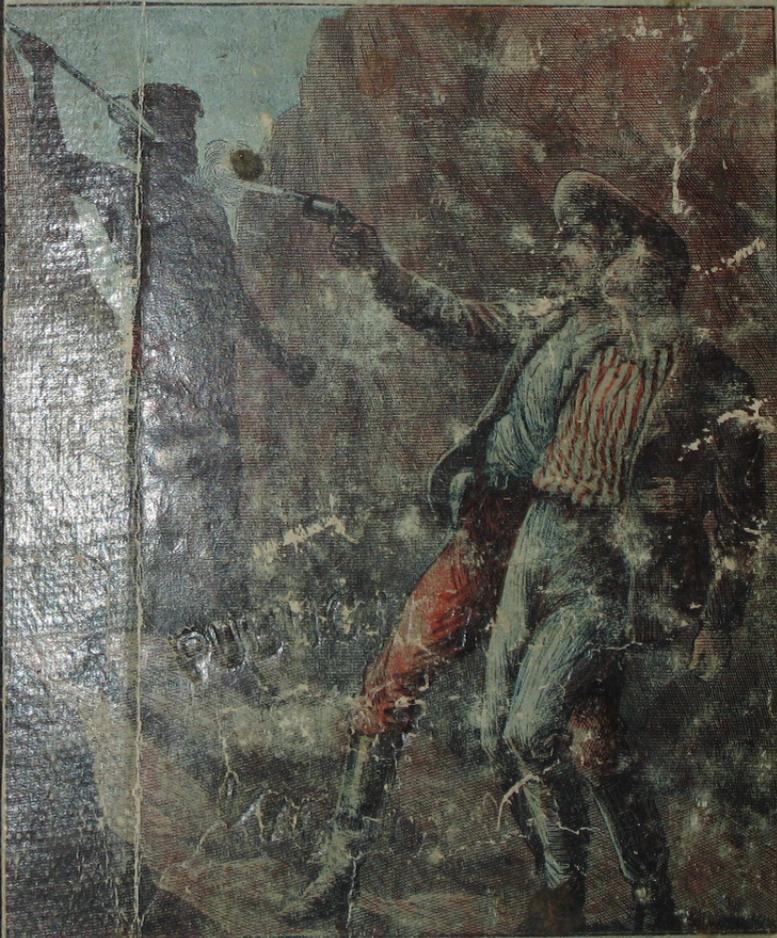


THE
VALLEY
COUNCIL

BY PERCY CLARKE

Standard Novels
Low's

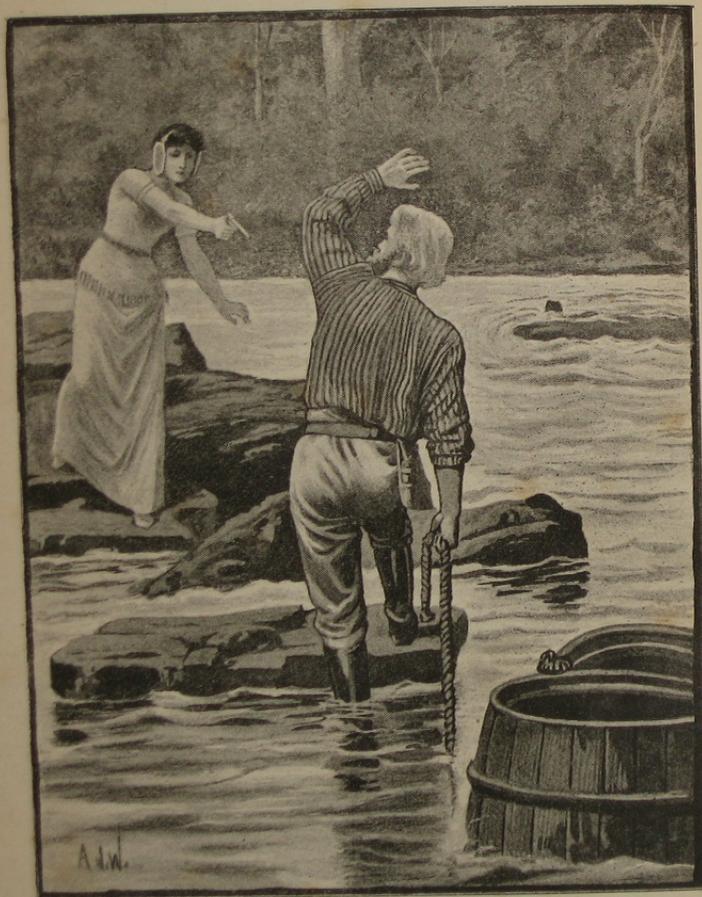


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THE
VALLEY
COUNCIL

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Frontispiece

HIMETOA AT THE WHIRLPOOL.

