearing for the first time, was coming home too. Norah, who had been away for a year teaching school, was home already. Mother said she looked quite the lady, and Sal envied the fashionable cut of her dresses.

Things were in a fair way at Shingle Hut; rain had fallen and everything looked its best. The grass along the headlands was almost as tall as the corn; the Bathurst-burr, the Scotch-thistles, and the "stinking Roger" were taller. Grow! Dad never saw the like. Why, the cultivation was n't large enough to hold the melon and pumpkin vines—they travelled into the horse-paddock and climbed up trees and over logs and stumps, and they would have fastened on the horses only the horses were fat and fresh and often galloped about. And the stock! Blest if the old cows did n't carry udders like camp-ovens, and had so much milk that one could track them everywhere they went—they leaked so. The old plough-horses, too—only a few months before dug out of the dam with a spade, and slung up between heaven and earth for a week, and fed and prayed for regularly by Dad—actually bolted one day with the dray because Joe rattled a dish of corn behind them. Even the pet kangaroo was nearly jumping out of its skin; and it took the big black "goanna" that used to come after eggs all its time to beat Dad from the barn to the nearest tree, so fat

was it. And such a season for butterflies and grasshoppers, and grubs and snakes, and native bears! Given an ass, an elephant, and an empty wine-bottle or two, and one might have thought Noah's ark had been emptied at our selection.

Two days to Christmas. The sun getting low. An old cow and a heifer in the stock-yard. Dad in, admiring them; Mother and Sal squinting through the rails; little Bill perched on one of the round posts, nursing the steel and a long knife; Joe running hard from the barn with a plough-rein.

Dad was wondering which beast to kill, and expressed a preference for the heifer. Mother said, "No, kill the cow." Dad inspected the cow again, and shook his head.

"Well, if you don't she'll only die, if the winter's a hard one; then you'll have neither." That settled it. Dad took the rope from Joe, who arrived aglow with heat and excitement, and fixed a running noose on one end of it. Then—

"Hunt 'em round!" he cried.

Joe threw his hat at them, and chased them round and round the yard. Dad turned slowly in the centre, like a ring-master, his eye on the cow; a coil of rope was in this left hand, and with the right he measuredly swung the loop over and over his head for some time. At last the cow gave him a chance at her horns, and he let fly. The rope whizzed across the yard, caught little Bill round the neck, and brought him down off the post. Dad could hardly believe it. He first stared at Bill as he rolled in the yard, then at the cow. Mother wished to know if he wanted to kill the boy, and Joe giggled and, with a deal of courage, assured Dad it

was "a fine shot." The cow and the heifer ran into a corner, and switched their tails, and raked skin and hair off each other with their horns.

"What do you want to be always stuck in the road for?" Dad growled, taking the rope off little Bill's neck. "Go away from here altogether!" Little Bill went away; so did Mother and Sal—until Dad had roped the cow, which was n't before he twice lassoed the heifer—once by the fore-leg and once round the flanks. The cow thereupon carried a panel of the yard away, and got out and careered down the lane, bucking and bellowing till all the cattle of the country gathered about her.

Dad's blood was up. He was hanging on to the rope, his heels ploughing the dust, and the cow pulling him about as she liked. The sun was setting; a beautiful sunset, too, and Mother and Sal were admiring it.

"Did y' never see th' blasted sun go—go down be——" Dad did n't finish. He feet slid under a rail, causing him to relax his grip of the rope and sprawl in the dust. But when he rose!

"Are y' going t' stand staring there all night?" They were beside the rails in an instant, took the end of the rope which he passed to them, put it once round the gallows-post, and pulled-pulled like sailors. Dad hung on close to the cow's head, while Joe kicked her with his bare foot and screwed her tail.

"Steady!" said Dad, "that'll about do." Then, turning to the women as he mounted a rail and held the axe above the cow's head: "Hang on there now!" They closed their eyes and sat back. The cow was very patient. Dad extended himself for a great

effort, but hesitated. Joe called out: "L-l-ook out th' axe dud-dud-don't fly and gug-gug-get me, Dad!" Dad glanced quickly at it, and took aim again. Down it came, whish! But the cow moved, and he only grazed her cheek. She bellowed and pulled back, and Mother and Sal groaned and let the rope go. The cow swung round and charged Joe, who was standing with his mouth open. But only a charge of shot could catch Joe; he mounted the rails like a cat and shook his hat at the beast below.

