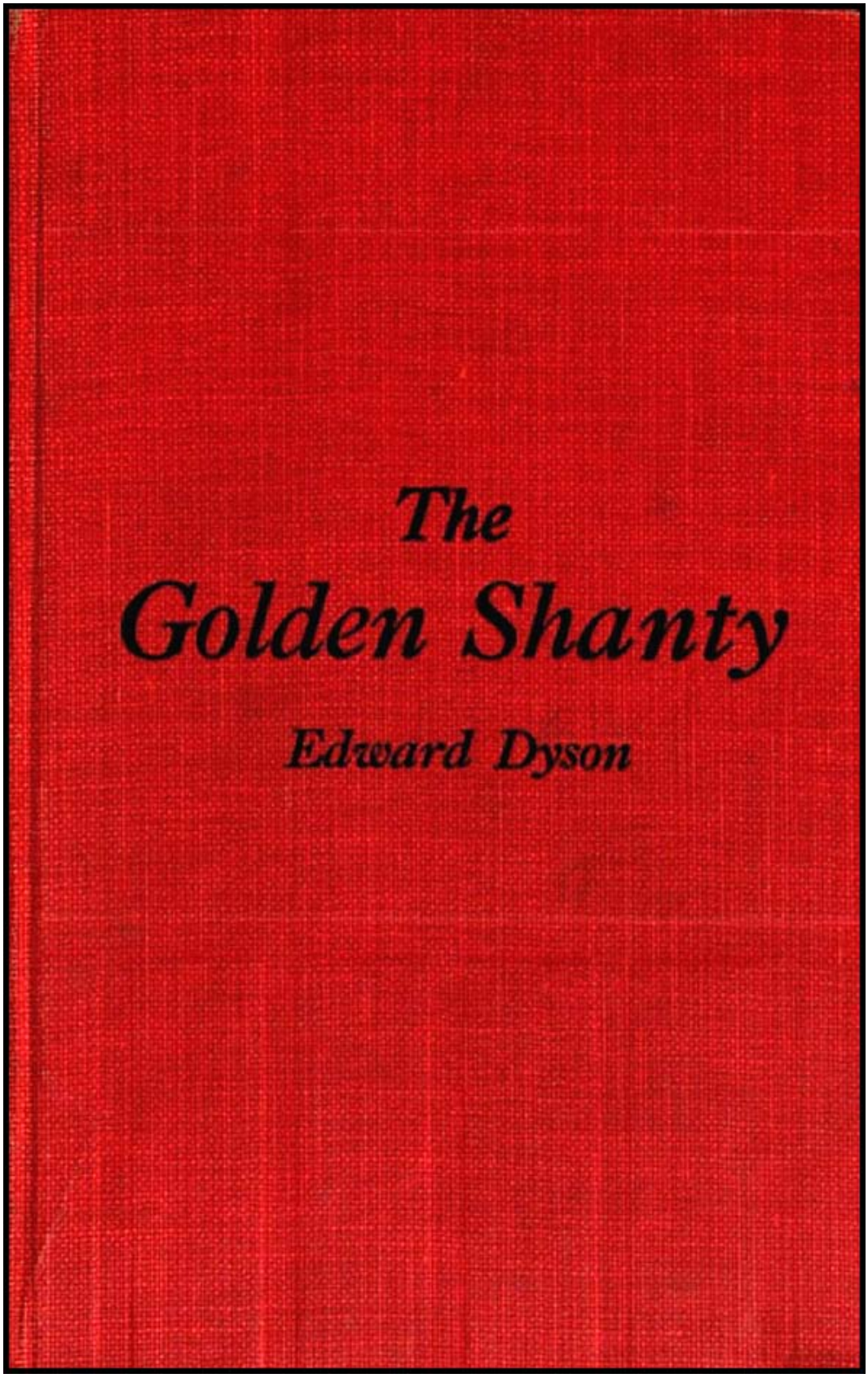
The
Golden Shanty
Edward Dyson

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Edward Dyson

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Contents

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1: The Golden Shanty

ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO, not a day's tramp from Ballarat, set well back from a dusty track that started nowhere in particular and had no destination worth mentioning, stood the Shamrock Hotel. It was a low, rambling, disjointed structure, and bore strong evidence of having been designed by an amateur artist in a moment of vinous frenzy. It reached out in several well-defined angles, and had a lean-to building stuck on here and there; numerous outhouses were dropped down about it promiscuously; its walls were propped up in places with logs, and its moss-covered shingle roof, bowed down with the weight of years and a great accumulation of stones, hoop-iron, jam-tins, broken glassware, and dried 'possum skins, bulged threateningly, on the verge of utter collapse. The Shamrock was built of sun-dried bricks, of an unhealthy, bilious tint. Its dirty, shattered windows were plugged in places with old hats and discarded female apparel, and draped with green blinds, many of which had broken their moorings, and hung despondently by one corner. Groups of ungainly fowls coursed the succulent grasshopper before the bar door; a moody, distempered goat rubbed her ribs against a shattered trough roughly hewn from the butt of a tree, and a matronly old sow of spare proportions wallowed complacently in the dust of the road, surrounded by her squealing brood.

A battered sign hung out over the door of the Shamrock, informing people that Michael Doyle was licensed to sell fermented and spirituous liquors, and that good accommodation could be afforded to both man and beast at the lowest current rates. But that sign was most unreliable; the man who applied to be accommodated with anything beyond ardent beverages— liquors so fiery that they "bit all the way down"— evoked the astonishment of the proprietor. Bed and board were quite out of the province of the Shamrock. There was, in fact, only one couch professedly at the disposal of the weary wayfarer, and this, according to the statement of the few persons who had ever ventured to try it, seemed stuffed with old boots and stubble; it was located immediately beneath a hen-roost, which was the resting-place of a maternal fowl, addicted on occasion to nursing her chickens upon the tired sleeper's chest. The "turnover" at the Shamrock was not at all extensive, for, saving an occasional agricultural labourer who came from "beyant"— which was the versatile host's way of designating any part within a radius of five miles— to revel in an occasional "spree," the trade was confined to the passing "cockatoo" farmer, who invariably arrived on a bony, drooping prad, took a drink, and shuffled away amid clouds of dust.

The only other dwellings within sight of the Shamrock were a cluster of frail, ramshackle huts, compiled of slabs, scraps of matting, zinc, and gunny-bag. These were the habitations of a colony of squalid, gibbering Chinese fossickers, who herded together like hogs in a crowded pen, as if they had been restricted to that spot on pain of death, or its equivalent, a washing.

About a quarter of a mile behind the Shamrock ran, or rather crawled, the sluggish waters of the Yellow Creek. Once upon a time, when the Shamrock was first built, the creek was a beautiful limpid rivulet, running between verdant banks; but an enterprising prospector wandering that way, and liking the indications, put down a shaft, and bottomed on "the wash" at twenty feet, getting half an ounce to the dish. A rush set in, and within twelve months the banks of the creek, for a distance of two miles, were denuded of their timber, torn up, and covered with unsightly heaps. The creek had been diverted from its natural course half a dozen times, and hundreds of diggers, like busy ants, delved into the earth and covered its surface with red, white, and yellow tips. Then the miners left almost as suddenly as they had come; the Shamrock, which had resounded with wild revelry, became as silent as a morgue, and desolation brooded on the face of the country. When Mr. Michael Doyle, whose greatest ambition in life had been to become lord of a "pub.," invested in that lucrative country property, saplings were growing between the deserted holes of the diggings, and agriculture had superseded the mining industry in those parts.

Landlord Doyle was of Irish extraction; his stock was so old that everybody had forgotten where and when it originated, but Mickey was not proud— he assumed no unnecessary style, and his personal appearance would not have led you to infer that there had been a king in his family, and that his paternal progenitor had killed a landlord "wanst." Mickey was a small, scraggy man, with a mop of grizzled hair and a little red, humorous face, ever bristling with auburn stubble. His trousers were the most striking things about him; they were built on the premises, and always contained enough stuff to make him a full suit and a winter overcoat. Mrs. Doyle manufactured those pants after plans and specifications of her own designing, and was mighty proud when Michael would yank them up into his armpits, and amble round, peering about discontentedly over the waistband. "They wus th' great savin in weskits," she said.

Of late years it had taken all Mr. Doyle's ingenuity to make ends meet. The tribe of dirty, unkempt urchins who swarmed about the place "took a power of feedin'," and Mrs. D. herself was "th' big ater." "Ye do be atin' twinty-four hours a day," her lord was wont to remark, "and thin yez must get up av noights for more. Whin ye'r not atin' ye'r munchin' a schnack, bad cess t'ye."

In order to provide the provender for his unreasonably hungry family, Mickey had been compelled to supplement his takings as a Boniface by acting alternately as fossicker, charcoal-burner, and "wood-jamber;" but it came "terrible hard" on the little man, who waxed thinner and thinner, and sank deeper into his trousers every year. Then, to augment his troubles, came that pestiferous heathen, the teetotal Chinee. One hot summer's day he arrived in numbers, like a plague, armed with picks, shovels, dishes, cradles, and tubs, and with a clatter of tools and a babble of grotesque gibberish, camped by the creek and refused to go away again. The awesome solitude of the abandoned diggings was ruthlessly broken. The deserted field, with its white mounds and decaying windlass-stands fallen aslant, which had lain like a long-forgotten cemetery buried in primeval forest, was now desecrated by the hand of the Mongol, and the sound of his weird, Oriental oaths. The Chows swarmed over the spot, tearing open old sores, shovelling old tips, sluicing old tailings, digging, cradling, puddling, ferreting, into every nook and cranny.

Mr. Doyle observed the foreign invasion with mingled feelings of righteous anger and pained solicitude. He had found fossicking by the creek very handy to fall back upon when the wood-jambing trade was not brisk; but now that industry was ruined by Chinese competition, and Michael could only find relief in deep and earnest profanity.

With the pagan influx began the mysterious disappearance of small valuables from the premises of Michael Doyle, licensed victualler. Sedate, fluffy old hens, hitherto noted for their strict propriety and regular hours, would leave the place at dead of night, and return from their nocturnal rambles never more; stay-at-home sucking-pigs, which had erstwhile absolutely refused to be driven from the door, corrupted by the new evil, absented themselves suddenly from the precincts of the Shamrock, taking with them cooking utensils and various other articles of small value, and ever afterwards their fate became a matter for speculation. At last a favourite young porker went, whereupon its lord and master, resolved to prosecute inquiries, bounced into the Mongolian camp, and, without any unnecessary preamble, opened the debate.

"Look here, now," he observed, shaking his fist at the group, and bristling fiercely, "which av ye dhirty haythen furriners cum up to me house lasht noight and shtole me pig Nancy? Which av ye is it, so't I kin bate him! ye thavin' hathins?"

The placid Orientals surveyed Mr. Doyle coolly, and innocently smiling, said, "No savee;" then bandied jests at his expense in their native tongue, and laughed the little man to scorn. Incensed by the evident ridicule of the "haythen furriners," and goaded on by the smothered squeal of a hidden pig,

Michael "went for" the nearest Asiatic, and proceeded to "put a head on him as big as a tank," amid a storm of kicks and digs from the other Chows. Presently the battle began to go against the Irish cause; but Mrs. Mickey, making a timely appearance, warded off the surplus Chinamen by chipping at their skulls with an axe-handle. The riot was soon quelled, and the two Doyles departed triumphantly, bearing away a corpulent young pig, and leaving several broken, discouraged Chinamen to be doctored at the common expense.

After this gladsome little episode the Chinamen held off for a few weeks. Then they suddenly changed their tactics, and proceeded to cultivate the friendship of Michael Doyle and his able-bodied wife. They liberally patronized the Shamrock, and beguiled the licensee with soft but cheerful conversation; they flattered Mrs. Doyle in seductive pigeon-English, and endeavoured to ensare the children's young affections with preserved ginger. Michael regarded these advances with misgiving; he suspected the Mongolians' intentions were not honourable, but he was not a man to spoil trade— to drop the substance for the shadow.

This state of affairs had continued for some time before the landlord of the Shamrock noticed that his new customers made a point of carrying off a brick every time they visited his caravansary. When leaving, the bland heathen would cast his discriminating eye around the place, seize upon one of the sun-dried bricks with which the ground was littered, and steal away with a nonchalant air— as though it had just occurred to him that the brick would be a handy thing to keep by him. The matter puzzled Mr. Doyle sorely; he ruminated over it, but he could only arrive at the conclusion that it was not advisable to lose custom for the sake of a few bricks; so the Chinese continued to walk off with his building material. When asked what they intended to do with the bricks, they assumed an expression of the most deplorably hopeless idiocy, and suddenly lost their acquaintance with the "Inglisiman" tongue. If bricks were mentioned they became as devoid of sense as wombats, although they seemed extremely intelligent on most other points. Mickey noticed that there was no building in progress at their camp, also that there were no bricks to be seen about the domiciles of the pagans, and he tried to figure out the mystery on a slate, but, on account of his lamentable ignorance of mathematics, failed to reach the unknown quantity and elucidate the enigma. He watched the invaders march off with all the loose bricks that were scattered around, and never once complained; but when they began to abstract one end of his licensed premises, he felt himself called upon, as a husband and father, to arise and enter a protest, which he did, pointing out to the Yellow Agony, in graphic and forcible language, the gross wickedness of

robbing a struggling man of his house and home, and promising faithfully to "bate" the next lop-eared Child of the Sun whom he "cot shiftin' a'er a brick."

"Ye dogs! Wud yez shtale me hotel, so't whin me family go insoide they'll be out in the rain?" he queried, looking hurt and indignant.

The Chinaman said, "No savee." Yet, after this warning, doubtless out of consideration for the feelings of Mr. Doyle, they went to great pains and displayed much ingenuity in abstracting bricks without his cognizance. But Mickey was active; he watched them closely, and whenever he caught a Chow in the act, a brief and one-sided conflict raged, and a dismantled Chinaman crawled home with much difficulty.

This violent conduct on the part of the landlord served in time to entirely alienate the Mongolian custom from the Shamrock, and once more Mickey and the Chows spake not when they met. Once more, too, promising young pullets, and other portable valuables, began to go astray, and still the hole in the wall grew till the after-part of the Shamrock looked as if it had suffered recent bombardment. The Chinamen came while Michael slept, and filched his hotel inch by inch. They lost their natural rest, and ran the gauntlet of Mr. Doyle's stick and his curse— for the sake of a few bricks. At all hours of the night they crept through the gloom, and warily stole a bat or two, getting away unnoticed perhaps, or, mayhap, only disturbing the slumbers of Mrs. Doyle, who was a very light sleeper for a woman of her size. In the latter case the lady would awaken her lord by holding his nose— a very effective plan of her own— and, filled to overflowing with the rage which comes of a midnight awakening, Mickey would turn out of doors in his shirt to cope with the marauders, and course them over the paddocks. If he caught a heathen he laid himself out for five minutes' energetic entertainment, which fully repaid him for lost rest and missing hens, and left a Chinaman too heart-sick and sore to steal anything for at least a week. But the Chinaman's friends would come as usual, and the pillage went on.

Michael Doyle puzzled himself to prostration over this insatiable and unreasonable hunger for bricks; such an infatuation on the part of men for cold and unresponsive clay had never before come within the pale of his experience. Times out of mind he threatened to "have the law on the yalla blaggards;" but the law was a long way off, and the Celestial housebreakers continued to elope with scraps of the Shamrock, taking the proprietor's assaults humbly and as a matter of course.

"Why do ye be shtealing me house?" fiercely queried Mr. Doyle of a submissive Chow, whom he had taken one night in the act of ambling off with a brick in either hand.

"Me no steal 'em, no feah— odder feller, him steal em," replied the quaking pagan.

Mickey was dumb-stricken for the moment by this awful prevarication; but that did not impair the velocity of his kick— this to his great subsequent regret, for the Chinaman had stowed a third brick away in his pants for convenience of transit, and the landlord struck that brick; then he sat down and repeated aloud all the profanity he knew.

The Chinaman escaped, and had presence of mind enough to retain his burden of clay.

Month after month the work of devastation went on. Mr. Doyle fixed ingenious mechanical contrivances about his house, and turned out at early dawn to see how many Chinamen he had "nailed"— only to find his spring-traps stolen and his hotel yawning more desperately than ever. Then Michael could but lift up his voice and swear— nothing else afforded him any relief.

At last he hit upon a brilliant idea. He commissioned a "cocky" who was journeying into Ballarat to buy him a dog— the largest, fiercest, ugliest, hungriest animal the town afforded; and next day a powerful, ill-tempered canine, almost as big as a pony, and quite as ugly as any nightmare, was duly installed as guardian and night-watch at the Shamrock. Right well the good dog performed his duty. On the following morning he had trophies to show in the shape of a boot, a scrap of blue dungaree trousers, half a pig-tail, a yellow ear, and a large part of a partially-shaved scalp; and just then the nocturnal visits ceased. The Chows spent a week skirmishing round, endeavouring to call the dog off, but he was neither to be begged, borrowed, nor stolen; he was too old-fashioned to eat poisoned meat, and he prevented the smallest approach to familiarity on the part of a Chinaman by snapping off the most serviceable portions of his vestments, and always fetching a scrap of heathen along with them.

This, in time, sorely discouraged the patient Children of the Sun, who drew off to hold congress and give the matter weighty consideration. After deliberating for some days, the yellow settlement appointed a deputation to wait upon Mr. Doyle. Mickey saw them coming, and armed himself with a log and unchained his dog. Mrs. Doyle ranged up alongside, brandishing her axe-handle, but by humble gestures and a deferential bearing the Celestial deputation signified a truce. So Michael held his dog down, and rested on his arms to await developments. The Chinamen advanced, smiling blandly; they gave Mr. and Mrs. Doyle fraternal greeting, and squirmed with that wheedling obsequiousness peculiar to "John" when he has something to gain by it. A pock-marked leper placed himself in the van as spokesman.

"Nicee day, Missa Doyle," said the moon-faced gentleman, sweetly. Then, with a sudden expression of great interest, and nodding towards Mrs, Doyle, "How you sissetah?"

"Foind out! Fwhat yer wantin'?" replied the host of the Shamrock, gruffly; "t' shtale more bricks, ye crawlin' blaggards?"

"No, no. Me not steal 'em blick— odder feller; he hide 'em; build big house byem-bye."

"Ye loi, ye screw— faced nayger! I seed ye do it, and if yez don't cut and run I'll lave the dog loose to feed on yer dhirty carcasses."

The dog tried to reach for his favourite hold, Mickey brandished his log, and Mrs. Doyle took a fresh grip of her weapon. This demonstration gave the Chows a cold shiver, and brought them promptly down to business.

"We buy 'em hotel; what for you sell 'em— eh?"

"Fwhat! yez buy me hotel? D'ye mane it? Purchis th' primisis and yez can shtale ivery brick at yer laysure. But ye're joakin'. Whoop! Look ye here! I'll have th' lot av yez aten up in two minits if yez play yer Choinase thricks on Michael Doyle."

The Chinamen eagerly protested that they were in earnest, and Mickey gave them a judicial hearing. For two years he had been in want of a customer for the Shamrock, and he now hailed the offer of his visitors with secret delight. After haggling for an hour, during which time the ignorant Hi Yup of the contorted countenance displayed his usual business tact, a bargain was struck. The yellow men agreed to give fifty pounds cash for the Shamrock and all buildings appertaining thereto, and the following Monday was the day fixed for Michael to journey into Ballarat with a couple of representative heathens to sign the transfer papers and receive the cash.

The deputation departed smiling, and when it gave the news of its triumph to the other denizens of the camp there was a perfect babel of congratulations in the quaint dialogue of the Mongol. The Chinamen proceeded to make a night of it in their own outlandish way, indulging freely in the seductive opium, and holding high carouse over an extemporized fantan table, proceedings which made it evident that they thought they were getting to windward of Michael Doyle, licensed victualler.

Michael, too, was rejoicing with exceeding great joy, and felicitating himself on being the shrewdest little man who ever left the "ould sod." He had not hoped to get more than a twenty-pound note for the dilapidated old humpy, erected on Crown land, and unlikely to stand the wear and tear of another year. As for the business, it had fallen to zero, and would not have kept a Chinaman in soap. So Mr. Doyle plumed himself on his bargain, and expanded till he nearly filled his capacious garments. Still, he was harassed to

know what could possibly have attached the Chinese so strongly to the Shamrock. They had taken samples from every part of the establishment, and fully satisfied themselves as to the quality of the bricks, and now they wanted to buy. It was most peculiar. Michael "had never seen anything so quare before, savin' wanst whin his grandfather was a boy."

After the agreement arrived at between the publican and the Chinese, one or two of the latter hung about the hotel nearly all their time, in sentinel fashion. The dog was kept on the chain, and lay in the sun in a state of moody melancholy, narrowly scrutinizing the Mongolians. He was a strongly anti-Chinese dog, and had been educated to regard the almond-eyed invader with mistrust and hate; it was repugnant to his principles to lie low when the heathen was around, and he evinced his resentment by growling ceaselessly. Sunday dawned. It was a magnificent morning; but the rattle of the Chinamen's cradles and toms sounded from the creek as usual. Three or four suave and civil Asiatics, however, still lingered around the Shamrock, and kept an eye on it in the interests of all, for the purchase of the hotel was to be a joint-stock affair. These "Johns" seemed to imagine they had already taken lawful possession; they sat in the bar most of the time, drinking little, but always affable and genial. Michael suffered them to stay, for he feared that any fractiousness on his part might upset the agreement, and that was a consummation to be avoided above all things. They had told him, with many tender smiles and much gesticulation, that they intended to live in the house when it became theirs; but Mr. Doyle was not interested— his fifty pounds was all he thought of.

Michael was in high spirits that morning; he beamed complacently on all and sundry, appointed the day as a time of family rejoicing, and in the excess of his emotion actually slew for dinner a prime young sucking pig, an extravagant luxury indulged in by the Doyles only on state occasions. On this particular Sunday the younger members of the Doyle household gathered round the festive board and waited impatiently for the lifting of the lid of the camp-oven. There were nine children in all, ranging in years from fourteen downwards— "foine, shtrappin' childer, wid th' clear brain," said the prejudiced Michael. The round, juicy sticker was at last placed upon the table. Mrs. Doyle stood prepared to administer her department— serving the vegetables to her hungry brood— and, armed with a formidable knife and fork, Michael, enveloped in savoury steam, hovered over the pig.

But there was one function yet to be performed— a function which came as regularly as Sunday's dinner itself. Never, for years, had the housefather failed to touch up a certain prodigious knife on one particular hard yellow brick in the wall by the door, preparatory to carving the Sunday's meat. Mickey

examined the edge of his weapon critically, and found it unsatisfactory. The knife was nearly ground through to the backbone; another "touch-up" and it must surely collapse, but, in view of his changed circumstances, Mr. Doyle felt that he might take the risk. The brick, too, was worn an inch deep. A few sharp strokes from Mickey's vigorous right arm were all that was required; but, alas! the knife snapped whereupon Mr. Doyle swore at the brick, as if holding it immediately responsible for the mishap, and stabbed at it fiercely with the broken carver.

"Howly Moses! Fwhats that?"

The brick fell to pieces, and there, embedded in the wall, gleaming in the sunbeam, was a nugget of yellow gold. With feverish haste Mickey tore the brick from its bedding, and smashed the gold-bearing fragment on the hearth. The nugget was a little beauty, smooth, round, and four ounces to a grain.

The sucking pig froze and stiffened in its fat, the "taters" and the cabbage stood neglected on the dishes. The truth had dawned upon Michael, and, whilst the sound of a spirited debate in musical Chinese echoed from the bar, his family were gathered around him, open-mouthed, and Mickey was industriously, but quietly, pounding the sun-dried brick in a digger's mortar. Two bricks, one from either end of the Shamrock, were pulverized, and Michael panned off the dirt in a tub of water which stood in the kitchen. Result: seven grains of waterworn gold. Until now Michael had worked dumbly, in a fit of nervous excitement; now he started up, bristling like a hedgehog.

"Let loose th' dog, Mary Melinda Doyle!" he howled, and, uttering a mighty whoop, he bounded into the bar to dust those Chinamen off his premises. "Gerrout!" he screamed— "Gerrout av me primises, ye thavin' crawlers!" And he frolicked with the astounded Mongolians like a tornado in full blast, thumping at a shaven occiput whenever one showed out of the struggling crowd. The Chinamen left; they found the dog waiting for them outside, and he encouraged them to greater haste. Like startled fawns the heathens fled, and Mr. Doyle followed them, howling:

"Buy the Shamrock, wud yez! Robbers! Thaves! Fitch back th' soide o' me house, or Oi'll have th' law onto yez all."

The damaged escapees communicated the intelligence of their overthrow to their brethren on the creek, and the news carried consternation, and deep, dark woe to the pagans, who clustered together and ruefully discussed the situation.

Mr. Doyle was wildly jubilant. His joy was only tinctured with a spice of bitterness, the result of knowing that the "haythens" had got away with a few hundreds of his precious bricks. He tried to figure out the amount of gold his

hotel must contain, but again his ignorance of arithmetic tripped him up, and already in imagination Michael Doyle, licensed victualler, was a millionaire and a J.P.

The Shamrock was really a treasure-house. The dirt of which the bricks were composed had been taken from the banks of the Yellow Creek, years before the outbreak of the rush, by an eccentric German who had settled on that sylvan spot. The German died, and his grotesque structure passed into other hands. Time went on, and then came the rush. The banks of the creek were found to be charged with gold for miles, but never for a moment did it occur to anybody that the clumsy old building by the track, now converted into a hotel, was composed of the same rich dirt; never till years after, when by accident one of the Mongolian fossickers discovered grains of gold in a few bats he had taken to use as hobs. The intelligence was conveyed to his fellows; they got more bricks and more gold— hence the robbery of Mr. Doyle's building material and the anxiety of the Mongolians to buy the Shamrock. Before nightfall Michael summoned half-a-dozen men from "beyant," to help him in protecting his hotel from a possible Chinese invasion. Other bricks were crushed and yielded splendid prospects. The Shamrock's small stock of liquor was drunk, and everybody became hilarious. On the Sunday night, under cover of the darkness, the Chows made a sudden sally on the Shamrock, hoping to get away with plunder. They were violently received, however; they got no bricks, and returned to their camp broken and disconsolate.

Next day the work of demolition was begun. Drays were backed up against the Shamrock, and load by load the precious bricks were carted away to a neighbouring battery. The Chinamen slouched about, watching greedily, but their now half-hearted attempts at interference met with painful reprisal. Mr. Doyle sent his family and furniture to Ballarat, and in a week there was not a vestige left to mark the spot where once the Shamrock flourished. Every scrap of its walls went through the mill, and the sum of one thousand nine hundred and eighty-three pounds sterling was cleared out of the ruins of the hostelry. Mr. Doyle is now a man of some standing in Victoria, and as a highly respected J.P. has often been pleased to inform a Chinaman that it was "foive pound or a month."

2: A Sabbath Morn at Waddy

SUNDAY-SCHOOL was "in" at Waddy. The classes were all in place, and of the teachers only Brother Spence was absent, strange to say. This was the first Sunday of the new superintendent's term, always an evil time for grace, and a season of sulkiness, and bickering, and bad blood. Each beloved brother coveted the dignity of the office, and those who failed to get it were consumed with envy and all uncharitableness for many Sabbaths after. Some deserted the little wooden chapel on the hill till the natural emotions of prayerful men pent in their bosoms could no longer be borne, and then they stole back, one by one, and condoned in hurricanes of exhortation with rain and thunder.

Brother Nehemiah Best occupied the seat of office behind a deal table on the small platform, under faded floral decorations left since last anniversary. Rumour declared that Brother Best was unable to write his own name, and whispered that he spent laborious nights learning the hymns by heart before he could give them out on Sunday, as witness the fact that he "read" with equal facility whether the book was straight, or end-ways, or upside down. Brother Best was thin-voiced, weak in wind, and resourceless and unconvincing in prayer. No wonder Brother Spence was disgusted. Brother Spence could write his own name with scarcely more effort than it cost him to swing the trucks at the Phoenix; his voice raised in prayer set the loose shingles fairly dancing on the old roof; and his recitation of "The Drunkard's Doom" had been the chief attraction on Band of Hope nights for years past. Ernest Spence had not hesitated to express himself freely at Friday evening's meeting:

"Ay, they Brother Best, he no more fit for pourin' out the spirit, you, than a blin' kitten. Look at the chest of en!"

"True for en, Ernie!" cried Brother Tresize.

"They old devil, you, he laugh at Best's prayin', sureli. Brother Spence some tuss, you."

But Brother Spence had left the meeting in a state of righteous indignation. Yet here were Brothers Tresize, and Tregaskis, and Prator, and Pearce, and Eddy. True, they all looked grim and unchastened, and there was an uneasy, shifty feeling in the chapel that inspired boys and girls, young men and young women, teachers and choir, with great expectations. Brother Best, in his favourite attitude, with one arm behind him under his coat tails, his right hand holding the book a yard from his eyes, his right foot thrust well out, the toe touching the floor daintily, made his first official announcement:

"We will open they service this mornin' by singing hymn won, nought, won."

Then, in a nasal sing-song, swinging with a long sweep from toe to heel and heel to toe, he gave out the first verse and the chorus, ending unctuously with a smack of the lips at the line:

Thou beautiful, beautiful Poley Star!

Nehemiah was a dairyman, and had a fixed conviction that the poley star and a poley cow had much in common.

The hymn being sung, the superintendent engaged in prayer, speaking weakly, with a wearisome repetition of stock phrases, eked out with laboured groans and random cries.

Brother Tresize could not disguise his cynical disgust, and remained mute. A prayer to be successful amongst the Wesleans of Waddy must make the hearers squirm and wriggle upon their knees, and cry aloud. Brothers and sisters were all happy when moved to wild sobbing, to the utterance of moans, and groans, and hysterical appeals to heaven, and when impelled to sustain a sonorous volley by the vigorous use of pocket handkerchiefs; but that was a spiritual treat that came only once in a while, with the visit of a specialist, or when the spirit moved Brother Spence or Brother Tresize to unusual fervor.

The superintendent's prayer did not raise a single qualm; and the boys of Class II. straggled openly over the forms, pinched each other, and passed such rubbish as they could collect to Dicky Haddon, the pale, saintly, ginger-headed boy at the top of the class, who was in honour bound to drop everything so sent him in amongst the mysteries of the old, yellow, guttural harmonium, through a convenient crack in the back.

Throughout the service Brother Best, proud of his new office, watched the scholars diligently, visiting little boys and girls with sudden sharp raps or twitches of the ear if they dared even to sneeze, but judiciously overlooking much that was injurious and unbecoming in the bigger boys of Class II., who had a vicious habit of sullenly kicking elderly shins when cuffed or wigged for their misdeeds.

The Bible reading, with wonderful, original expositions of the obscure passages by horny-handed miners, occupied about half an hour, and then the superintendent stilled the racket and clatter of stowing away the tattered books with an authoritative hand, and invited Brother Tresize to pray. If he was great he could be merciful.

Brother Tresize made his preparations with great deliberation, spreading a handkerchief large enough for a bed-cover to save the knees of his sacred black-cloth trousers, hitching up the latter to prevent bagging, and finally loosening his paper collar from the button in front to give free vent to his emotions— and preserve the collar. Then, the rattling of feet, the pushing and shoving, the coughing and whispering and sniffing having subsided, and all

being on their knees, Brother Tresize began his prayer in a soft, low, reverent voice that speedily rose to a reverberant roar.

"Oh, Gwad, ah! look down upon we here, ah; let the light of Thy countenance ahluminate, ah, this little corner of Thy vineyard, ah. Oh, Gwad, ah! be merciful to they sinners what be assembled here, ah; pour down Thy speerit upon they, ah, make they whole, ah. Oh, Gwad, ah! Thoo knowest they be some here, ah, that be wallerin' in sin, ah, some that be hippycrits, ah, some that be cheats, ah, some that be scoffers, an' misbelievers, an' heathens, oh, Gwad, ah! Have mercy on they people, oh, Gwad, ah! Show they Thy fires, ah, an' turn they from the wrath, oh, Loord Gwad, ah!"

Brother Tresize was evidently in fine form this morning; already the windows were vibrating before the concussions of his tremendous voice, and the floor bounded under the great blows that punctuated his sentences. As he went on, the air became electrical, and the spirit moved amongst the flock. The women felt it first.

"Oh, Gwad, ah!" interjected Mrs. Eddy from her corner.

"Throw up the windies, an' let the speerit in!" sobbed Mrs. Eddy.

Brother Prator blew his nose with a loud report, a touching and helpful manifestation.

Brother Tresize prayed with every atom of energy he possessed. His opinion was on record:

"A good prayer Sunday mornin', you, takes it out of en more'n a hard shift in a hot drive, you."

When his proper momentum was attained he oscillated to and fro between the floor and the form, swaying back over his heels till his head almost touched the boards— a gymnastic feat that was the envy of all the brethren— he shook his clenched fist at the rafters and reached his highest note. The plunge forward was accompanied by falling tones, and ended with a blow on the form that made every article of furniture in the building jump. The perspiration ran in streams down his face and neck; dry sobs broke from his labouring chest; long strands of his moist, well-oiled, red hair separated themselves from the flattened mass and stood out like feelers, to the wild, ungodly delight of Class II.; and whilst he prayed the brethren and "sistern" kept up a continuous fire of interjections and heartrending groans.

"They be people here, ah! what is careless of Thy grace; chasten 'em with fire an' brimstone— chasten 'em, oh, Lord, ah! They be those of uz what go to be Thy servants, oh, Gwad, ah! an' to do Thy work here below, ah, what is tried an' found wantin', ah— some do water they milk, oh, Gwad, ah! an' some do be misleadin' they neighbors' hens to lay away. Smite they people for Thy glory, oh, Loord, ah!"

A great moaning filled the chapel, and all heads turned towards Brother Nehemiah Best, kneeling at his chair, with his face buried in his hands, trembling violently. Nehemiah, two years earlier, had been fined for watering the milk sold to his town customers; quite recently he had been thrown into the Phoenix slurry by an unregenerate trucker, who accused him of beguiling his hens to lay from home. Brother Tresize was wrestling with the superintendent in prayer, and the excitement rose instantly to fever heat.

"They what do not as they wad be done by, pursue 'em, ah; smite they with Thy right hand, oh, Lord Gwad, ah! so they may be turned from they wickedness, ah. They what have better food to they table for theyselves than for they children or they wives, ah, they what be filled with vanity, ah, they what havin' no book-learnin' do deceive Thy people, an' fill the seats o' the learned, ah, deal with such, oh, Gwad, ah!"

Brother Tresize was now almost frantic with the ecstasy of his zeal. His exhortation was continued in this strain, and every word was a lance to prick the cowering superintendent. The women sniffed and sobbed, the men groaned and cried "Ahmen, ah!" It was a great time for grace.

But suddenly a new voice broke in— a shrill, thin voice, splitting into that of Brother Tresize like a steam-whistle. Brother Best had assumed the defensive.

"Oh, Lord, ah!" he cried, "give no ear to they what bears false witness against they neighbors, to they what backbite, ah, an' slander, ah, an' bear malice, ah; heed they not, oh, Lord, ah!"

Abel Tresize rose to the occasion. It was a battle. His voice swelled till it rivalled the roar of the ravening lion; he no longer selected his words or cared to make himself understood of the people; it was necessary only to smother Brother Best, to pray him down, and Abel prayed as no man had ever prayed before at Waddy. A curious crowd— the Irish children, Dan the Drover, an old shepherd, and a few cattlemen from the Red Cow— attracted by the great commotion, had assembled in the porch, and were gazing in open-mouthed, delighted.

Tresize persevered, but Best's shrill, penetrating voice rang out distinctly above all. Brother Best was transformed, inspired; under the influence of his great wrath he had waxed eloquent; he smote his enemy hip and thigh, he heaped coals of fire upon his head, and marshalled St. Peter and all the angels against him.

The severity of his exertions was telling heavily upon Abel Tresize; he was dreadfully hoarse, his great hands fell upon the form without emphasis, he was almost winded, and his legs wobbled under him. He pulled himself together for another effort, and the cry that he uttered thrilled every heart, but it quite

exhausted him, and he went over backwards, striking his head upon the floor, and lay in the aisle convulsed in a fit.

Instantly the chapel became a babel. The teachers ran to Brother Tresize, and bore him into the open air, the wondering children crowding after, and left the new superintendent sobbing on his table like a broken-hearted boy.

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3: The Fossickers

THE BOY carried under his arm an old, rusty frying pan, minus the handle. He was a small, sober-looking boy of about twelve years, with red hair and plenteous freckles; his big felt hat was tucked in in the approved style, and dusted with pipe-clay— he had carefully dusted it for the sake of verisimilitude; his shirt sagged artfully over the top of his moleskin trousers, which were tied under the knees with the customary "bowyangs." No detail was missing; the boots were covered with moist yellow clay, and the trousers were stained with mud from the dam and rust from the iron puddlers. Dickie was quite a realistic fossicker, a man of experience, invested with the dignity of labour.

The pan was full of greyish dust, in which were bits of gritty rope-yarn and many splinters. He sank it in the water of the dam, where stones were set for a footing, and began puddling the dirt, working with great care and a due sense of importance. He would have given much to have had a pipe and real tobacco— a bit of dry root, he felt, would not be equal to the occasion, he having "struck it"— his last dish realized quite ten grains.

Dickie puddled slowly, working his hands with the machine-like movement he had copied so accurately from the men at Pig Creek. He unravelled the bits of rope, and washed all the grit from them before they were thrown aside. No spot of clay that could hide a colour was left upon the chips, and when at length the dirt was completely puddled, he began the more interesting work of panning off.

Only about half a pint of material was left in the pan— sand and pebbles and rusty nails. The boy handled this deftly, pawing the stones and nails and throwing them out between his legs with the skill of an old hand; and then, shaking and dipping, he washed away the sand, until the yellow gold began to show through. Taking a little water in the dish he swirled the contents, and his heart bounded again. A streak of fine gold, with here and there a coarse speck, ran along the edge of black sand, and every lap widened the yellow band.

"Gimminy! Sonny, that's good ernuff!"

A little, grizzled, hard-looking old man, splashed with wet clay, was leaning over Dick, peering excitedly into the dish.

"Must be ten weights there, boy. Where'd yer get the stuff?"

"Find out!" said Dick, sulkily.

It is contrary to strict etiquette and accepted professional usage for one fossicker to go sneaking around another fossicker when the latter is panning off; it suggests an encroachment. Dickie filled with resentment. He shook the gold down, and moved away from the old man.

"Clear rout, can't you?" he growled.

"Only thot I'd show yer 'ow ter pan 'er off," piped the other, with a poor show of disinterestedness. This was a grievous insult to Dick, who flattered himself that he could always get a decent prospect out of Tinker's tailings, and who had been complimented on his art by an expert. Dickie felt it keenly.

"You jes'scoot— go on!" he said, resentfully. "You want ter find out where I got this, so's you can collar the stuff, don't you? You sneaked that patch what I found by the office door, didn't you? 'n got thirty-bob's worth outer it. I know you!"

"But no one else ain't 'lowed ter fossick roun' this mine but me," said Tinker. "The right was given ter me by the board uv directors, see!"

"Ger out!" cried the boy, dubiously.

"Didn't they, but? See here!"

The old man drew a piece of crumpled paper from his breast— the piece he had had his tobacco wrapped in.

"See here, here's the blessed deed all draw'd up, an' with the Queen's signitur in 'er own 'andwritin'."

"Le's see."

The boy reached for the paper, but Tinker restored it hastily to his breast,

"'Somever," he said, "if you'll lay me on where yer got that dirt I don' mind lettin' yer wash a few dishes now 'n again. 'R yer on?"

"No, I ain't. My father was killed in this mine, an' I got ez good er right ez you."