After Dad had nearly brained her with a rail the cow was dragged to the post again; and this time Dad made no mistake. Down she dropped, and, before she could give her last kick, all of us entered the yard and approached her boldly. Dad danced about excitedly, asking for the long knife. Nobody knew where it was. "DAMN it, where is it?" he cried, impatiently. Everyone flew round in search of it but Joe. HE was curious to know if the cow was in milk. Dad noticed him; sprang upon him; seized him by the shirt collar and swung him round and trailed him through the yard, saying: "Find me th' knife; d' y' HEAR?" It seemed to sharpen Joe's memory, for he suddenly remembered having stuck it in one of the rails.

Dad bled the beast, but it was late before he had it skinned and dressed. When the carcass was hoisted to the gallows—and it seemed gruesome enough as it hung there in the pallid light of the moon, with the night birds dismally wailing like mourners from the lonely trees—we went home and had supper.

Christmas Eve. Mother and Sal had just finished papering the walls, and we were busy decorating the place with green boughs, when Sandy and Kate, in their best clothes—Kate seated

behind a well-filled pillow-slip strapped on the front of her saddle; Sandy with the baby in front of him—came jogging along the lane. There was commotion! Everything was thrown aside to receive them. They were surrounded at the slip-rails, and when they got down—talk about kissing! Dad was the only one who escaped. When the hugging commenced he poked his head under the flap of Kate's saddle and commenced unbuckling the girth. Dad had been at such receptions before. But Sandy took it all meekly. And the baby! (the dear little thing) they scrimmaged about it, and mugged it, and fought for possession of it until Sandy became alarmed and asked them to "Mind!"

Inside they sat and drank tea and talked about things that had happened and things that had n't happened. Then they got back to the baby and disagreed on the question of family likeness. Kate thought the youngster was the dead image of Sandy about the mouth and eyes. Sal said it had Dad's nose; while Mother was reminded of her dear old grandmother every time the infant smiled. Joe ventured to think it resembled Paddy Maloney far more than it did Sandy, and was told to run away and put the calves in. The child was n't yet christened, and the rest of the evening was spent selecting a name for it. Almost every appellation under the sun was suggested and promptly rejected. They could n't hit on a suitable one, and Kate would n't have anything that was n't nice, till at last Dad thought of one that pleased everybody—"Jim!"

After supper, Kate started playing the concertina, and the Andersons and Maloneys and several others dropped in. Dad was pleased to see them; he wished them all a merry Christmas, and they wished him the same and many of them. Then the table

was put outside, and the room cleared for a dance. The young people took the floor and waltzed, I dare say, for miles—their heads as they whirled around tossing the green bushes that dangled from the rafters; while the old people, with beaming faces, sat admiring them, and swaying their heads about and beating time to the music by patting the floor with their feet. Someone called out "Faster!" Kate gave it faster. Then to see them and to hear the rattle of the boots upon the floor! You'd think they were being carried away in a whirlwind. All but Sal and Paddy Maloney gave up and leant against the wall, and puffed and mopped their faces and their necks with their pocket-handkerchiefs.

Faster still went the music; faster whirled Sal and Paddy Maloney. And Paddy was on his mettle. He was lifting Sal off her feet. But Kate was showing signs of distress. She leaned forward, jerked her head about, and tugged desperately at the concertina till both handles left it. That ended the tussle; and Paddy spread himself on the floor, his back to the wall, his legs extending to the centre of the room, his chin on his chest, and rested.

Then enjoyment at high tide; another dance proposed; Sal trying hard to persuade Dad to take Mother or Mrs. Maloney up; Dad saying "Tut, tut, tut!"—when in popped Dave, and stood near the door. He had n't changed his clothes, and was grease from top to toe. A saddle-strap was in one hand, his Sunday clothes, tied up in a handkerchief, in the other, and his presence made the room smell just like a woolshed.

"Hello, Dave!" shouted everyone. He said "Well!" and dropped his hat in a corner. No fuss, no kissing, no nothing about Dave. Mother asked if he did n't see Kate and Sandy (both were smiling across the room at him), and he said "Yairs"; then went out to have a wash.

All night they danced—until the cocks crew—until the darkness gave way to the dawn—until the fowls left the roost and came round the door—until it was Christmas Day!

THE END