"Oh, very well, young feller me lad! When the mounted p'lice comes along, I jes' fixes yer up for ten years' 'ard labour, with three floggin's, fer gold-stealin'."

Dickie looked consternated for a moment, but soon recovered himself after recollecting that Tinker was always particularly and peculiarly anxious to avoid the police, and arguing inwardly that those great, proud men on the polished horses, who pranced through the township once a month or so, would certainly have nothing to do with a mean, dirty little hatter like Tinker Smith.

"If you don't gib out I'll climb up ter the wheels an' paste you with grease," he said, "an' drop rocks in yer puddlin' tub."

Tinker stood, eyeing the boy dispassionately, and clawing his scrubby beard.

"Ten years' 'ard labour, an' three floggin's," he repeated, musingly.

Dickie had armed himself with a stone, and struck an offensive attitude. "'R you goin', once?" he said.

"A dirty, dark gaol!" said Tinker, apparently to himself.

"'R you goin', twice?"

"No tucker, no bed, nothin' but lickin's an' leg-irons!"

"'R you goin', fer the third an' last time?"

Tinker moved off slowly, reciting as he went:

"Ten years an' three floggin's! Floggin's with the cat-o'-nine-tails -cat-o'-nine-tails with bits o' lead on 'em!"

But Dickie was not in the least impressed, and when Tinker had returned to his tub up the race, set eagerly to work to finish his prospect. About half an ounce of clean gold was the result, and the sight of it added to the feverish elation that was in the boy's blood. He had never washed such a rich dish before. Hundreds and hundreds of dishes he had taken from all sorts of holes and corners about the old mine, but hitherto the best result had been a pennyweight or so from a shovelful of surface dirt dug out just near the office door, where the sweepings were scattered, and Tinker had promptly confiscated a large area, and robbed him of his right as discoverer. An unconscionable fossicker was Tinker, with no respect for the nice observances of the craft and the unwritten code which forbids one man to take advantage of another's discoveries, to poach his preserves, or encroach upon his "dirt."

But since then Dick had learned to assert himself he had found that Tinker was not invulnerable, and now he knew that, when perched up by the great black twin wheels, on the swimming height at the top of the poppet-legs, he was master of the situation, and commanded the field. They were by far the highest legs in the country, and the old man never dared venture further than the brace, not half-way up; so that from his proud eminence Dick could bombard his foe with lumps of the congealed tar and grease that flaked the wonderful pulleys, until Tinker was glad to signal a truce.

Dick washed the gold from his pan into the up-turned bottom of a broken beer bottle, along with the few grains earned during the afternoon, and, after hiding it in a rabbit burrow under the bank, hastened up the wide wooden stair leading to the high brace of the deserted mine. Along by the machines he set to work on the floor of the puddling plat with an improvised broom and a scraper, collecting the dust that lay between the boards into his dish, gathering it with as much care as if it had been pure gold. Near here had stood one of the sluice-boxes— long since torn away and burnt for the sake of the gold secreted in its crevices— and Dick, noticing that the floor was double boarded, was inspired to pull up the top planks and wash the dust collected underneath and in the cracks. Fine gold is as insinuating as quicksilver; about an old alluvial mine you find it in the most unexpected places. Tinker once put in a good day's work washing the dust from above the Peep-o'-Day boilers, where the "knock-off" men had hung their clay-covered working clothes to dry, shift after shift,

for many years; and anywhere within a hundred yards of the mine the colour could be got for the trying.

Tinker had followed Dick to the brace, and stood greedily overlooking the boy, who was digging dirt out of the cracks with a long, pointed nail, and deeply absorbed in his work. Tinker drew nearer, his little red eyes gleaming amongst their wrinkles. He had the reputation of a miser in Waddy, and certainly gold-dust had fascinations for him that did not arise wholly from its intrinsic value; but Dickie commanded respect— his power for mischief was great. Enthroned above, he had often taken summary and complete vengeance for injustices done him. It was an occasion for diplomacy.

"Ho, ho, young feller! I've cot yer, have I? " cried the old man. "This is burglary an' house-breakin'."

Dick Haddon armed himself in defence of his property, and faced his enemy, glaring defiance.

"Yer in fer it this time right ernough, Mister Haddon. Le's see," continued Tinker, eyeing the boy's stick dubiously, "I b'lieve they hangs fer robbery with vi'lence."

"Don' care!" snorted Dick. "You come near me an' I'll break yer head."

"Look here, Dickie, you don' split on me, an' I won't split on you. We'll go harves. I works at this end, an' you at that. That's a fair do."

"No, you don't!" answered Dick, sturdily. "I found this patch, an' I ain't goin' t' give it up t' no-body."

It was a bad place for a scuffle. All the boards had been stripped from the plat at the far end, and between the big pine beams supporting the puddlers, and on which the floor had been laid, was a clear fall of about eighty feet to the clean white boulders below. But Tinker's cupidity was aroused; he believed that if the whole of the plat were stripped as the boy was doing it the dust would yield five or six ounces, and he was furious at having over-looked the job so long. He edged towards Dickie cunningly.

"I don't wanter get yer inter quod, 'cause o' yer pore widder mother," he said, "but the board o' directors said I wasn't t' allow no one 'round this mine, an' if yer don't clear I'll have ter go t' town an' 'ave yer took at once. Dooty's dooty!"

"Who cares?" shouted Dick, valiantly.

"Ger out, blast yer!"

Tinker closed with the lad, and there was a struggle. Dick struck out blindly with his stick, and it cracked on his enemy's head, and Tinker went tottering back, with out-thrown arms, over the edge of the floor, and fell among the beams, clutching wildly at their smooth sides. Dick saw his blanched face, horrified eyes, and his gaping, toothless mouth for one moment, and then he

disappeared between the beams with a shrill and terrible cry, echoed by one yet shriller from the lips of the boy.

But Tinker had not fallen. A long nail in the side of one of the beams had caught in the slack of his capacious trousers at the back, and the old fossicker hung, head downwards, above the enormous stones, clawing like a suspended cat, and screaming like a frightened child. His trousers were far from new, and the nail was old and rust-eaten.

"Tinker, don't wriggle!" cried Dick. "Your trousers!— they'll tear— they'll tear!"

Instantly Tinker became as rigid as a dead man, but the awful consciousness that he was slowly slipping out of his clothes redoubled his terror, and he never ceased to yell.

The boy, lying face downwards on a beam, made an attempt to pull him up by the shirt, but desisted instantly on perceiving that the effort only served to jeopardize Tinker's one poor hold. Then Dick was inspired with a great idea. He ran for the long nail which he had been using, seized an old tooth from a puddling harrow, and returning to the pendulous fossicker, drove the spike through the old man's trousers into the beam, taking in as much material as possible. A shriek of extraordinary vigor convinced him that he had skewered Tinker's leg to some extent, but it was no time for nice distinctions.

"Don't wriggle, Tink'!" gasped the boy. "Don't stir a wink 'r you'll fall outer yer pants. I'm off for help."

Tinker, head downwards and transfixed, with starting eyes glaring upon the stones far beneath him, where already in imagination he saw his mangled corpse, answered only with a groan, and Dickie fled along the puddling plat, across the brace, and down the wooden steps, missing the last six and landing in a heap with a blinding shock. When he quite recovered his senses again he found himself tearing across the paddocks towards the cattle-yards, with a strange feeling in his head and one arm hanging at his side like a piece of old rope. Over two fences and through a blackberry hedge, and Dick, white as a sheet, streaked with blood, ragged, and gasping, burst upon Michael Minahan at the yards.

"Tinker!" panted the boy. "Quick! Quick! Tinker! He's hanging! hanging! hanging!"

Michael was a man slow of comprehension under ordinary circumstances; but a glance at Dick and a glance in the direction of his outstretched finger sent him racing towards the mine, with poor maimed, winded Dickie toiling gamely in the rear.

Meanwhile Tinker was slipping, slipping through his clothes. His voice had failed him, and he could only cry with a hoarse, thin treble, breaking into a

poor squeal of mortal fear when a decided slip set him clutching frantically at the thin air, and convinced him that his end had come.

When Minahan reached the steps, the fossicker had slipped through his moleskins, and hung by the feet, moaning piteously. The cords tied below his knees delayed the great catastrophe. There was still hope. Minahan mounted the stairs with a rush, three at a bound, and Dickie, prostrate upon the dam bank, completely exhausted, watched the inverted figure of Tinker Smith with wide, terrified eyes.

Presently a large hand shot down and grasped one leg, and then to Dickie's mind the world seemed to go out like a candle. When he knew anything again he was in a white hospital ward, with his arm in splints and his head in many bandages; and long before he could use that arm again Tinker had scraped the puddling plat as clean as a dining table, and, although he told no one, it yielded seven ounces.

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4: At the Yards

WADDY, in its decadence, lived through two days of every week. The awakening began late on Sunday night, or in the gloom of Monday morning, with the sound of phlegmatic cursing— softened and chastened by distance and the enfolding darkness— the yapping of busy dogs, the pathetic lowing of weary beasts, the marching of many hoofs, the slow movements of big flocks and herds on the ironstone road.

On Sunday evening Waddy was a mile-long township facing an apparently interminable post-and-rail fence and a wide stretch of treeless country dotted with poppet-legs— a township of some fifty houses, a Sunday-school and a chapel; grey, weatherboard, rain-washed houses, and an old, bleached, wooden day-school shored up on either side with stays, but lurching forward and peering stupidly out of its painted windows with a ludicrous suggestion of abject drunkenness. On Sunday evening Waddy was still, silent, and apparently deserted, oppressed by the weight of a Cousin-Jack Sabbath, but on Monday morning tents and covered carts linked the scattered houses, camp-fires smoked everywhere, and bearded cattle-men, making their scant toilet under the decent cover of a cart-wheel or a rail-fence, enlivened the place with light-hearted blasphemy and careless snatches of song, whilst flocks of sheep drifted on the common, fraternizing with the local goats, and mobs of cattle came slowly down the old toll-road, sniffing at the bare, brown track; the dust-coloured, sleepy drovers, with sunken heads, nodding on their limp horses.

Tuesday was sale-day. Monday afternoon was devoted to the yarding of cattle and the yarding and drafting of innumerable sheep— the former a comparatively easy and decorous undertaking; the latter a clamorous and arduous business provocative of disgust, dust, and madness, and inducing a thirst that afflicts the toiler like a visible disease, making him an object of pity to all humane beholders. The average bullock is of incalculable mental density, but he has the virtue of faith, and if you wish him to go through a gateway he goes in blind confidence; but you may pack a mob of five or fifty thousand sheep hard against a 10 ft. opening in a fence, and you may yap yourself hoarse, and beat your trousers to rags, and your dogs may bark their lungs up, without inducing a single monumental idiot of the whole flock to venture through.

It is a hot afternoon— it always was a hot afternoon, it seems to me at this distance— and scores of thousands of sheep are being hauled, and bullied, and cursed, and cajoled into the yards, and from pen to pen. There is a decided substratum of sound— the ceaseless, senseless bleating of sheep, low and unvarying; above this the "yap, yap, yap" of the men and boys, the sharp

barking of the dogs, and the lowing of the cattle in the high yards beyond. Over all, the dust and the sun— a burning, yellow sun, and a rolling cloud of powdery dust— and everywhere in the air the taint of sheep, the pungent smell of the beasts, and the taste of them if you open your lips to breathe. It is a great time for several of the boys of Waddy; it means half a day from school and the opportunity of earning a shilling or two playing at work. Every healthy boy in the township is ambitious to be a drover, and have a black pipe, a wonderful horse, and a fabulous dog. Working at the yards is an approach to the ideal, and confers a dignity obtainable in no other way. To the boys penned in the stuffy little drunken schoolhouse the others who have a job at the yards are kings, and objects of an envy unspeakable. They command humble service, and awe, and admiration always.

With treasured whips, home-made of many fragments, the boys are busy helping with the drafting and penning of the cattle, or, coated half an inch deep with yellow dust, they are rushing the sheep up and down, bleary black patches indicating where their eyes may be, and muddy circles the probable situation of their mouths. It is hot, hard work, but, oh! the glory of it, and the pride of walking home with money in one's pockets, and covered with heaped-up, honourable dirt!

On sale-day the Drovers' Arms is hemmed in with conveyances of all sorts and sizes, each with a sober horse or two tethered to a wheel, dreaming with drooped heads under the scorching sun, or patiently foraging for the last oat in the corner of the feed-box. The heat is the same, so are the dust and the smells, but the noises of yesterday are supplemented by the continuous rattle of the auctioneers' voices. Over the simmering stew sound the voices like the crackling of gum-twigs in an open fire:—

"Fo'rteen fi'! fo'rteen fi'! fo'rteen fi'!

"All done eighteen, done eighteen, done eighteen!

"Fo'r pounds, I'm bid. Fo'r two six! fo'r two six!

"Fo'r two six! Goin 'for— two— six!"

There are a few "drunks" sleeping in attitudes of absurd abandon along M'Mahon's fence, coated with flies; and out on the common, with the whole waste to themselves, two men, stripped to the buff, are engaging in a dull, boozy, interminable fight. They have been fighting ineptly for many hours, and their punctilious observance of the rules of the ring is the wildest farce; but the comedy is wasted on Waddy, and the drovers are too busy to give heed.

In the afternoon the cattle begin to move out again and off by the roads they came, but the babel continues, and the buyers— stout, red, bibulous men of one pronounced type— follow the auctioneers in knots along the platforms over the yards. The cattle are not the meek, weary animals of yesterday; they

have been hustled from one yard to another, rushed around, whipped and prodded, packed into small pens, and cursed and orated over to the complete loss of their few poor wits, and there is now a decided note of revolt in the lowing that rises up from the yards like a lingering curse. In every lot turned out there are one or two beasts filled with blind, blundering hate; they swing up the road, leading the mobs, red-eyed and possessed of devils; cords of saliva hang from their muzzles, and their moaning is ominous, suggesting the vacuous complaining of a maniac.

The youngsters coming from school keep close to the rail-fence, but they delight to run deadly risks, and fill the air with the profane shrieks of the drovers. Often a goaded, homicidal bullock bolts, and then young hearts are glad. It is wonderful sport to behold that frantic race for the distant timber—the long, rolling plunge of the bullock, with the good horse working on his shoulder, and the volleying whip kicking up dust and hair from his hollow ribs.

The clatter of the auctioneers grows fainter and hoarser, and the perishing beasts in the pens below toss up their heads like the branches of wind-blown trees, and push hither and thither ceaselessly with a pitiful "mooing."

Marks is selling a pen of Bellman's stock in No. 26. The buyers cluster about him on top of the fence, and bidding is brisk. One bullock, a fine red beast, has knocked himself about badly; his tail has been torn clean away, one horn is cracked close to the head, and the thick red blood oozes out, and blackens rolling sluggishly down the white blaze of his face. It is a large yard, and there is plenty of room for the brute to charge, which he does several times, now and then driving blindly into another bullock, but generally cracking his skull sharply on the great posts of the fence. Suddenly a portly, helmeted buyer, leaning over to get a better view, misses his centre of gravity and goes after it, the whole 16 st. plumping solidly into the slush of the yard below. The red bullock is at him instantly. The good horn takes Langley in the back of the trousers, and the drive rips him bare to the collar, leaving him unmarked, but prone, in a condition of unseemly nudity.

The beast backs away for another drive, shaking his head and uttering his low, tigerish bellow, the expression of all malevolence; but at the same moment a figure drops smartly from the platform, and a ragged, smudgy, red-headed small boy is riding astride the animal's neck, diverting his attention by battering him over the eyes with an old felt hat. Dicky Haddon has performed this feat often for his own amusement, to the amazement of staid and matronly cows, but this is a beast of another colour, and the trick is done in response to an involuntary heroic impulse.

The bullock backs about the yard, tossing his head in an effort to be rid of his mysterious burden, and many hands clutch stout old Langley from the other pen, and tow him along through the mire to the gate, the bottom rail of which is high enough from the ground to enable them to pull him out of danger. Then he is borne away, unnerved and invertebrate. The boy seizes his opportunity, drops from the bullock and slips under the gate like a cat. Then he follows Langley, and stands in eager expectance whilst the damaged grazier is being bundled into his buggy. Really Langley suffers from nothing more serious than blue funk, but is oblivious of everything excepting a great craving for neat brandy, and is driven off without bestowing even a glance on his small preserver.

This base ingratitude inspires the youth with a loathing that can only be expressed in the choice idiom of the yards, and the disappointed hero, dancing in the road with his thumb to his nose, yells bitter and profane insults after Jabez Langley, moneyed man and M.L.A.

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5: Mr. and Mrs. Sin Fat

MR. SIN FAT arrived in Australia in the year of grace 1870, a poor and friendless man. He entered the great city of Melbourne, a stranger in a strange country, possessed only of a blue dungaree suit that had served him long and faithfully in his distant home, ninepence in coppers, and as much of his fatherland spread over his surface and deposited in the cracks and crannies of his gaunt person as he could conveniently carry.

Sin Fat was not tall and athletic, nor fair to look upon— in truth, he was stunted, and as plain of face as the pottery gods that he had learned to revere at his good mother's knee. His complexion was so distraught by an uncongenial climate that it possessed less bloom and beauty than the inside of a sun-dried lambskin; his features were turned and twisted and pulled awry till they resembled excrescences and indentations on a pie-melon, and his lank, lean limbs were mute evidence of a life of privation and toil. In point of fact, Sin Fat was so ungainly and so sparing of personal attractions at this period of his existence that his homely visage soon became the theme of popular comment, and "ugly as Sin" is an aphorism which will survive as long as the English language is spoken.

The humble immigrant paid no poll-tax; he was a duly certified subject of Her Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria, towards whose throne and person he possessed an ardent and undying affection, as he told the Customs officer in mutilated English and accents tremulous and low. For Sin was by nature bashful and conciliatory, his tones were unctuous, and his humble carriage excited the derision of a distempered and woe-worn dog which had its habitat amongst the lumber on the wharf— a vagrant, craven mongrel, that lived in a perpetual state of cringe, yet which assumed something of dignity in the presence of a still meaner creature, and boldly pursued Sin Fat as he ambled away, and assailed him in the rearmost parts of his frame. But the lowly foreigner continued on his road with downcast eyes and an expression of religious meekness, till, as if guided by instinct or the power of affinity, he slunk into that nest of pestilence between Little Bourke and Lonsdale streets, and was lost amongst the hordes which there do congregate.

Fifteen years ago the Chinese Camp at Ballarat East was a large and populous suburb. Thousands of prosperous, but unkempt and wasted, disciples of Confucius lodged in a nest of tottering, vermin-ravaged, smoke-begrimed hovels, of which no independent hog would accept a protracted tenure. The area extending from the main road to back beyond the old Llanberris was almost covered with the broken-backed tenements of squalid, immoral heathens, who followed various light and remunerative callings— peddling tea,

gimcrack fancy goods, and moonstruck fish; fossicking on the Yarrowee and Black Hill flats; or prowling round with a pair of shabby baskets strung on a stick, collecting rags, bones, and bottles, or any movable items of intrinsic value which could be reached through the fence when the proprietor's attention was otherwise engaged, and each and all supplementing their income by deeply-planned nocturnal raids on distant poultry yards, fruit farms, wood-heaps, or sluice-boxes. A couple of serpentine streets, inhabited by grimy pagans, still remain, but the majority of the Chows have migrated to other diggings, some have returned to the homes of their childhood, and some have gone to heaven. The staggering shanties which still remain are a good sample of the sties that littered the flat in '73— decrepid dens, reaching away in all directions for something to lean against, indented on one side, bulged on the other— compiled of logs, stones, palings flattened tins and battered pans, and roofed with sugar-mats. The common Chinaman glories in these little snug cries. When by some chance he becomes possessed of a home with a respectable exterior he straightway hews a hole in the roof, boards up the windows with borrowed planks, and disfigures the front with scraps of tin and old battens— whether in accordance with a perverted taste or out of a guileful desire to mislead the tax-assessor is beyond Caucasian comprehension.

It was evening, after a day hot enough to blister the ear of an elephant. Sin Fat's work was done, and he jogged homewards along a little side-street in Ballarat East. He bore the orthodox Chinese baskets, a pair which had evidently been in active business for some considerable time, and, judging from the hooked stick in his hand and the grateful aroma of old bones and such things which clung to him like a brother, Sin was following the calling of a "Rag John." S. Fat, as we now see him with the eye of faith, is physically much improved since he landed in Australia; he does not appear to have missed meals so regularly of late, and his predatory success has lent him an air of confidence and self-esteem, though he smiles with his old deference and still clings with superstitious awe to the dirt of his fatherland, now cemented by grit of Australian origin.

Our hero has disposed of his day's collection of rags and rottenness, gleaned from the gutters and rubbish-heaps of the city, at a local marine-store, and he now hies him to his humble home and merited repose. But he is not lost to a sense of duty; his ever-watchful eye is open to detect an opportunity, however trifling, of increasing his diurnal income, and when he espies a goose, obese and matronly, making frantic endeavours to squeeze her portly form through a small aperture in a fowl-house behind a private residence, his soul is instantly fired with a desire to possess her— to call her his own, if only for a few hours.

Sin is a man of action; dropping his baskets, and casting aside all reserve, he enters the yard, and in a moment the well-conditioned bird is in his power. Tucking her under his arm, and stifling her noisy clamours, he turns to vacate the premises; but, alas for his circumspection, the door of the residence opens, and a fat woman, with a baby dangling over one arm, comes out to swear at a neighbour's boy who is throwing stones at a cat on her roof. She has not noticed the enterprising Mongol, but "he who hesitates is lost," and Sin's native wit serves him well. Advancing boldly to the stout female, smiling obsequiously the while, and covering the brands and birth-marks of the goose with his jerkin, he blandly queries:

"Buy em goose, missee? Welly good, welly fat."

"Naw!" snaps the woman, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Muchee fine goose, welly fat!" persists Sin, coyly smiling.

"Don't want it; go away!"

"All li; some odder day, eh?" So Sin retreats, still smiling, and as he trots on his way congratulates himself, gibbering aloud in his rapture.

Sin had a bijou villa, built in his spare time from plans and specifications of his own making, and composed of old palings gleaned from neighbouring fences on moonless nights, and multitudinous other scraps and patches which were within the reach of a poor Chinee. The residence was a very comfortable one for summer wear; it had openings to catch the breeze from every point of the compass, and if the rain did come in at the roof— well, it ran out at the sides again. Standing at the front door one commanded an excellent view of a creek, embedded in whose thick yellow clay lay the decomposing remains of many domestic fauna. The house was within two minutes' walk of a fantan table and a Joss-house; it abutted on a stagnant pool, and received the balmy westerly breeze as it bounced off a candle-factory. Our hero was content with these few advantages for the time being, but by steady industry and frugality he hoped one day to run a gambling-hell of his own, and move in the best Celestial society in imported wooden boots. Sin was ambitious.

Sin Fat parted with his feathered prize to an epicurean fellow-countryman at a high figure before he reached his humble home. He knew that, had he not done so, Mrs. Sin Fat would have seized the earliest opportunity of converting the bird into square gin. Mrs. Fat was possessed of a deplorable habit of thus transmuting all kinds of personal property into liquor, in consequence of which it was part of her industrious husband's policy to carefully place all articles readily saleable beyond her reach.

It was dark before Mr. Fat reached his own roof-tree. He groped his way into the parlour, which was also kitchen, bedroom, drawing-room, and outhouse, and lit a candle (candles were another of Mrs. Fat's extravagances).

The glare awoke a woman who was sleeping, sprawling amongst a few filthy rags on a low bunk at one end of the hut. She lifted herself on her hands, and gazed at the Chinaman with stupid, drunken eyes. A great shock of unkempt black hair fell about her sallow face, which, despite the ravages of drink, and that faint, strange Mongolian look which surely comes to the woman who consorts with Chinamen, still possessed something of beauty. Under earlier and more favourable circumstances her eyes had been full, dark, and luminous. Her features were well cut, the nose somewhat aquiline, the mouth large and sensual. A virago surely, with the temper of fifty devils— a woman abandoned to the filth and utter loathsomeness of a Chinese camp. About thirty-four years of age, tall, round with the unnatural obesity of a heavy drinker, intensely hating all about her— aye, and hating herself worse than all as she wallowed in the very dregs and slime of the social system— such was Mrs. Sin Fat.

"Home again, sweetheart!" she muttered. "home again to your true love, my tall, beautiful— Bah, you ugly thief! Get out or I'll brain you!" And a list of profane ejaculations was smothered as she fell with her face amongst the rags once more, clutching vacantly for the empty bottle wherewith to assault her submissive husband.

This was Sin's only weakness— this she-fiend, from whose bursts of passion he had often to fly for his life. He had found her one cold, wet night, stretched in the mud at the door of his hovel, and had taken her in. She was haggard, ragged, and so fearfully emaciated that the men turned from her with wry expressions, and this seemed her last chance. She and Sin Fat "got married." She was possessed of one husband already, a portly Melbourne mechanic, but she had left him and her child years before— left him because he was a "fat old fool," an opinion based on the fact that he did not kick her down and jump on her with his working boots when she flew into a tantrum. Other men had done this since, and she respected them. Sin fed her up, dressed her well, and then she left him, only to return again, worn with debauchery, to be dressed and fed, and to "clear" once more. She repeated this course several times, and her dutiful lord always received her with open arms; but at length an idea occurred to Sin: he refused to provide fine clothes, and then she stayed with him, and made merry by occasionally cracking his head with a gin-bottle— an empty bottle, of course, for she would rather that her dear lord should escape correction altogether than waste a "nobbler" of her favourite nectar. Sin bore his cross patiently, but it was not affection entirely that restrained him from dropping something unhealthy into her gin. We have said that he was ambitious; he had many plans, and this woman could dress well and ape the lady. He foresaw the time when she would be useful to him.

Sin had no intention of remaining a toiler and moiler all his life. He had done well in the rag-and-bone business, but it was laborious, and our hero had gentlemanly instincts— he wanted to acquire riches and fatty tissue without expending any more of the sweat of his brow than was absolutely necessary, and he but waited to increase his available capital before embarking in business. By a dispensation of Providence, the fulfilment of his laudable ambition was brought about earlier than he expected.

Midnight. The white moon floated low in the eastern sky, and thrust her sheeny beams like sword-blades through the crazy walls of Sin Fat's home. A tall, willowy cat, with swan-like neck and attenuated frame, bestrode the ridge-pole, and stood black against the pallid orb of night, and lifting up her voice recited her woes to the listening spheres in accents wild and weird. All else was still. The camp lay like a cluster of islands in a lake of light. Sin's sleep was calm and childlike, and his wife had ceased to toss and breathe half-uttered curses in his deaf ear. The moon rose higher and higher, and the long black shadows slowly folded towards their base. Suddenly and stealthily the ground opened like a yawning giant; Sin Fat's villa trembled, tottered, and sank quietly into the black abyss, and where it had stood gaped a deep, dark pit— and a dusty cat, with a broken tail and a coat of many colours, tearing madly across the battery sands, seemed to be the only creature that quite realized the extent of the catastrophe. The Chinese camp at Ballarat is situated chiefly over "old ground." The country has been worked so thoroughly that sections of the earth's crust often settle down abruptly into the caverns below, accompanied by sundry Mongolian residences, to the exceeding discomfort of their greasy inhabitants.

At break of day the squalid denizens of the camp gathered about the chasm, at the bottom of which lay Mr. and Mrs. Sin Fat buried in the ruins. The Chows appointed a chairman, and discussed the situation with characteristic clamour and gesticulation, finally resolving by a large majority to call in white men to undertake the rescue. When there is work to be done which entails the probability of a broken head or the unearthing of a corpse, the heathen Chinee is sure to have a sore hand or an important engagement at some distance. White men came, and Mr. and Mrs. Sin Fat were fossicked out of the debris, full of dust, old nails, and wooden splinters, but not much the worse for their premature interment. Mrs. Fat thanked her rescuers, as she was hauled up through the roof of the hut, with a few well-chosen objurgations, terminating with a heartfelt wish that they might be instantly consigned to a region where frost and snow are unknown.

Sin stood on the brink of the aperture for some time after the thoughtless herd had dispersed, dolefully surveying the fragments of his late home. His

mind was made up at last— he would not build again, he would go into business.

The year 1876 A.D. Little Bourke-street, Melbourne, Sunday morning. On both sides of the narrow thoroughfare were groups of sleek-looking Chinese, arrayed in imported clothes, their hands buried in their long sleeves, debating politics and theology, or more likely cavilling at the absurdly low price of "cabbagee" and "gleen pea," the conversation occasionally eliciting a shrewd ejaculation from a dun-coloured philosopher a hundred yards off, or from a hoary, half-dressed pagan at a third-story window. They were a fat, comfortable-looking lot, and they aired their Sunday best on a fine Sabbath "allee same Eulopean." In front of a smoky little shop, possessed of only one window, in which a roast fowl, beautifully browned and highly polished, hung suspended by a string, and served as a roost for half the flies in the lane, was congregated a particularly verbose and noisy crowd, attracted evidently by the brilliant conversational powers of one of their number— a short but enormously fat "John," who leaned in the doorway. His stoutness was phenomenal; it would not have discredited the treatment of those wily men who prepare prize hogs for agricultural shows. Layers of blubber bulged about his eyes, leaving only two conical slits for him to peer through; his cheeks sagged below his great double chin, and his mighty neck rolled almost on to his shoulders, and vibrated like jelly with every movement. But his corporation was his greatest pride— it was the envy and admiration of all his friends; it jutted out, bold and precipitous, and seemed to defy the world. This Celestial phenomenon was dressed in the very latest Chinese style; gorgeous silks of many colours bedizened his capacious person; his feet were encased in the richest stub-toed wooden shoes; his hat was a brilliant building direct from the Flowery Land, and his proud tail swept the floor. A dandy dude was he— a heavy swell from home— oily and clean, looking as if he had been well scraped and polished with a greasy rag. He was jolly; his smiles went from his ears to his toes like ripples on a lake, and succeeded each other like winking— in fact, he was brimful of a wild sort of Chinese humour. We have read that the Chinese delight in punning; this man must have been the king of Mongolian punsters, judging from the merriment his every remark was wont to evoke. He was brimming with irony, sarcasm, and sparkling repartee. A white man could never grasp his witticisms; after translation they sounded much like childish nonsense, but anyone who listened to him would feel confident that he was a comical dog all the same.

In compliance with a suggestion from the portly host, the Chows streamed after him through the dark, dirty "shop" into a long, low room on the left, where were a number of tables covered with matting. Seating himself at the

head of one of these, and producing the "tools," the fat man prepared to preside over the game, his small eyes twinkling keenly enough now from out of the depths of his head; and soon all were enthralled in the mysteries of fan-tan. The Chinaman, stoical under all other circumstances, gambles like a fiend; these men were soon worked into a delirium of excitement, but the fat Mongolian was always cool, and whilst the sums of money before the players fluctuated, his increased steadily, surely.

A sign over the door of the little smoky shop translated into English implied that Sin Fat, Chinese cook, lived and plied his trade within, and was prepared to fulfil all orders with promptitude. That sign was a bold and brazen lie. Sin Fat was no cook, and the burnished fowl which hung in the window was only a "blind"— a window-blind, so to speak— intended to beguile "him foolee white feller." Sin Fat ran a gambling-hell and something worse. Sin had attained his ambition; while making flesh he was also making money rapidly. Our hero, the poor broken Chow who had landed in the city not many years before without a shilling or a change of raiment, had, by patient industry and steadfastness of purpose, acquired an extensive business and a quantity of capital at interest. The colonial climate agreed with him, and he had many friends. When Constable Mahoney, Sergeant Mulduckie, or Private O'Brien met him they greeted him like a brother; they winked knowingly, dug him jocularly in the ribs, and insinuated that he was a sly dog. These zealous guardians of public property and morality had mastered the art which was necessary to every "mimber av the foorce" who would have his bank book and little terrace in the suburbs— the art of not seeing too much.

Beyond the little shop adorned with the pendant fowl, stretched to the right and left till the back premises of the houses in the block seemed to be absorbed, were numerous small rooms— cabins reeking with the nauseating odour of opium and pollution and Chinamen, and always clouded with smoke. There was no order, no design, in the building of these cribs; big rooms had been portioned off and holes cut in partitions recklessly. You groped through the place, and might find your way, to your great surprise, into two or three filthy lanes at the back, right or left. The curious European, on a voyage of discovery, saw in these rooms, through the clouds of choking, evil-smelling opium fumes, debilitated Chinamen, with animalized faces, floating to hell in the midst of visions of heaven; lank, skinny coolies, Indians, and other vile Asiatics; and, worst of all, European girls, corrupt below anything else in nature, excepting only the ghouls they consorted with. Girls of sixteen, decoyed in at the front door by the sheen of silk and the jingle of gold, percolating through that terrible den, to be finally cast out amongst the slime

and rottenness of the lanes— abject wrecks, with nothing of humanity left within them, and hardly the semblance without.

Mrs. Sin Fat was well and hearty; she had fine clothes galore, and no longer thought of deserting her dear lord— perhaps because she saw that he was not now so very anxious to prevent it. A great assistance in the business was the tall, dark woman, who could "put on style;" she clung to her old love— the gin-bottle— and frequently worked up a small cyclone, an hysterical fit peculiarly her own, which militated against the prosperity of the house by suspending business for the time being. In these moments she called herself many vile and unladylike names, bit her arms, tore her hair, spat upon her lord, and spurned him with something heavy and hard, even going to the extent of hurling bottles and other dangerous projectiles at the shaven heads of the best customers. This was unpleasant, but Sin condescended to overlook it when she sallied forth in fine raiment, with a thick veil concealing half her face, to wander in the public parks and gardens, and enter into conversation with young girls who were airing babies, or reading romances in the shade. She talked with them so sweetly (one at a time always) about babies, birds, or flowers; but she was at her best when describing with poetic fervour gorgeous dresses, all bespangled and glittering, or dwelling upon hats that were dreams of loveliness. She was always making appointments with these girls, and gradually, deftly leading them by a golden thread, she drew them into the shop of Sin Fat the cook, and the sign over the door might well have read:— "Abandon all hope ye who enter here!" Mrs. Fat was not always successful; but one success condoned for fifty failures. Sin Fat's trade was so extensive that he was enabled to give other women commissions in this line; none of them, however, succeeded so well as his wife.

Two years rolled by, and Sin Fat's business increased and multiplied in every branch. A polished fowl still hung in the little window, and the green and golden sign published the same old lie. Sin was even jollier and more rotund; he was looked up to as a Chow among Chows. His capital at interest had grown apace, and he fondly dreamed of selling out and returning home to the Flowery Land, there to buy a Celestial C.M.G-ship, and lord it as a representative Australian. His wife by this time was a source of grave uneasiness to him; her temper had intensified, she had grown hypochondriacal, and refused for months to tout for the business. Her bursts of passion were terrible to contemplate, and Sin Fat, Esq., had now attained a station so exalted that to be seen evading the wrath of a tall female armed with a poker or a bottle compromised his dignity. He felt that it was time to assert his authority.

One day Sin, as head of the firm, was overjoyed at the advent of a new victim. The decoy in this case was a loudly dressed young woman who shortly before had developed marvellous ability in that line. The new girl was aged about seventeen, tall, dark, and thin, but handsome— the spoilt daughter of a weak parent. She had been caught with the golden cord, and the hook had been baited with her own vanity. A few hours after her advent he was seated with her in the one room of the place which had any pretensions to cleanliness and attractions. It was draped and hung about with all kinds of ridiculous, highly-coloured Chinese gew-gaws, and fairly furnished. This was the bower into which all novices were first introduced; when they left it they had received their initial lesson in the hard course of misery just entered upon. Sin was introducing this girl to her first pipe of opium— that devil's drug and Chinaman's greatest ally. The obese Confucian prattled to her in tender tones, like the jolly old gallant he was, and the girl, half-stretched upon a sort of settee, laughed and joked with the boldness of an old hand.

Suddenly the door opened and Mrs. Sin Fat entered. She had come to inspect the strange girl for the first time. She looked wild and uncanny enough as she stepped over the threshold, but when her eyes encountered the face of the newcomer her countenance became horrifying.

"Great— !" she whispered, supporting her shivering limbs against the door. The exclamation was not blasphemous— for a wonder— it was half a prayer, half the expression of strong inward agony. Then a fierce determination seemed to strengthen every muscle and sinew in her tall frame; she strode into the room, dashed the pipe from the girl's hands, and, seizing her by the arms with a force that made the bones crack, she said hoarsely:

"Who are you, my fine miss? Your name? What's your name? You need not scream, Jessie Hill. You see I know you. I have watched you from a distance for years. So your tender-hearted father has let you drift this way, as he did me. He is too kind for devils like us. You go out of this— back to your father! Do you hear me? You go now, and if you ever come here again I'll stab you to death! Remember, I swear I will watch for you, and if you come here again I will kill you on the spot! They told you you would have rich dresses, handsome admirers, pockets full of gold, didn't they? They have lied, as they lied to the miserable wretches who have gone before you. There is no finery here— nothing but filth and misery and degradation. Come here again, and I will throw your dead body into the gutter. Now, go!"

But the girl had fainted, and no wonder, for the woman gripped her like a vice, and her face was as frightful as a nightmare. Mrs. Sin Fat ran out for water; when she returned her husband had locked the outer door and placed

the key in his pocket. She rushed at him in a fury, but checked herself with her hands in the air.

"That girl has got to go!" she hissed.

"No savee," muttered Sin, putting on a bolder front than ever he had dared to do before.

"I tell you she shall go; she is my daughter, my child!"

"No savee! Stay here all a same." And he crossed into another room. Sin had paid his agent a big commission on this girl, and was determined not to lose her. Besides, he had taken a fancy to her himself; he would rather have lost the mother than the daughter. Mrs. Sin Fat did not storm and rage, but turned away with a calmness that was unnatural, and presently followed Sin into the room, and came close to him, concealing one hand in the folds of her dress.

"That girl," she said, calmly; "is she to go?"

"No, no! Go yourself— "

These memorable words were the last ever spoken by the great, the prosperous Sin Fat. A knife flashed before his eyes, and was driven to the hilt in his side. He fell forward with only a groan, and the fall forced the heavy handle of the weapon still deeper between his ribs. Mrs. Sin Fat, coolly removing the keys from his pocket, went out, followed by a little stream of bright blood, which ran along the floor under the closed door, as if to keep watch upon her, and entered the room where she had left the new girl— her own daughter, as the fates would have it. The new girl was sitting gazing about her, frightened and confused.

"Here, come with me," said the woman, seizing her roughly by the arm; "come with me, and see the delightful life you will have of it in this house!" She led the girl through the vile den, showed her all its abominations, and at last pushed her into one of the filthy alleys. "Here," she said, "you would be thrown out in a few months' time, a degraded wretch. A fine, gay life, eh? Now go, and be a good woman if you can. So help me Heaven, if you ever come back I will kill you. Remember that, night and day!"

The girl hurried away, full of horror and fear, but saved and her mother followed her at a distance. Sin Fat was found, and duly inquested. A verdict of murder was returned, and a warrant issued for Mrs. Sin Fat, but she was never caught. Only one man ever cast eyes on her again. A week after the murder a stoical old ferryman was working his lumbering craft across the river late one night, when something struck the prow, turned slowly round, and quietly drifted with the dark waters. It was a body. It turned over after the contact with the boat, and the man saw a white, bleached face in the moonlight, surrounded by a mass of black hair, which formed a sombre halo. The

ferryman looked after it curiously for a time, then resumed his rowing, muttering:

"Only a body! Well, I don't want t' be mixed up in no inkwests."

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6: A Visit to Scrubby Gully

THE MEN at the mine were anxious to have me visit our magnificent property. The battery and water-wheel were erected, there were 50 tons of stone in the hopper, and we only needed water and the blessing of Providence to start crushing out big weekly dividends. I know now that there has never been a time within the memory of man when Scrubby Gully did not want water, and that Scrubby Gully is the one place on earth to which a discriminating man would betake himself if he wished to avoid all the blessings of Providence for ever. But that is beside the matter.

I was carefully instructed by letter to take the train to Kanan, coach it to the Rabbit Trap, take horse from Whalan's to the Cross Roads, ask someone at Old Poley's on the hill to direct me to Sheep's Eye; from there strike west on foot, keeping Bugle Point on my right, and "Chin Whiskers" would meet me at The Crossing. There was no accommodation at the mine for city visitors, but I was given to understand Mr. Larry Jeans would be happy to accommodate me at his homestead over the spur.

Casual references to Mr. Jeans in the correspondence gave me the impression that Jeans was an affluent gentleman of luxurious tastes and a hospitable disposition, and that a harmless eccentricity led him to follow agricultural and pastoral pursuits in the vicinity of Scrubby Gully instead of wasting his time in voluptuous ease in the city.

"Chin Whiskers" met me at The Crossing. "Chin Whiskers" was a meditative giant who exhausted his mental and physical energies chewing tobacco, and who bore about his person interesting and obvious evidence of the length and the severity of the local drought— he was, in fact, the drought incarnate. The Crossing was a mere indication of a track across a yellow, rock-strewn indentation between two hills, which indentation, "Chin Whiskers" informed me, was "The Creek." That did not surprise me, because I knew that every second country township and district in Australia has a somewhat similar indentation which it always calls "The Creek." Sometimes "The Creek" has moist places in it, sometimes it is quite damp for almost a dozen miles, but more often it is as hard and dry as a brick-kiln. When the indentation is really wet along its whole length it is invariably called "The River."

I found the mine; it was a simple horizontal hole bored in a hill. The battery was there, and the water-wheel. The water-wheel stood disconsolate beside the dust-strewn creek, and looked as much at home as a water-wheel might be expected to look in the centre of the sandy wastes of Sahara. The working shareholders were unaffectedly glad to see me. They were sapless and drought-stricken, but they assured me, with great enthusiasm, that they lived

in momentary expectation of a tremendous downfall. Leen had been mending the roof of his hut, he said, in readiness for the heavy rains which were due before morning. He examined the sky critically, and expressed a belief that I would be detained on Scrubby Gully a couple of weeks or so in consequence of the floods.

This spirit of unreasonable hopefulness and trust seemed to be shared by Cody, and Ellis, and MacMahon. I alone was dubious. The journey up had worn me out; the dry desolation all around and the flagrant unprofitableness of our spec. sickened me; but Jeans still remained— the prodigal Jeans, with his spacious homestead and profuse hospitality. I was heartfully grateful for Jeans. We met in due course. As I talked with Leen, a man came wearily down the hill, towing a meagre horse, which in turn was towing a log. This man delivered his log, unslung his animal, and approached us, heroically lugging behind him the miserable apology for a horse— a morbid brute manifestly without a hope or ambition left in life, and conveying mysteriously to the observer a knowledge of its fixed and unshakable determination to lie down and die the moment its owner's attention was otherwise directed. But the proprietor seemed fully alive to the situation, and never allowed his thoughts to stray entirely from the horse, but was continually jerking its head up, and addressing towards it reproaches, expostulations, and curses— curses that had lost all their vigour and dignity. This man was Jeans, and if I had not seen his horse I would have said that Jeans was the most hopelessly heart-broken and utterly used-up animal breathing on the face of the earth. He was about 40, grey, hollow-cheeked, hollow-chested, bent, and apathetic with the dreadful apathy that comes of wasted effort, vain toil, and blasted hopes. Jeans had a face that had forgotten how to smile and never scowled— a face that took no exercise, but remained set in the one wooden expression of joyless, passionless indifference to whatever fate could offer henceforth and forever. My last hopes exploded at the sight of him.

Mr. Larry Jeans said I was welcome to camp in the spare room "up to" his place, and added dully that "proberly" his missus could scrape up grub enough for me "fer a day'r two." "Proberly" did not sound very encouraging, but I had no option, and, being dead-beat, accepted the hospitality offered, and followed Mr. Jeans. Larry laboriously hauled his melancholy horse over a couple of low stony rises, and then we tackled the scrag end of the range, across which led a vague track that wound in and out amongst a forest of great rocks, and presented all the difficulties and dangers of mountaineering without its compensations. Jeans struggled on with dull patience, and in silence, saving when it was necessary to divert the old horse from his morbid thoughts, and

when he briefly answered my questions. I gathered from him that the men at the mine had been expecting rain for four months.

"And what do you think of the chances?" I asked.

"Oh, me, I never expect nothin'. Sometimes things happen. I don't expect 'em, though."

"Things happen— what, for instance?"

"Well, dry spells."

I elicited that pleuro happened, and rabbits, and fires, and "this here new-fangled fever." But whatever happened Jeans never fluctuated; he had struck an average of misery, and was bogged in the moral slough. It seemed as if his sensibilities above a certain capacity had been worn out by over-work, and refused to feel more than a fixed degree of trouble, so that whatever might come on top of his present woes, be it fever, or fire, or death, the man remained in his normal condition of grim apathy and spiritless obedience to fate.

The "homestead" stood upon the flat timbered country beyond the rise. It was just what Jeans's homestead might have been expected to be— a low structure of bark and slabs, with a slab chimney at one end, and a door in the middle between two canvas "windows." It stood in a small clearing; just beyond the house stood the skeleton of a shed, upon which, it being sundown, roosted a few gaunt fowls; a lank cow with one horn was deeply meditating by the front door. There were signs of bold raids upon the stubborn bush, pathetic ventures; and great butts lay about in evidence of much weary but unprofitable work. A dog-leg fence, starting at no particular point, straddled along in front of the house, and finished nowhere about a hundred yards off. Not a new fence either, but an old one, with much dry grass matted amongst the logs— that was the pathos of it. There had been a brave attempt at a garden, too; but the few fruit trees that stood had been stripped of the bark, and the hens had made dust-baths in all the beds. In this dust an army of children were wallowing— half-clad, bare-footed, dirt-encrusted children, but all hale and boisterous.

At the door we were met by Mrs. Larry Jeans, and after introducing me as "him from the city," the master laboured away, dragging his shuffling horse, and leaving me in the centre of a wondering circle of youngsters of all sorts and sizes, from two dusty mites not yet properly balanced on their crooked little legs up to a shock-headed lubberly boy of thirteen, curiously embossed with large tan freckles, and a tall, gawky girl of the same age in preposterously short skirts, whom my presence afflicted with a most painful bashfulness. A peculiarity about Jeans's children that struck me was the fact that they seemed

to run in sets: there was a pair even for the sticky baby deftly hooked under its mother's left arm, judging by the petulant wailing to be heard within.

The Jeans's homestead consisted of two compartments. I looked about in vain for the "spare room," and concluded it must be either the capacious fire-place or the skeleton shed on which the hens were roosting. The principal article of kitchen furniture was a long plank table built into the floor; between it and the wall was a bush-made form, also a fixture. A few crazy three-legged stools, a safe manufactured from a zinc-lined case, and an odd assortment of crockery and tin cups, saucers, and plates piled on slab shelves in one corner, completed the list of "fixings."

Mrs. Larry Jeans was a short, bony, homely woman, very like her husband— strangely, pathetically like in face and demeanour; similarly bowed with labour, and with the same air of hopelessness and of accepting the toils and privations of their miserable existence as an inevitable lot. She was always working, and always had worked; her hands were hard and contorted in evidence of it, and her cheek was as brown and as dry as husks from labouring in the sun.

We had tea and bread and boiled onions and corned beef for tea that evening— a minimum of beef and a maximum of onions. The last onion crop had been a comparative success somewhere within half a day's journey of Scrubby Gully. Tea served to introduce more children; they dangled over the arms of the unhappy mother, hung to her skirts, sprawled about her feet, squabbled in the corners, and overran the house. Jeans helped to feed the brood in his slow, patient way, and after tea he helped to pack away the younger in little bundles— here, there, and everywhere— where they slept peacefully, but in great apparent peril, whilst the bigger kids charged about the room and roared, and fought, and raised a very pandemonium of their own. Every now and again Mrs. Jeans would lift her tired head from her sewing or her insatiable twins, and say weakly, "Now, you Jinny, behave." Or Larry would remark dispassionately, "Hi, you, Billy!" But otherwise the youngsters raged unchecked, their broken-spirited parents seeming to regard the noise and worry of them as the lightest trial in a world of struggling and trouble.

I asked Jeans how many children he thought he had. He didn't seem certain, but after due deliberation said there might be thirteen in all. He had probably lost count, for I am certain I tallied fifteen— seven sets and one odd one.

When the washing-up was done, and half of the family were bedded down, Larry dragged a tangle of old harness from the other room, and sat for two hours painfully piecing it up with cord, and his wife sat opposite him, silent and blank of face, mending one set of rags with another— I perched upon a stool

watching the pair, studying one face after the other, irritated at length by the sheep-like immobility of both, thinking it would be a relief if Jeans would suddenly break out and do something desperate, something to show that he had not, in spite of appearances, got beyond the possibility of sanguinary revolt; but he worked on steadily, uncomplainingly, till the boy with the unique freckles came hurrying in with the intelligence that the old horse was "havin' a fit'r somethin'." Jeans did not swear. He said "Is he but?" and put aside his harness, and went out, like a man for whom life has no surprises.

The selector was over an hour struggling with his hypochondriac horse, whilst I exchanged fragments of conversation with Mrs. Jeans, and went upon various mental excursions after that spare room. It appeared that the Jeanses had neighbours. There was another family settled seven miles up the gully, but Mrs. Jeans informed me that the Dicksons, being quiet and sort of down-hearted, were not very good company, consequently she and Jeans rarely visited them. I was indulging in a mental prospect of the jubilation at a reunion of the down-hearted Dicksons and the gay and frivolous Jeanses when Larry returned from his struggle with the horse. He resumed his work upon the harness without any complaint. His remark that "Them skewball horses is alwis onreasonable" was not spoken in a carping spirit; it was given as conveying valuable information to a stranger.

At 11 o'clock my host "s'posed that p'r'aps maybe" I was ready to turn in. I was, and we went forth together in quest of the spare room. The room in question proved to be a hastily-constructed lean-to on the far corner of the house, at the back. Inside, one wall was six feet high and the other was merely a tree-butt. My bunk was built against the butt, and between the bunk and the roof there were about eighteen inches of space. That bunk had not been run up for a fat man. After establishing me in the spare room Jeans turned to go.

"Best bar the door with a log, case o' the cow," he said. "If she comes bumpin' round in the night, don't mind. She walks in her sleep moonlight nights."

It only needed this to convince me that I was usurping the customary domicile of the meditative cow.

The room had been carefully furbished up and deeply carpeted with scrub ferns. But the cow was not to be denied.

Weary as I was, I got little sleep that night. I had fallen off comfortably about half an hour after turning in, when I was awakened again by some commotion in the house. Half a dozen of the children were blubbering, and I could hear the heavy tread of Larry, and the equally heavy tread of his wife, moving about the house. Presently both passed by the lean-to, and away in the direction of the range. For another half-hour or so there was silence, and then

the one-horned cow came along and tried my door. Failing to open it, she tried the walls and the roof, but could not break her way in, so she camped under the lee of the structure, and lowed dismally at intervals till day-break.

When I arose a scantily-attired small boy generously provided me with a pint pannikin three-parts full of water. The water was for my morning bath, and the small boy was careful to warn me not to throw it away when I was through with it. This youngster told me that "Dad, an' mum, an' Jimmy" had been out all night hunting Steve. Steve, I gathered, was the one enterprising child in the household, and was in the habit of going alone upon voyages of exploration along the range, where, being a very little fellow, he usually lost himself, and provided his parents with a night's entertainment searching for him in the barren gorges and about the boulder-strewn spurs of the range. How it happened that he was not missed till nearly midnight on this occasion I cannot say, unless the father and mother were really as ignorant of the extent and character of their family as they appeared to be.

Mrs. Jeans was the first to return, and she brought Steve with her. The dear child had not been lost, after all. Incensed by some indignity that had been put upon him during the afternoon, he had "run away from home," he said, and slept all night in a wombat's hole about 200 yards from the house. There his mother found him, returning from her long, weary search. The incident did not appear to have affected her in any way; she looked as tired and as heart-sick as on the previous evening, but not more so.

"You know we lost one little one there"— she extended her hand towards the low, rambling repellent hills— "an' found him dead a week after."

Larry returned half an hour later, and his apathy under the circumstances was simply appalling.

We had fried onions and bread and tea for breakfast, and immediately the meal was over Larry, who I imagined would be going to bed for a few hours, appeared in front of the house leading his deplorable horse. He was bound for the mine, he said. I put in that day exploring the tunnel, examining the immovable mill, hunting for specimens in the quartz-tip, and listening to Leen's cheerful weather prophesies; and Jeans and his soured quadruped dragged logs to the mine from a patch of timber about a mile off, which patch the men alluded to largely as The Gum Forest.

Returning to the homestead at sundown we found the children fighting in the dust and the one-horned cow meditating at the door as on the previous evening. I fancied I detected in the eye of the cow a look of pathetic reproach as I passed her. Tea that evening consisted mainly of roast onions. Jeans felt called upon to apologize because the boys had been unable to trap a rabbit for my benefit.

"Now'n agen, after a rainy spell, we're 'most afraid the rabbits is a-goin' to eat us, an' then when we'd like a rabbit-stoo there ain't a rabbit to be found within twenty mile," said the settler impassively. "When there is rabbits, there ain't onions," he added as a further contribution to the curiosities of natural history.

The second night at Scrubby Gully was painfully like the first: Mrs. Jeans stitched, Mr. Jeans laboured over his tangle of harness, and the brood rolled and tumbled about the room, raising much dust and creating a deafening noise, to which Larry and Mary his wife gave little heed. When a section of the family had been parcelled up and put to sleep, I was tempted to ask Jeans why he continued to live in that unhallowed, out-of-the-way corner, and to waste his energies upon a parched and blasted holding instead of settling somewhere within reach of a market and beyond the blight of tangible and visible despair that hung over Scrubby Gully and its vicinity.

"Dunno," said Jeans, without interest, "'pears t'me t'be pretty much as bad in other places. Evans is the same, so's Calder."

I did not know either Evans or Calder, but I pitied both from the bottom of my heart. Jeans admitted that he had given up hope of getting the timber off his land, though he "suspected" he might be able to handle it somehow "when the boys grew up." He further admitted that he didn't know "as the land was good for anythin' much" when it was cleared but his pessimism was proof against all my arguments, and I went sadly to bunk, leaving the man and his wife working with slow, animal perseverance, apparently unconscious of the fact that they had not slept a wink for over thirty hours.

The cow raided my room shortly after midnight. She managed to break down the door this time, but as her intentions were peaceful, and as it was preferable rather to have her for a room-mate than to be kept awake by her pathetic complaints, I made no attempt to evict her, and we both passed an easy night.

I was up early next morning, but Mr. and Mrs. Jeans were before me. They were standing together down by the aimless dog-leg fence, and the hypochondriacal horse lay between them. I walked across, suspecting further "unreasonableness" on the part of the horse. The animal was dead.

"Old man, how'll you manage to haul those logs in now?" As Mrs. Jeans said this I fancied I saw flicker in her face for a moment a look of spiritual agony, a hint of revolt that might manifest itself in tears and bitter complainings, but it passed in the instant.

Jeans merely shook his head, and answered something indicative of the complete destruction of his faith in "them skewbald horses."

We had bread and onions for breakfast.

When I last saw Jeans, as I was leaving Scrubby Gully that day, he was coming down the hill from the direction of the gum forest, struggling in the blinding heat, with a rope over his shoulder, towing a nine-foot sluice leg.

We had a letter from Leen yesterday; he says the working shareholders are hurrying to get the sluice fixed over the wheel, and he (Leen) anticipates a heavy downfall of rain during the night.

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7: Hebe of Grasstree

A CHANGE had come over the spirit of Grasstree; there was a false note in the gaiety of the men up from Ramrod Flat, and the young fellows in the pastoral interest around on the Black Cockatoo, when they foregathered in Cleever's bar, discovered an un-accustomed awkwardness and restraint in their attitudes towards each other. With miners and bushmen alike confidence had given place to suspicion, and good-fellowship to an all-round surliness.

For a time the men could not account even to themselves for this strange alteration; an attempt was made to make the climate responsible, and a few insisted that it was something in the drink, but certainly all had become "sudden and quick in quarrel"— hats went down and hands went up on the slightest provocation. Men whose ordinary work-a-day friendship had previously heightened to brotherly love under the warming influence of alcohol now became profane and bitter in drink, and short arguments terminated with a rush and a collision in the bar. Little differences that might previously have been settled by mutual concessions were now nursed and coddled till they grew into hot enmities, and even Foster and Brierly, once the best of mates, were camping apart and each working a lone hand at Goat Creek.

Eventually Hetty Maconochie was generally recognized as the disturbing element at the Grasstree, but, by tacit agreement, that fact was not publicly admitted. Possibly a delicate and chivalrous consideration for "Miss Mack's" sensibilities inspired this polite reticence, but perhaps it chiefly arose from the shamefacedness of her worshippers. The man out-back, secretive in most things personal, will admit any weakness or wickedness ere confessing to the pangs of unrequited passion. Hence when Hetty was particularly affable to Stacey on Monday evening in the bar, and allowed Riverton to monopolize her smiles on Tuesday evening, Riverton and Stacey fought a desperate and bloody battle on the Wednesday afternoon to decide the ownership of a one-eyed dog which was the local head depot for fleas, and which really belonged to a third man, who, being public-spirited, waived his claim rather than spoil sport. Riverton won the dog.

Of course Miss Maconochie was quite conscious that she had introduced a new element into the relationship of things at the Grasstree, but, although exultant in the knowledge that the men were contending with animal ferocity for her favour, she appeared always quite oblivious, and was genial or distant with the discrimination of a conscientious barmaid.

Miss Mack had been sent to the Travellers' Rest from a Melbourne labour office in response to Cleever's order, which specified "a strapping girl, not

more than 26, to work and assist in bar." Hetty was "strapping," and certainly not more than 26; five feet seven, straight as a lath, strong, ruddy-cheeked, and possessing a marvellous efflorescence of glorious red hair as fine as spun silk, coruscant, throwing little subtle tendrils down about her ears, her temples, and her long white neck. There are many female Samsons. But Hetty's power was not wholly in her hair; her strength was peculiarly attractive to the men; her every action suggested strength— strength underlying a womanly softness and roundness. She often served in the bar on warm evenings with her sleeves rolled well above her shapely elbows, and then Cleever's patrons felt it was worth the price of the drink to see "Mack" reach up for the bottle. She draped lightly for comfort, and blushed to find it fame. The average woman who puts on much to make herself attractive does not realize that half the art is in taking off. Hetty was innocent of coquetry when she divested herself of superfluous drapery, but she could not remain long ignorant of the advantages she enjoyed from her emancipation. Then her laugh helped to ensure success— it was a generous laugh, full of suggestive music, and discovered new attractions in her large, handsome mouth. Such a laugh is honeyed flattery for the man who provokes it, and, as Hetty was proud of her fine white teeth, no man's joke was altogether a failure in Cleever's bar.

There were other young women in and about the Grasstree— two or three in the township, and settlers' and farmers' daughters judiciously distributed over the district; but, although these had been courted, it was in a temperate and bloodless manner. These girls were not slow in concluding that Miss Maconochie was a person of extraordinary deceit and peculiar morals. But Hetty was by no means a designing woman. Saving a year spent in domestic service in an extremely Methodist household in Melbourne, her knowledge of men and manners had been gathered in the bush township where she was born and bred. Her morals were particularly healthy; it was soon understood by Cleever's customers that "Mack" knew how to take care of herself— an understanding that detracted not from the zest of the pursuit.

After the morbid propriety of that Methodist household, Hetty revelled in the unrestraint and comparative brilliancy of life at the Travellers' Rest. Cleever was a widower, and not at all exacting, and in the bar of evenings the girl received at least a specious show of respect sufficiently gratifying to a young woman of her intellectual limitations.

The first battle fell about between Stacey and one of the Devoys. Both had been dangling over the bar, chatting and larking with Hetty for an hour or so, when Stacey's glass was upset in a bit of horse-play, and Stacey, receiving its contents over his shirt-front, became a butt and an object of derision to all in the bar. "Mack" laughed aloud, and flashed her white teeth in the lamp-light,

and Devoy laughed too, and Stacey's blood grew hot, and he longed for slaughter. His opportunity came when the girl left the bar a minute later. He confronted Devoy:

"Damn you, Devoy, you did that on purpose!"

It was entirely an accident, but neither was in any humour for explanations. Devoy felt it was beneath him to excuse or parley; he blurted much defiant profanity.

"What if I did! Why don't you drink up your liquor like a man!"

He was cut short by a swinging, open-hand blow. Then thud, thud, thud, thud— four quick blows, two and two, with a sound as of a teamster banging the ribs of his bogged horses with a shovel— and Stacey and Devoy were fighting with the ferocity of tigers at mating-time.

Hetty returned to the bar to see the first blow struck, and now, leaning over the counter, with sparkling eyes, glowing cheeks, and heaving breast she watched the fight. There was none of the impassivity of the lolling tigress in her attitude: she burned with excitement; she clenched her own hands, and bruised her knuckles on the boards; she followed each swift, cutting blow, and uttered inarticulate cries of wonder.

The men fought without science, fought with the brutality of powerful men, wounding with every blow, but feeling nothing in their heat and fury. A ring of onlookers circled round them, and outside this ring danced Cleever— "Fighting" Cleever— with his "peacemaker," a wicked-looking "waddy," eager to get in a blow and stun one of the combatants, for the peace of Devil's End and the credit of the house.

The fight was not settled in Cleever's bar. Two or three rounds served to exhaust the blind fury of the combatants, and then mutual friends interceded, and a formal meeting was arranged for next day. A two hours' struggle in Haddon's grass paddock on the following afternoon ended in the defeat of Stacey, and that night Devoy appeared before Hetty Maconochie, bruised, bandaged, and badly hacked about, but big with victory. The fight was not discussed, but the girl quite understood, and the conquering hero rejoiced in her luminous smile, and was sullenly given the pride of place by his companions, who tacitly admitted this right to the victor for the time being.

After that fistic battles were daily occurrences at Devil's End. Callaghan, the solitary constable of the district, made a gallant attempt to cope with the press of business, but after an exhausting week yielded to public opinion and was officially blind and deaf when the battle-cries were heard at the Travellers' Rest. Presently every second man in the district possessed black eyes, split lips, or a swollen ear, or all these things, and the local chemist did a roaring trade in court-plaster and Friar's balsam. The men fought on the slightest provocation,

or with no obvious provocation at all; arguments on religion or politics invariably ended in bloodshed; mates in the drives below disagreed as to the proper locality for a "shot," and came blaspheming up the shafts to "settle it" in a "mill;" the boys at "Old Burgoo's" fought viciously to maintain their superiority as horsemen and shearers, and always the victorious pugilist turned up at Cleever's, in all the glory of his wounds and bruises, to invite the admiration of the creamy-skinned goddess with the brown eyes.

Grasstree had discovered Hetty Maconochie. Previously she had received a reasonable amount of attention from the men with whom she was thrown in contact, but Grasstree had made her a sensation— a craze. She gloried and revelled in her success, and the sense of pride and power it gave her. Thinking over it through the day, she laughed with rapturous delight, and felt like a queen amongst her pans. Cleever did well these times: there were no tee-totallers left in and about Grasstree, and the Travellers' Rest had absorbed all the business of the district. Being in love with Hetty himself, Cleever made an effort to dispense with her help in the bar, and excited an instantaneous revolt.

"Fetch out the girl," was the general demand. "You don't think we've travelled down here to be served by a splay-mouthed Dutchman!"

Cleever was a Swede; but Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Belgians, Germans, Austrians, and men of Holland are all Dutchmen out-back. Other foreigners are invariably Frenchmen. If Hetty was not produced on demand there was no more drinking, but much disorder and many accidents, and the proprietor was always compelled to yield. Cleever fought with the rest. He fought without science or discrimination, and nobody took any satisfaction from an encounter with the "Dutchman." He never knew when he was beaten, and had a ridiculous and disconcerting way of resuming the battle, without word or warning, a day, a week, or a month after being egregiously whipped. Being a foreigner, he did not allow any absurd sentiment to interfere with his manner of fighting, and repudiated British prejudices and British reverence for rule and precedent, and fought with all his weapons— fists, nails, teeth, and feet. There was no credit in beating Cleever; he couldn't fight, but he was always willing to try, and, although he was considered wildly humorous in his tantrums, his opponents rarely escaped an injury of some kind or another before the battle was ended.

After much indiscriminate fighting, in the course of a couple of months it was understood and admitted without argument that the final must be contested by Riverton and Devoy. Both were unbeaten, and each would have done battle with a raging lion for the love of Hetty Maconochie. Cleever alone, of all the whipped candidates, refused to abandon his hopes of winning his

handsome Hebe, and was quite willing to "take on" the two last aspirants one after the other or both together. The other men of Grasstree, and Ramrod Flat, and Grecian Bend admitted themselves "out of it," and it was quite understood that the winner of the Riverton-Devoy contest had only to step up and take possession of the prize. This view had never been questioned; Hetty's keen interest in the many battles, and her evident delight in the knowledge that she was the prize in the greatest competition that had ever shaken an Australian bush township out of its habitual quietude and lethargy, were taken as indicating her acquiescence. Certainly both Devoy and Riverton took it for granted that the best man of the two was destined to marry the belle of Grasstree.

The great fight came off on a beautiful pitch under Grecian Bend on a Tuesday morning, and half the male population of the district was there to see. Devoy and Riverton fought because the latter had ventured before witnesses to assert his disbelief in the story of Devoy's great shooting exploit— a wonderful narrative, never before questioned at Grasstree. The fight was long and stubborn. Both men were young, strong, hardened with toil, active, game as peccaries, six-foot and a bit, and fighting for an issue that seemed dear as dear life.

They fought bare-knuckled and stripped to the buff. There was no sparring and no vain display; every blow cut or bruised; and during the first half-dozen rounds the great toughened, knubbly fists were going like sledge-hammers about a busy forge. After that it was a brutal exhibition of butchery and endurance. Blood ran freely, dyeing the combatants and darkening the grass. The faces of the fighters became unrecognizable, and after the 13th round neither could see. By this time half the spectators had sickened and turned away, and awaited the end at a distance. Devoy was knocked clean out in the 19th round, and then Riverton was carried away across three saplings, a bruised and battered champion, limp as a wet shirt, but triumphant, and feeling drunk— happily, jubilantly drunk.

Riverton would have much liked to drag himself to the Travellers' Rest that night, but it was impossible.

He was helpless next night, and on the following morning his bunk still held him captive. But on Friday night, with the assistance of his mate, he conveyed his battered carcass into Cleever's bar. A woeful spectacle was the champion of Grasstree, but his wounds were glorious. About a dozen men sat in the bar. Cleever was in attendance. The hero called for drinks all round.

"Where's Mack?" he asked authoritatively.

The publican had evaded this query from others for two days in order to produce a good effect when the champion appeared to claim her. He lingered over the answer now as he served the drinks.

"She haf went by dot city for der honeymoons," he said composedly.

"Wha-at!" Riverton sprawled upon the counter, and his bruised face went livid.

"Vile you vos fight mit Devoy, she haf ride away in der coach to marry anodder feller."

"Marry! marry! Who— who is he?"

"Tommy Haynes."

"Haynes!" Riverton stood upright, looking around upon his companions, but saw only blank faces.

Tommy Haynes was the successful storekeeper of Grasstree, a small boyish man of 24, slight and fair, with curls and a complexion. He would easily have stood upright under Hetty's extended arm. Whilst others fought and suffered Haynes courted— courted pluckily, with kisses and caresses and pretty presents— courted and conquered. "Haynes!" repeated Riverton, with a lingering, bitter imprecation, "that— that worm. By the Lord! when they come back I'll put him over my knee and spank him before her face."

But they were two months coming, and long before their return Riverton had thought better of it.

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8: After the Accident

ONE MAN sat upon a heap of broken reef near the face, with his broad palms supporting his chin. His thin, hollow cheeks showed, between the out-spread fingers, a sickly yellow in the candle-light. One candle in a spiked holder burned against the side of the drive. Two billies and two full crib-bags hung near on dog-hooks driven in an upright leg, and at the man's feet lay a couple of picks and a shovel. Kyley sat with his back to the face, staring with glowing, vindictive eyes into the gathered gloom down the drive, where the passage to the shaft was choked to the roof with splintered timber and fallen mullock, and where the head of a second man was dimly visible. Only the head and shoulders of this other were free; the rest of his body was hidden under the debris. The second man was thrown face downwards; across his back, pinning his arms, lay the great cap-piece, which alone seemed heavy enough to have crushed the life out of him. Beyond this the tumbled reef and splintered slabs were piled to the roof.

But the buried miner was not dead. The tough red-gum log, forced down by the mighty pressure, had ploughed its way diagonally down the side of the drive, and pinched him to the floor, stopping when the pressure of another inch must have been followed by certain and speedy death. A stout iron truck was jammed under the log beside him, torn and doubled like a cardboard box. The young man could lift his chin a few inches from the floor of the drive, and turn his face from one side to the other, but was incapable of any other movement.

Presently he spoke. His voice came with an effort, and sounded feebly shrill, like that of a very old man.

"Dick, Dick! in the name o' God, speak, man! D'ye think there's a chance fer us?"

Dick Kyley dropped his hands, and there was an expression of grim satisfaction in his gaunt face as he replied deliberately— "There's a chance for me, William. "

The buried man lifted his clay-smirched face, startled by the other's tone, and gazed eagerly at his mate, and continued gazing for fully a minute, puzzled and frightened by the incongruous levity in the face that confronted him. Then, the position becoming painful, he dropped his cheek in the wet clay again.

"What d'ye mean?" he asked anxiously. "Why only fer you?"

"Because, William, I don't think you've got a dog's show."

The reply was without a trace of sympathy; there was, in fact, a touch of malicious banter in the mincing tone of the "William." William Hether had never been anything but "Hether" or "Bill" to his shift-mate before.

Again Hether looked anxiously into Kyley's face. Its cadaverous hollows were filled with dark shadows, and the high-lights brought out the salient features in a grotesque caricature that struck Hether as simply fiendish. He turned from the sight, with a new horror in his heart.

"This ain't no time to fool a man, Dick," he said humbly. "How can there be any chance fer you if I ain't in it?"

Kyley arose, plucked the candle from the wall, and advancing close to his mate held the flame low down and showed him a small pool of water gathered upon the floor within 18 inches of his face.

"That's why," he said.

Hether understood, and a cry broke from his lips.

"Keep it back, Dick!" he gasped.

"William," said Kyley, calmly replacing the candle and resuming his former position on the reef, "you're a fool. That water's coming in from the face, as usual. The fall has dammed the gutters, and it can't get away; consequently, in less'n five hours the pool will be above your ears. And you know what that means."

"But you can build a dam around me. Get the shovel-quick! Make a dam with that loose reef an' the clay off the floor. Dick, Dick! give us a chance, for God's sake, man!"

Hether stopped short, staring at the other, who sat calmly regarding him. Presently he spoke again in a quavering whisper:

"You won't see a man drown without lendin' a hand t' help him?"

"No, I won't see it," replied Kyley, "because I'm goin' to douse this light. A candle burns up the air, an' I'll want all there is here, I reckon, before the boys reach me."

Driven almost wild with terror, a terror occasioned no less by the grim significance of Kyley's leering countenance and the brutality of the words than by the horrors of his position, Hether began to plead piteously, with tears and moanings. The pain of broken bones and the sickness of exhaustion had quite unmanned "Big Bill Hether;" but his agony did not touch the heart of Kyley, who seemed to have forgotten that death also threatened him in the delight that the young man's sufferings awakened within his breast.

"Why've you rounded on me, Dick? What 've I done— what 've I ever done?" moaned the helpless man.

"I'm not goin' to lift a finger to keep you out of hell," answered the other, "because of her, William— because of Hannah."

Bill turned his face to the light again, and once more he stared at Kyley, sharply, inquiringly, reading every line of his fateful countenance. Then a groan of despair broke from him.

"I'll go away, Kyley," he said— "true's Christ, if we get out I'll go away, an' you'll never hear of me again. Only make a dam. Quick, man, quick— it's comin'! God! this is worse than murder. Dick— "

The water, having filled the depression at the side of the drive, was now running down and forming a pool in the hollow under Hether's chin.

Kyley turned and blew out the candle. For a long time Hether continued to supplicate in the darkness, and Kyley, leaning comfortably against the face, heard the thin voice, weakening to an almost inarticulate whisper, beseeching by all that is good on earth and holy in heaven for a little grace— another poor chance of life— and answered never a word. By a painful effort the young man continued to keep his mouth above the gathering water, but gradually the torture that afflicted his extended neck became unendurable, and now in his last extremity he railed at Kyley as a murderer, and abused him with curses in weak, childish tones that were nevertheless pregnant with passion, and sounded distinctly and with terrifying emphasis in that black chamber of death.

Suddenly there was silence. Dick Kyley listened, and presently heard a bubbling sound in the water. That ceased, and all was still. He felt now that his vengeance was complete— that Hether was dead, and at that moment the fierce emotions of resentment and revenge— hunger that had possessed and upheld him departed in a breath, and left him weak and cowed. His limbs trembled, and beads of perspiration gathered about the roots of his hair and rolled coldly upon his brow and cheeks. He was thinking, too, of his own wretched case. He heard, fitfully, a distant drumming, the sound of timber being driven home, and knew that the rescue parties were working as hard as men may work, but whether theirs would be a job of hours or days he could not tell, and already he fancied he detected some taint of vitiation in the air.

Dick Kyley, sitting alone in the blackness of his prison, waiting for salvation or death, was soon the victim of an ungovernable fear, a supernatural terror entirely new to him, and the more awful for its novelty. From the moment he believed Hether dead he began to fear him. He strove with all the energy of his strong sense to drive him from his thoughts, but do what he might his mind would revert to the dread subject, and his eyes turn, staring intently into the darkness, where at times they seemed to detect a yet blacker form in the pitch-black night that filled the drive— the shape of the dead man's head. The horror grew, and with it an agonizing conviction that Hether's dead face was staring at him with dead but seeing eyes. Imagination had pictured the pallid cheeks stained with blood and clay, and the wide, accusing eyes, till the vision became a reality to him. Tortured beyond endurance, Kyley fumbled in his pocket and found a match, which he struck upon the shovel blade. As the light filled the chamber a groan of relief broke from the miner's labouring breast.

Only the back of Hether's head was visible; his face was sunk to the temple in the water. Dick extinguished the match— his last— and sat down again, only to struggle with another relay of horrors that presently arose against him.

William Hether still lived. He had discovered that by taking a deep breath and sinking his face till the forehead rested upon the clay he was enabled to allay the pain in his neck and to continue the struggle. He persisted in this course, noiselessly, for the sound of the rescuers at work had filled him with a glorious hope, and with that hope had come a fear that Kyley might be moved to murder him if he thought his rescue possible.

So another hour fled. The water in the drive, which had now found a broad level, continued to rise slowly. Kyley had lost the power of appreciating time, and sat huddled against the wall, distraught with fear and despair. Hether's face was haunting him again, standing forth visibly, threatening and awful in the tomb-like darkness. His mad fancy stretched every hour of his imprisonment into a long day, and he believed that it was his fate to be stifled by the foul gases from his mate's decomposing corpse. Even now the taint was in his nostrils. Although he was listening all the time with agonized intensity, he no longer heard the hammering of the miners beyond; his mind was too full of its unspeakable fear— he awaited the attack of the inhuman thing that his irresponsible faculties had fashioned out of the impenetrable gloom at the end of his narrow prison. At this crisis Hether called again, in a piercing voice, full of the supreme terror:—

"Help! help! Kyley, you murderer! fiend devil— "

At the first sound of the voice, Kyley sprang back against the end of the drive, and shrieked, with all the power of his lungs, again and again; and there he remained, crouched down, pressing his face into the gravel, clutching his ears, shivering and moaning.

Three hours later the rescuers broke through, and found Hether under the fall, with his head in a pool of water, dead, and Kyley squatting at the face, babbling of spectres and devils.

It is still Mr. Richard Kyley's quaint belief that he is a conspicuous figure in hell.

9: The Washerwoman of Jacker's Flat

THE EXTREME disparity in the number of male and female denizens of Jacker's Flat was a source of sore discontent to the former. That refining influence which fair women are said to exert over rude mankind was a long-felt want, as, out of a population of twelve hundred and odd, only nine were of the feminine gender. Four of the ladies were mated— a reverential regard for beautiful truth forbids us saying married— and stultified the glorifying womanly attribute to a great extent by persisting in a course of intemperance, and rarely appearing abroad excepting under the stimulus of rum. Deduct from the five of the softer sex who remain unallied, so to speak, three under the age of six, and that the malcontent of the men was a rational grievance becomes patent to the meanest understanding. It has been said that where women and children are few, men of affectionate natures lavish their surplus sentiment on the lower animals. This characteristic did not prevail on the Flat— indeed, experience has taught us that there, as elsewhere, men so circumstanced invariably cleave to the intoxicating cup and abandon themselves to the seductive wiles of euchre, crib, and Yankee-grab.

The few dogs of the camp were lean and debilitated, of a furtive habit, and noted for their agility in dodging missiles; the cats were unkempt and fearful, and much disposed to abandon civilization for the joys of a wild, free life on Mount Miamia; but there was not a pack of cards or a dice box on that flat that did not bear unmistakable traces of good handling and long attention, and "Monkey Bill," otherwise Mr. William Monk, the local publican, had no just cause to complain that the worshippers at the shrine of the god set up in his temple— "The Pick and Barrow"— were wanting in numbers or in religious zeal. However, these joys are vain and meagre substitutes for the companionship of lovely women, and small wonder that the sign-board hung out before the new tent down the creek should excite pleasurable anticipations in the susceptible breasts of the local bachelors. The sign itself, apart from its terseness and the originality of its orthography, was not an object of the deepest interest— it was merely the bottom of a candle-box, on which had been inscribed with a ball of blue, in large, irregular capitals that staggered across the board at independent angles, two words— "WASHING DID." Nor was the eloquent message which this laconic advertisement was intended to convey calculated to carry any great amount of satisfaction to the masculine soul, for, if truth must prevail, the negligent diggers seldom had any washing to be "did," as many of them, reckless in the pride of big yields, simply abandoned a "rig-out" when once its appearance called very loudly for soap and water. Others acknowledged but one limit to the time an article might be

retained in wear without washing, and that was regulated by the durability of the garment in question. Economy commended this latter usage, and it was most popular. No, the sign had a deeper, a more sacred import to the lone diggers; it announced a very welcome addition to the one-sided population, and signified— A WOMAN. What style and condition of woman she would prove was the subject of earnest speculation in Monkey Bill's canvas bar on the evening following the first appearance of the placard.

"I hope t' goodness she ain't hitched," moodily remarked a long, angular man with a phenomenal growth of red hair and whiskers, who was revelling in the luxury of twist tobacco and raw brandy— a combination which seemed to suit his taste, as the "quid" was never removed to make way for the liquor, each pull at the pannikin being preceded, however, by mechanical and voluminous expectoration. The observation was greeted with derisive laughter.

"Anyhow, you won't stand a show, Bender; I'll bet a cabbage-tree you're the ugliest man from Home!" observed Dick Treen, with refreshing candour.

"You've got no luck, old Frightful. Don't forget the time when you smiled at Martin's daughter on Bendigo and caused her horse to bolt."

"I don't, I don't, Dick," said Bender, as calmly as if he had been paid a flowery compliment; "I ain't built to please horses— and asses; but ladies is different— some of them takes to ugliness!"

And the speaker resumed his mastication with an air of supreme complacence, and passed his hand feelingly over his nose, which organ had been badly battered by a blow from a shovel in an encounter with a "jumper" at Deadman's Rush in '52, and afforded no contrast to his natural facial deformities, which were many and various.

"For my part, I'd rather she were married," observed a tall, rather handsome young fellow, conspicuous by reason of his immaculate rig-out, who was sitting on a bush table. "Young, you know, and married to a beautiful youth like Bender!"

"Well, supposin' her boss does happen t' be anythin' like Joe Bender?" replied that gentleman, evidently nettled by the other's sneer. "Supposin' he is; if he ever catches you sneakin' round his tent he'll knock yer stiff for a condemned crawler! That's what Joe Bender 'ud do, me Honourable John, an' you'd best make a note of it, case y' forget!"

The Honourable John laughed lightly, and turning his back on the group, entered into conversation with a digger who was drinking alone in the shadowy part of the tent. In common with every other man on the Flat, he believed that it was not advisable to go too far with Mr. Bender, who (like every other man with a broken nose) had quite a reputation as a "slogger." He was known to have knocked out Black Anderson after a tightly-contested

battle of twenty-seven rounds at Specimen Hill one Sunday afternoon, and was, although rather proud of his unique ugliness, prepared to instantly resent any derisive levity, especially if it emanated from a person like the Honourable John, whose well-greased Wellingtons, careful shave, and neatly arranged curls earned the contempt of four-fifths of the miners.

John Blake could not have been more scrupulous about the set of his Crimean shirt, the arrangement of his silk sash and tie, or the curl of his moustache had the township boasted a large assortment of fair maids instead of being limited to so meagre a female population. With the few women at hand, however, he was on the very best of terms. "I'm of good family, and a gentleman, by G— !" was his stock boast. The community accepted the statement in good faith, and dignified him with the title of "Honourable."

The man who was drinking alone in the dark corner was Mr. Stephen Bacon. It was a peculiarity of Mr. Bacon's that when he was drinking, in which agreeable recreation he passed most of his spare time, he loved to sit in the shanty, as far out of sight as possible, and drink alone— a particularly detestable characteristic in the eyes of the average digger. Mr. Bacon was a widower of three years' standing, and he drank, it was stated, to drown the grief occasioned by the loss of his wife. What terrible woe gnawed at his vitals and gave rise to an insatiable thirst for brandy previous to the demise of that lamented lady was never known, but that it was intense and irrevocable is proven by the knowledge that Stephen's unremitting but ineffectual endeavours to drown some secret sorrow in large quantities of ardent spirit had been the main factor in bringing his still young but broken-hearted spouse to her grave. After that sad event Mr. Bacon was able to start afresh and found his thirst on a tangible grievance. As an evidence of the enormous quantity of alcohol a settled sorrow can withstand, it may be mentioned that Steve Bacon had not exhaled a breath untainted with brandy for many years. He and "Mite" Power had "struck it" in a hole below the bend, but Monkey Bill "cleaned him out" pretty effectually before each sluicing-day came round. Every night saw him in the shanty, where he would sit and absorb grog till his hair became moist and clung to his temples in clammy rings, and the perspiration oozed from his forehead in large beads. At this stage he was wont to weep great tears of fusel-oil, and call upon his dead wife in lugubrious tones, or chummer over his sorrow with drunken dolorousness, till he was warned off by the forcible curses of the company, or unceremoniously ejected by a disgusted digger— whereupon he would stagger to his canvas residence and reassert his manliness by knocking his only child down and kicking her for falling.

Cecilia Bacon, known on the Flat as "Cis," was about seventeen, slight and pale, with very fair hair, and large, frightened eyes of a light-blue tint. Her

whole bearing was one of excessive timidity. Of a shrinking, retiring disposition, imagining herself a burden to her besotted sire, since the death of her mother her life had been a joyless one. She was not an interesting girl, never associated with the other females of the camp, and thought she had but one friend in the world— the Honourable John. He was very kind; he overcame her bashfulness, walked and talked with her, and being interested in the daughter was gracious to the father. Often and again had that sallow, fragile, awkward girl stolen into the shanty after midnight to guide the eccentric footsteps of her drunken parent to his tent, fearing he might stray into some abandoned hole and break his worthless neck if left to come home alone, and almost as often had she been heartily kicked for her pains.

The fair lady whose condescension in shedding the lustre of her charms on Jacker's flat had awakened tender anticipations in the breasts of the forlorn bachelors of that encampment by her preliminary announcement made her first public appearance on the following evening at Monk's hostelry. The usual brilliant assemblage was gathered together in the "bar" of that elegant establishment, engaged in the usual convivial pursuits, when universal attention was suddenly withdrawn from cards, dice, and brandy by the entrance of a stranger.

An apparition would not have been more startling. A coarse skirt alone betokened the stranger's sex; she wore a man's black slouch hat, which bore palpable traces of having seen long service "below," and was trimmed with a narrow leather belt; she smoked a highly-coloured meerschaum pipe, the bouquet of which eloquently testified its strength; she had on a short guernsey buttoned up the front like a coat, whose sleeves, rolled to the elbow, betrayed an arm that might have graced a navvy; her hair was cropped short, and bristled almost six feet from the floor. Fleshy, broad-shouldered, and straight as a sapling, her hands thrust into the pockets on either side of her skirt with an air of aggressive manliness, the new washerwoman strolled into the room and up to the counter, coolly oblivious of the impression she had created. In a strong, masculine voice she ordered "stout." Mr. Monk could scarcely express his sorrow— he had no stout— didn't keep it.

The lady calmly anathematized his eyes, cleverly lumped his soul, shanty, and immediate relatives in a brief but comprehensive curse, and "made it gin."

The gin was satisfactory. Then she replaced her pipe, after throwing off the "nobbler" with scientific abruptness, thrust her hands into her side pockets once more, and, lounging against the counter in a devil-may-care, intensely mannish attitude, boldly surveyed the company. Everything about the woman bespoke her manly sentiments. Those skirt-pockets were a brazen plagiarism of the refuges for idle hands in the nether habiliments of the lords of creation,

and her upper lip bore unmistakable traces of an earnest endeavour to grow a moustache; even her distorted nose seemed to suggest the pugnacious male.

Monkey Bill's patrons were astounded; they gazed at the washerwoman and at each other in grave surprise, and continued playing their hands with unwonted solemnity. Bender alone seemed capable of grasping the situation, and, after concluding the game in which he was engaged, left his seat and advanced to the new-comer with outstretched hand.

"Brummy Peters!"

"What! Bender?"

"That same."

"Well, I'm— !"

After a hearty, hail-fellow-well-met sort of greeting, Bender ventured the query:

"Well, Brummy, how's things?"

To which the lady replied that things were very slow indeed, emphasizing the assertion with an ejaculation only admissible in the pulpit, and informed Bender, in a casual way, that Peters was no more. Mr. Bender did not seem to think himself called upon to exhibit very violent grief over this sad intelligence; he merely remarked: "You and Peters weren't spliced, were you?"

One might think the palpable indelicacy of this question would have affected the lady to anger; but no, it touched only her pride.

"Spliced!" she ejaculated, and all the scorn she felt for that feminine weakness was apparent in her voice. "Devil a fear! We just chummed in."

Further conversation revealed the fact that the late Mr. Peters, whilst under the influence of blended liquors, had fallen into a puddling machine at Bendigo, a lamentable accident which was only made apparent some time later, when bones, buttons, boots, and other distinguishing features turned up in the sluice-boxes. Mr. Peters's chum, who had been accorded her mate's surname and sobriquet as a humble tribute to her superior manliness, was then thrown upon her own resources— and here she was at Monkey Bill's bar.

Mr. Bender introduced the latest acquisition to the assembled gentlemen as "Brummy Peters," insinuating, with some judicious profanity, that she was a splendid fellow, and had vanquished a reputable pugilist in her time. After which the lady took a hand at crib, and succeeded in winning several pounds, and establishing her reputation as "a good sort of a chap" before the night was spent.

Three months passed by, and Jacker's Flat still maintained its not over-numerous population. The yields, though good enough to keep its pioneers hanging on, were not sufficiently exciting to attract strangers from a distance, and if few had departed less had arrived. Amongst the former was the

Honorable John— that gentleman, "by G— ," having furled his tent by night and silently stolen away, without taking the trouble to afford his numerous creditors an opportunity of bidding him a fond farewell. Brummy Peters, by which inelegant appellation the Amazonian laundress became generally known, was a frequent visitor at Monkey Bill's establishment where she placidly puffed at her meerschaum, dashed off an occasional brandy, called down dire eternal penalties on the urbane host for omitting stout from his stock-in-trade, and engaged in various games of cards and Yankee-grab with so natural an air of manly bravado that her chosen associates at length quite overcame the diffidence that the presence of a woman had occasioned, and comported themselves with their accustomed easy freedom, no longer pausing to select their oaths with an eye to gentility or style, or being deterred by gallantry from raising a row when all didn't seem fair, square, and aboveboard a the card-table. In fact, since Brummy acted as bottle-holder for Treen, when he and Barney Ryan settled their little difference in a fifteen-round mill, and displayed her signal ability to fulfil that honourable and responsible office, the men had quite disburdened their minds of the impression that she was a woman, and now looked upon her as one of themselves, a compliment for which she was duly grateful. Certainly, Bender was frequently chaffed about his intimacy with Brummy, between him and whom there existed a friendship; but the inferences of these jokes were so preposterous, and the jokers themselves were palpably so cognizant of the absurdity, that Mr. Bender received the chaff with the best grace. Mrs. Peters did not consort with the others of her sex at the camp, but in the unwholesome-looking daughter of Mr. Stephen Bacon she displayed a sort of fraternal interest, which moved her to tow that lugubrious inebriate from the shanty to his tent on divers occasions in a manner at once unceremonious and emphatic.

The washerwoman had adorned the locality with her rather massive charms for the space of about ten months, when one dark night, deterred by the rain from making her usual visit to the "Pick and Barrow," as she sat on an inverted tub in her cosy tent, her hands deep in her side-pockets, her back against the bunk, her feet thrust out towards the fire that raged up the small sod chimney, and the inevitable meerschaum in her lips (manly even in her solitude), a light, quick step was heard without, the flap of the tent was drawn aside, and Cecilia Bacon, whiter, more wretchedly wobegone and desolate-looking a thousand times than was her wont— and she was white and wobegone at her best— staggered into the tent. Her head was bare, her thin flaxen hair, sopping wet, clung to her face and neck; and the rain dripped from the poor skirt that was drawn up to shield a tiny object feebly wailing at her breast.

Brummy started up, her beloved meerschaum, the object of a year's tender solicitude, fell, unheeded, and was broken on the clay floor. She caught the reeling girl in her arms, and laid her on the bunk, tenderly took the babe from the wet skirt, wrapped dry things of her own about the feeble atom of humanity, and laid it on a possum rug by the fire. After which she turned her attention to the young woman, and without a word commenced to divest her of her soddened garments and dry her reeking hair. Brummy was a woman now, with all a good woman's gentleness, compassion, and quick perception. She showed neither surprise nor curiosity, but proceeded quietly and quickly with her work, and when the girl, revived by the warmth and the spirit that was forced between her lips, began to moan and cry, she soothed her with pitiful words in a soft, low voice that proved how vain had been the long years of wild, rough life and harsh associations to embitter the soul within.

Cecilia's story was soon told. The Honourable John was the father of her child. He had deserted her without a consideration, without a word. After the birth, fearful of meeting her father, she had left her tent, intending to crawl to the creek and drown herself and her child; but when the black waters lay at her feet she had not the courage to take the leap, and, after wandering about the bush in the wind and rain, distracted with misery and fear, she sought the washerwoman's tent. "Because," she said, "you saved me from him when you could." And, starting up, she continued wildly: "He will kill me! I am sure of it! My father will kill me when he knows!"

"No, no," murmured the woman, compassionately "Don't you fear. I will watch you."

"You do not know him," hoarsely whispered the young mother. "You do not know how terrible he is at times. He has threatened me with a pick over and over. He will do it now. Hadn't I far better have gone into the creek with my baby? My blood would not have been on my father's head then, but on his— its father's. Father is drinking again, and he will kill me!"

"Hush! hush! and rest now. If you can, go back to your tent early in the morning. Your father is drinking; he will notice nothing— tell him nothing. Leave your baby with me; I will care for it. Nobody will kill me!" And Mrs. Peters squared her great shoulders, and thrust her hands into her pockets, with her old assumption of manliness. "No one will kill me, I think!"

The habitue's of the "Pick and Barrow" were astounded, mystified, amazed, and virtuously indignant when on the night following the incidents related above Dick Treen entered Monk's bar with the intelligence that "Brummy Peters had got a kid!"

The shock conveyed by the news was general, and confounded the miners. They gazed open-mouthed and dumb. A hurt and resentful feeling succeeded.

They had been imposed upon— their confidence had been outraged. To think that Brummy Peters, who had overawed them with her muscle and manly assurance and hoodwinked them with side-pockets and a billycock hat, was as frail as the frailest of her sex— a weak, wayward woman after all! It was a violation of all their finest sentiments. "And she threw me, Cumberland and Durham style, best three out of five!" murmured a small Geordie in a bated whisper, only now feeling the full force of his degradation. Strangely enough, all eyes focussed on Mr. Joseph Bender, who blushed like a school-girl under the concerted gaze, and toyed uneasily with his dislocated nose.

Gradually the look of consternation on the faces of the assemblage gave place to a broad grin, which presently extended to a wild guffaw, and thirty accusing fingers were pointed at the now furious Bender.

"Here, look here, you fellers!" he roared, dashing his glass upon the floor and drawing his sleeves back from his great, knotted fist. "This is too thunderin' stiff, y' know! The first man ez says I've anythin' t' do with that youngster 'll get smashed! Now, notice!"

Nobody spoke, but everybody laughed, and the accusing fingers still pointed. Mr. Bender lingered for a moment on the point of running amok and wreaking his vengeance on all and sundry, but thought better of it, pulled his hat over his eyes, and strode out, his soul a prey to angry passions and the pangs of injured innocence.

Mrs. Peters fed the child by artificial means; she procured a cunningly-designed bottle and tubes, and went regularly to the station homestead, at the foot of Miamia, for milk. The diggers regarded this conduct with an unfavourable eye; they supposed it to be another display of anti-feminine sentiment, and nothing that Brummy might do now could make them forget that she was a woman— she had forfeited all her rights as a man and a brother irretrievably. She visited the shanty occasionally, and endeavoured to maintain her old footing, but the men preserved a studied coolness, and Curly Hunt even went so far as to suggest that she be summarily ejected, but that perky little individual was brought to a sudden repentance by being knocked over a bench and thrown bodily through the calico window by the ireful washerwoman.

Brummy appeared to be very fond of the child, but Bender was frequently accused of displaying a criminal lack of parental affection. Since the arrival of the little stranger the demeanour of this gentleman had undergone a painful change. He had grown moody and furtive; the banter of his companions drove him furious; to be regarded as the father of Brummy's child was bitter gall. Given any other woman, and he might have accepted the imputation with some complacency, but Brummy— Brummy Peters, with her side-pockets,

ready fist, and strong meerschaum— it was too much. He determined to vindicate his character and clear his name of the tender impeachment at any cost. With this object in view he developed amateur-detective proclivities, and kept a zealous eye on the laundry.

The baby was just a month old when one night the homely Mr. Bender burst into the "Pick and Barrow" (which, by the way, he had avoided of late), his face radiant, and the ejaculation of an ancient philosopher on his lips.

"Eureka! I've struck it, boys!" he cried triumphantly.

"What?— the reef?" exclaimed the men with one voice— there having been some prospecting for a reef on the high ground.

"Reef be d— ! No; proofs that you fellers 're a lot of blamed asses as 've been barkin' up th' wrong tree!" The representation of a lot of asses barking up a tree was certainly not a strikingly felicitous illustration, but Bender was too excited to be precise in small matters. He continued:

"See here, with all yer infernal cleverness, that kid ain't Brummy's after all."

"Not Brummy's!"— and great excitement.

"No, 'taint. It's his daughter's!"

But, despite Bender's circumspection, Mr. Bacon had heard, and he advanced into the light, the big tears stealing down his cheeks and his favourite look of unutterable woe overspreading his bloated face.

"Whose child did you say, Mr. Bender, sir?" he queried, in tones of deep bathos.

"Nobody's! Go to blazes, snufflebuster! This ain't no business of yours."

Stephen Bacon retired again to his shades to indulge his lachrymose propensities and sorrow over his brandy, and Bender related in a low voice how by keeping an eye on Brummy's establishment, noting Cis's frequent visits, and putting this and that together, he had arrived at the conclusion that was to prove him innocent of the delicate peccadillo insinuated against him.

Mr. Bacon's settled sorrow was very distressing that night, and he was subsequently ejected amidst a shower of tears, dolefully calling upon his late lamented wife to come back and comfort his declining years; but that lady, doubtless retaining a lively remembrance of the weight of his fist and the force of his foot, failed to respond.

Next morning being Sunday, an off day, quite a number of the miners, who were indulging in a game of quoits, and others who were sunning themselves and smoking on the grass, indolent and uninterested spectators, were disturbed by sounds of a row at the tent of their laundress, and as the public interest of the Flat centred for the time in that domicile, the loungers leisurely arose, the contestants dropped their quoits, and all strolled across to the tent. Mrs. Peters was standing with her back to the entrance, her lips were tightly

compressed, and there was an awed, sorrowful expression in her face that the men had never seen there before. She held the baby in her arms, in quite a matronly fashion, and calmly faced Mr. Stephen Bacon, who was bordering on sobriety, and whose settled sorrow was subordinated for the time to unreasoning rage.

"You've got my girl here!" he yelled, gracefully turning the sentence with several euphonious curses, and brandishing the pick-handle he held in his hand.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Peters, quietly; "she's in the tent."

"Well, I want her. D— n you! I want her. I've 'eard your little game. Its all up! She got away from me last night, but I'll have her now!"

"She got further away than you think, Steve Bacon; but you can have her."

"You don't want t' see no girl with that in yer fist," said Bender, who had come up with the others, snatching the pick-handle from his grasp. "And you want t' be carm, y' know, 'cause if you hurt yer girl when I'm near I'll spread y' out quick."

"He can't hurt her," added Brummy. "Come in. Don't go away, boys; she'd like to see y' all. Jest come up and look in."

The men who had turned away, thinking the girl would doubly feel her shame if upbraided in their presence, startled by the tone in which the request was made, went back. Brummy held the flap of the tent aside, and they all looked in.

"Great God! Dead!"

Yes, the pale, slight, awkward girl, scarcely paler in death, her large, light-blue eyes fixed with the frightened expression that had characterized them in life, lay dead upon Brummy's bunk, and from the spare flaxen hair, and the long thin hand, and the points of her clothing, hanging over the side, pools of water had dripped to the floor.

"Yes, she's dead!" said Mrs. Peters, the tears on her lashes belying her harsh tones. "Drowned! I found her body in the shallow water near the bank when I went to the dam this morning. This is your work, Joe Bender."

"No! No! For the Lord's sake don't say that!"

"You told her story at Monkey Bill's last night— he heard you. That snivelling cur was a devil to her. She said he would kill her if he ever knew— he intended to last night, but she got away and took the job off his hands."

Steve Bacon, shocked by the unexpected sight, had fallen into a crouching position in the corner. He straightened himself now.

"And her child?" he muttered, pointing towards the dead girl.

"He is mine. She gave him to me, and I will keep him." And the muscular arms of the washerwoman folded the tiny mite closer to her breast.

On the Monday evening following Brummy Peters was waited on by a deputation. A very respectful deputation it was, and wished "to signerfy that the fellers all voted her a brick, an' hoped how she'd pocket that trifle to help her with the youngster, an' say nothin'." That trifle was a roll of notes of all sorts and sizes surrounding a five-ounce nugget, the biggest ever found on the rush, and the contribution of the Geordie. Mrs. Peters, in responding, accepted the gift, and said she knew "the boys was real grit," and promised to make a man of the little chap on her bosom if she could. And right royally she fullfilled her promise; it would astonish you if only you knew who is the foster-son of the washerwoman of Jacker's Flat.

10: Spicer's Courtship

SPICER was a selector. Why he chose to be a selector rather than enjoy comparative ease and affluence as a corporation day labourer or a wharf-hand or navvy is inexplicable. He had taken to the wilderness, built his smart bark hut in the centre of an apparently impenetrable forest, and was now actively engaged eating his way out again. Along the bank of the trickling creek he had cleared an acre or so where a few fruit trees flourished and a methodical little vegetable garden looked green and encouraging. Dick Spicer was a methodical man; what he did he did well, and he was always doing. Dick was small, and he looked puny lifting his pigmy axe to those mighty gums, and patiently hewing splinters out of the compact bush. Having little or nothing to say to his scattered neighbours, he exchanged small talk with his hens, and favoured Griffin, the low-comedy dog-of-all-work, with his opinion of things.

Mr. Spicer was a bachelor, approaching 50, wiry, leathery, deliberative, and very diffident in company. But, despite his apparent uneasiness when chance threw him into the society of females, Dick was looking about for a wife. The stillness of the long evenings and the solitary Sundays implanted a great yearning for the companionship of a good wife in his lonely heart. In looking about the selector's view was very limited. There was not an unmarried woman of suitable years within a radius of twelve miles. Of all the approachable females, he admired Mrs. Clinton the most, and his only hope lay in the fact that Clinton was in feeble health and reported to be sustaining life precariously with one lung.

Clinton held a block about a mile up the creek, and Spicer paid him occasional abrupt and unceremonious visits there. Sometimes he would lean against a door-jamb, with not more than his head inside, and pass a few remarks relative to nothing in particular, in an irresponsible sort of way; but more frequently he just stood about outside, and criticised the poultry in audible soliloquy, or reflected aloud upon Clinton's ridiculous notions about dairy work and vegetable-growing. However, he always displayed a proper neighbourly concern in inquiring after Clinton's health before leaving.

"Y'ain't feelin' no better, I s'pose?" he would ask, with an appearance of anxious interest that quite touched the sick man.

Clinton was always feeling "pretty bad." He said as much in his dull, heavy manner, and Dick would go off to indulge in contemplation, and consult his dog.

Spicer did not wish Clinton to die, he did not want to hurry him up; he was a patient, dispassionate man, and the possibility of his neighbour's early

demise entered into his calculations merely as a probable circumstance which, however regrettable, could not reasonably be overlooked.

Clinton substantiated predictions, and obligingly died within a reasonable time, and Dick rode solemnly in the funeral cortege, behind the drays, on a lame cart-horse borrowed from Canty for the occasion.

After the funeral he looked in upon the widow and, feeling inspired to say something consolatory and encouraging, expressed his belief that she wouldn't mourn much about Peter.

"'Tain't worth while," he said.

Dick's command of language was only sufficient to enable him to say the thing he meant once in a dozen tries, and on this occasion he was conscious the moment he had spoken that the sentiment expressed was hardly appropriate to the occasion. Before he could frame an apology the disconsolate widow attacked him with a spear-grass broom and stormed him out of the house. He walked home thoughtfully, afflicted with a nettle-rash and a vague idea that perhaps he had not made an altogether satisfactory beginning.

But Spicer was not cast down. He had resolved upon a plan of courtship, and the object of his first manoeuvre was to break his intentions gently to the widow. This he thought to accomplish by hanging round the house a good deal. He would haunt her selection in the cool of the evening, or, in his more audacious moments, perch himself on the chock-and-log fence running by the side of the house, and whistle an unmelodious and windy jig, which was intended to convey some idea of his airy nonchalance and peace of mind.

It was a long time before Dick progressed from the fence to the wood-heap, and meanwhile the widow had not seemed to pay any particular attention to his movements. He sometimes addressed her with a portentous truth bearing upon the dieting of laying hens, or the proper handling of cows, or the medical treatment of ailing chickens; but usually satisfied himself with a significant grin and a queer twist of the head that was his idea of sheer playfulness and waggery. The neighbours came to notice him over-looking the selection or perched on the fence supervising the weather and things generally, and predicted that there would be "a marryin'" up the creek presently.

Presently! Spicer did nothing hastily, nothing to lead anybody to believe that he had not all eternity to come and go on. He never considered the flight of time, and had made many calculations that carried him on to the end of the next century without discovering any incongruity.

He did arrive at the wood-heap eventually, though. Mrs. Clinton's boy John was too young to wield an axe with any effect, and one afternoon Dick lounged

over to the logs, took up the axe, and examined it with an air of abstraction. He weighed it carefully in his hand, and satisfied his curiosity by trying it on a log. When he had chopped about half a ton of wood he appeared satisfied that it was a pretty good axe. That evening he chuckled all the way up the creek, and all the time it took to prepare his tea, and towards bed-time confided to Griffin, with more chuckles, his opinion that it was "'bout's good 's done."

"She can't go back on that," he said with assurance.

But Spicer lingered at this stage for a long time; he cut all the wood the widow needed, and did other little things about the selection, and often sat on the fence, as usual, and gradually grew to be quite at home there. The widow accepted his services now as a matter of course, and though she was often betrayed into expressions of great impatience, Dick remained oblivious, and worked out his courtship in his own ponderous way.

His next step towards strengthening his position was when he took it upon himself to put several palings on the roof of Mrs. Clinton's house. This was a decided advance, and when the buxom little woman thanked him, his odd screw of the face and sidelong nod clearly conveyed the impression that he was beginning to regard himself as a "perfect devil amongst the women." There was more chuckling that evening, and further confidences for the dog. After this Spicer ceased working seriously on his own selection, and slowly extended his sphere at the widow's. He did some gardening, and repaired the fences, and dictated improvements, but it was not till eighteen months after Clinton's death that he made his great stroke. It was on Sunday afternoon that Dick discovered Mrs. Clinton in hot pursuit of the boy John, with one shoe in her hand and one on her foot. John was in active rebellion, and yelling his contempt for the maternal authority. Spicer rose to the occasion. He secured boy John, took off his belt, and proceeded to strap the unfilial youth— to give him a grave, judicious, and fatherly larruping— under the eye of his mother. Then the selector drew off to consider and weigh the important step he had taken, with the result that, half an hour after, he hung his head in at the kitchen door, and said abruptly:

"Treaser, when's it to be?"

"Meanin' which?" asked the unconscious widow.

"Meanin' marryin'."

The widow thought for a moment, and said, just as if she were contemplating the sale of a few eggs:

"This day month'll suit me."

"Done," said Spicer.

Then he felt called upon to make some kind of a demonstration, and edged up to Mrs. Clinton in a fidgeting sort of way, and when near enough made as if to kiss her, paused half-way in doubt, and then didn't.

"The man's a fool," said the stout little widow composedly.

They were married though, under conditions of great secrecy, at the parson's house in the township, with the blinds down. It was with great difficulty Dick was convinced of the necessity of witnesses.

11: A Zealot in Labour

THE CREEK was hacked and mangled out of all semblance to a sylvan rivulet.

The ruin effected looked like the work of many men. The muddy, yellow stream had been diverted from its course several times within half a mile, and all along the banks were torn down, great cuttings made, piles of gravel heaped up, dams built, and races dug. But the ravisher was there— a lone man, gouging his way into a bank at the head of the flat where it met the hill, looking a mere midge amongst the destruction he had wrought with his two good hands.

"Humpy" Bannon was puny and weazened and old; he had a hump between his shoulders, and no intelligence to speak of, but he had the spirit of a little red ant, magnified to suit his size. He loved labour, and he had chosen Grim Creek as his vineyard. From a miner's point of view Bannon was the discoverer of Grim Creek. He it was who prospected it and found gold in it, and he was exceedingly proud of his field, although it was a starvation hole at the best, and rewarded him for his tremendous labours— digging, shovelling, puddling, cradling, wading in water, and grubbing in sludge— with a few wretched pennyweights where ounces would have been poor pay. But Humpy never thought of leaving. Wet days and fine found him, smeared with clays of many colours, struggling in a wet shaft or delving at the banks, full of enthusiasm, without resource, without horse sense, but all grit.

"Leave the creek?" he would say in answer to the advice of casual visitors. "Why, where'd I go ter?"

"Well, there's some good gold gettin' at Black Cap, an' I hear about somethin' worth prospectin' ten miles out by Double-U Hill."

"No fear! you don't catch me leavin' the creek. Why, some o' them minin' sharks from the city would be down here an' jump the claim afore I'd bin gone a week."

"Jump this show, Humpy! Why, there is not gold enough in a mile of it to buy a peanut."

Bannon couldn't restrain his temper when the creek— his creek— was disparaged, and at this point always became incoherent between extravagant predictions as to the fabulous richness of the wash he was going to cut presently and insulting reflections upon the intelligence of the maligner, and he would fall to working again more fiercely than ever, jigging his old head the while, and chummering bitterly.

How he did graft! Little, and skinny, and aged, and ill-fed as he was, he cheerfully faced mountains of labour, and wore them down by sheer pertinacity— shifted them by faith and works. What wonders of toil can one

determined man perform in a year! To know you must see the man struggling amongst the evidences of it, with the work of his hands piled up about him, and the man's sole master must be a belief, sane or otherwise.

Humpy's faith in Grim Creek was transcendent. That the creek gave him no justification mattered not a scrap. He lived in a little bark hut, comfortless as a mia-mia, on nothing in particular; he dressed at work in a worn shirt, patched extravagantly, and deplorable trousers and boots, and he wound lengths of sugee about his shins. His hat, a battered boxer, a gift from a sympathetic selector, had a big hole fore and aft— driven to extremes, he had once run a handle through it, and used it for a ladle when cradling— and the whole costume was cemented and frescoed with the grit and clay of the unspeakable creek.

The old man never had a mate— he never wanted one. He designed all sorts of hare-brained, unworkable contrivances in the shape of dumb-waiters, and cranks, and feed-pipes, and sluices, to overcome the difficulties that hamper a lone hand, but through disappointments and dangers and endless tribulation he struggled on, and turned up regularly every Saturday afternoon at the log store on the Piper road with his pathetic little packet of gold and his long familiar story of the good day that was coming for Grim Creek and the surrounding district when he finally "got on to it."

A few of the farmers and selectors in the district, thinking that possibly, by reason of an unlooked-for contingency, Humpy might some day "get on to it" and boom the place a bit, helped with gifts of food and old clothes that to him were as good as new. One or two, from pure wooden-headed good nature, visited him at times, especially on Sundays, and sat with him in the sun or in his smoky hut, and let him talk to them by the hour about his creek. Next to grafting in the creek like a tiger, nothing pleased Humpy better than to prattle about his work, and invent, and lie, and rhapsodize to a sympathetic audience.

Tom Hughes was the old digger's best friend. He had secured a selection in the locality of Grim Creek within the last six months, built a hut upon it, and settled down to take life as easily as a selector can who observes the covenants. Hughes was a hatter— a big, hairy man, physically slow, mentally alert, with a golden faculty of extracting amusement out of anything and everything, from the capers of his waddling terrier pup or the solicitude of a motherly hen to the foibles of his fellows. Hughes enjoyed Humpy Bannon enormously. He cultivated him. He would sit and study him by the hour, ponderous and apparently as grave as a fat frog between meals, but with a soul full of laughter. Humpy reminded him of an ant that he had once seen attempt to shift Mount Macedon. The ant thought the mount obstructed its view, or felt that it had a call; anyhow, Tom kept track of the insect for a week

and neglected his duties to watch progress, and when he left the ant was still going strongly. Now, here was this other midge ripping up the face of nature and tearing at the bowels of the earth after something he didn't really want and wouldn't know how to appreciate. Wifeless, childless, without a taste superior to mutton and bread or an aspiration above the puddling tub, and with very few years of life before him, he worked from daylight to dusk, moving mountains, and grew radiant describing the treasure he must win some day. Yet ten shillings a week would have satisfied his needs, twelve would have embarrassed him with riches.

Walking along the creek one day Hughes came upon the old man clambering out of a prospecting hole on a rise. He was dripping wet, and coated with mud; clay was in his hair and his ears, and the dirty water ran from him as he stood. Humpy was too busy for conversation; he seized the windlass handle and began hauling with terrific energy. There were two buckets on the rope— one a kerosene tin, the other an ordinary water bucket. Humpy landed and emptied these, and then, lowering the rope into the shaft again, began to fish about. Presently he hooked another bucket and brought it to the surface. After fishing once more he landed a nail keg. Then he proceeded to let himself down again, sliding on the rope.

"What's the little game, old man?" asked Hughes as the dripping head disappeared.

"After a bit o' wash here. Tremenjis rich, I think," answered Bannon up the shaft.

"But it's too wet; you'll never be able to bottom, workin' her alone."

"Bet I will, though!"

Further comment was deferred by the pit-pit of the old man's pick in the wet hole. Tom Hughes hooked the nail keg, and put in an hour or so at the windlass, and was rewarded later with Humpy's confidence. As usual, the little man was on the eve of a discovery that was going to revolutionize the district, and bring a big town humming about their ears on Grim Creek in less than no time. Hughes was a better miner than old Bannon, and thought the latter was fighting after a vain thing, but he offered no advice, understanding that it would be wasted, and remembering that it was Humpy's policy to go and find out for himself at whatever cost of sweat and patience.

Humpy did bottom that hole, and scraped up a prospect that promised about ten "weights " to the load to a sanguine man, but the water was up within three feet of the surface next morning, and eight hours' vigorous baling had no appreciable effect. The claim could not be worked without a diving-suit and apparatus.

So Humpy went apart and thought. He wasted little time in speculation, and presently took a bee-line from his shaft to the foot of the rise, 250 yards off, and commenced an open cutting. His idea was to carry this narrow cutting into the hill on a level as long as he could throw the dirt, and then, when the sides became too high, to tunnel to the shaft, and so drain the ground he wished to work. This represented about a year's labour to an average man working decent hours and in moderation. It was an utterly fatuous and foolhardy undertaking; as far as it was possible to judge, the ground would not pay for the working, let alone compensate for this gigantic "dead horse;" but Bannon did not calculate— he worked. On the occasion of Hughes's next visit he found Humpy pegging away industriously in his cutting. He had covered a good distance in the shallow ground.

"Well, old party, what're you coursin' after now?" asked Tom.

Humpy explained between blows.

"Gee-rusalem, but you do lick 'ell an' all!"

Tom proceeded to explain the difficulties of the job, and the ridiculousness of it; but the digger's under-hand pick was going busily all the time, and at last Hughes seated himself upon a log and overlooked the toiler in silent enjoyment of his wonderful courage, his dunderheadedness, and the comical little ape-like figure and quaint tricks and turns of the man.

Humpy persisted, and in the weeks wore by his cutting extended and deepened, and at length he was forced to take on another contract. It was necessary to get the water away. He felled trees, and split palings, and laid down a box drain all along the cutting— a wonderful drain, representing much time and trouble. He timbered his job where timber was needed, and continued as before eating his way into the hill, and as he progressed his pride in his work increased. The cutting was trim and true; Humpy bestowed the most loving care upon it, and Tom Hughes brought all the strangers he came across to inspect and admire it as the one spectacle of Grim Creek, and to gaze upon Humpy and wonder over him. And whilst Tom stood aloft eulogizing the digger with something of the air of a showman, and amiably explaining his humours and eccentricities for the pleasure of these strangers, Humpy hammered away eagerly on the job below.

"He ain't got common-sense about minin'," Hughes would say; "have you, old man?"

Humpy, with his pick driven to the eye in the wall before him, would turn up his puckered, tanned, hairy face with the aspect of a venerable mandril, and damn his friend— hide, bones, and soul— as the selector went on:—

"But in a tunnel or a drive he'd work any man I ever knew stone-blind inside a week. Wouldn't you, Humpy?"

More profanity from below.

"See, he's built for it. Them shoulders was built fer pokin' round in low black drives an' muddy tunnels, but he's wasted fer want of horse sense. He's a blessed steam-engine whirling away like blazes, but doin' nothin' that matters a hang. Look at him! He's the only man in Australia that likes work— he'd rather be workin' than drinkin'— an' he's only happy when he's clayed up to the ears and sweatin' quarts."

Sometimes a visitor dropped Humpy a half-crown or a shilling, and often a settler or farmer gave him help; but for all that he was compelled to leave his cutting now and again and go fossicking in the creek for a pennyweight or two, and then he was given over to a great discontent. Whilst he was working in the cutting it preserved its spick-and-span appearance; when he was away dead leaves accumulated in it, and Monaghan's sheep sometimes destroyed the symmetry of its edges, and that affected Humpy as dirt and litter about a room irritate a good housewife.

But as time passed the great work progressed, and at length the tunnel had been opened out, and was being driven towards the shaft. It was the most elegant of tunnels, with a beautiful entrance, and carefully squared throughout, and it went in and in until at length, when Humpy was within a week of his goal, there came jangling up the creek one day a mounted policeman. The officer of the law examined Bannon's hut carefully, and tossed things about and turned the place upside down with the placid insolence with which power endows most men; and then he rode to Humpy's cutting, called the little man into the light of day, handcuffed him, and led him off.

The charge was sheep-stealing. There was no doubt of Bannon's guilt: one skin with the brand on it was found doing service as a rug on his bunk another, quite fresh, was tacked up in his shed; and the best part of a fine lamb was rescued from his pickling-tub, and produced in court. The spirit of the early squatter still survives in the particular and express abomination of sheep-stealing manifested by our virtuous and humane judges. The sentence was two years.

Tom Hughes tried hard to preserve Humpy's cutting from destruction, and kept a careful eye on his hut, but, walking down the creek one day twenty months later, he came upon the little old digger standing surveying the ruins of his great work. The sides of the cutting had tumbled in, the tunnel was down, and the drained ground was worked out. Humpy was smaller-looking and more shrunken, and ten years seemed to have been added to his age; he was bent nearly double, and was bleached a deadly dough-colour; his limbs trembled as he stood, and he snivelled miserably like a boy. No greeting passed between the two men.

"'Twas three fellers from Melbourne done it," said Hughes, indicating the cuttings.

"Damn 'em!" snapped Bannon.

"I tried hard to stop 'em," continued the selector. "I explained it was your job; I argued, an' pleaded, an' preached, but 'twasn't no good."

Tom had also fought the intruders, singly and in a bunch, and had been severely manhandled for his kindness and consideration, but he did not explain this.

"Hows'mever, wasn't worth a cuss," he added eagerly. "They skursly knocked out tucker, an' only hung on jest from pure villainy."

This was a lie: the young men had done fairly well out of Humpy's claim, and had taken to town with them when they left sufficient gold to run a month-long "bender" of the most virulent and dazzling description.

"Damn 'em!" said Humpy again.

"Better track up to yer hut, old man," Hughes said. "You'll find it in order. You can spell-oh till you pick up a bit, an' then you can get down to graft. You'll be all right, you know."

"Yes, yes," grasped Bannon with a feeble return of his old fire, "there's somethin' above the fork I'm goin' after. I'll have to turn the creek. B'lieve there's some ten-ounce stuff there."

Hughes had to lead him to his hut, and attend to him for a few days, but presently Humpy was out and about again, with pick and shovel, pottering weakly here and there. Once Tom found him struggling to clean out the old cutting. By-and-by he started making great raids upon the hills, digging aimless holes, and throwing up heaps of dirt anywhere. Two or three times he was discovered lying helplessly by his work. At length the same policeman came trotting up the gully again, and once more Humpy Bannon was led away. This time he did not come back. He finished his days performing extraordinary feats of labour with a little wooden shovel at Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum, destroyed in mind and body by eighteen months of comparative peace and rest and comfort in Her Majesty's gaol.

The End