THE VALLEY COUNCIL

OR LEAVES FROM

THE JOURNAL OF THOMAS BATEMAN

OF

CANBELEGO STATION, N.S.W.

EDITED BY

PERCY CLARKE, F.R.S.

OF THE

THE AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

1891

ILLUSTRATED

LONDON

JOHN BARNES, 11, MARK LANE & COMPANY

PRINTED

AT THE PRESS OF

THE AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY, 11, MARK LANE, E.C.

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FETTER LANE, FLEET STREET, E.C.

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410598

J Blackham
Bay Street
North Brighton

PREFACE.

Letter from the Editor to the Author.

Cannon Hall, Hampstead,
August, 1891.

MY DEAR TOM,

LITTLE did either you or I think, when years ago together we chased emus and kangaroos over the Canbelego paddocks, or yarded-up brumbies or scrubbers from the back districts, that you would some day be an author, and I your editor. Truly *tempora mutantur*!

At first I could have wished you at the bottom of the deep blue sea for sending me a mass of notes and diaries to arrange and edit; for, to tell you the truth, dear Tom, you were a better hand at branding cattle, or cracking a stock-whip, than at writing. But it is only fair to tell you that I very soon became interested, nay, quite excited to learn the end of your adventures.

I am, however, not a little exercised in my mind whether I ought to pledge my word for the veracity of your narrative. So I have taken counsel's advice on the point, and am told that you cannot reasonably expect me to be your guarantor as well as your editor. The fee doesn't run to it, my dear Tom, and I have my private opinions on the matter which were better unsaid. I will not specify what part of your story appears to me—let us say—improbable, lest I might fall into the error of the sailor's mother, who, though she believed in Pharaoh's chariot wheels being brought up by the ship's anchor in the Red Sea, would have none of the flying-fish.

I certainly always thought you truthful; but, at the risk of seeming hypercritical, I feel I ought to tell you a story, told me the other day: A certain young man sought the hand of a lovely girl from her stern parent; when asked if he really loved her, the young man deliberately replied: "Love her? Why! for one glance from her corruscating eyes, I would journey the world over on bare knees! For one smile from her ruby lips, I would dash myself from yonder cliff, and fall a mangled corpse at her feet!" "Enough!" replied the father: "Young man, there's only room in our family for one accomplished liar, and I flatter myself the place is filled already."

Now, you can hardly imagine, dear Tom, with what relief I read in the finishing pages of your Journal, that your daughter Agnes was married, for I can't help thinking that in your family also "the place is filled already."

Having relieved my conscience, I will tell you that I have had no little pleasure in editing your Journal; and why? Because I have an idea that it will give pleasure and profit to young and old, one and all. In a few months you will doubtless be able to tell me whether my idea is far-fetched.

Yours faithfully
Percey Clarke

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J. Mackham
Bay Street
North Brighton

THE VALLEY COUNCIL:

OR,

LEAVES FROM THE JOURNAL OF THOMAS BATEMAN .

CHAPTER I.

THE MURGABA MYSTERY.

Sunday, April 3rd, 1887.

Of all the faddists in agricultural walks or pastoral runs, commend me to a sugar-planter as a head and shoulders above his fellows, and to Cousin Jeremy as *primus inter pares*.

There's something in the odour of m'gass which seems to develop the hidden germs of excessive enterprise; for when, ten years ago, Jeremy owned Bullungoola Station, away in Victoria, a more conservative sheep-owner was not to be found in the colony. He deemed it almost an intrusion upon the methods of Providence to make tanks and build dams for water storage against dry seasons, but as soon as he was transplanted and sniffed the air of a sugar-mill, the disease within him—long dormant—seemed to work out.

Like the patient who suffers from trichinosis, while the distemper raged its fiercest, he was, not to put a fine point upon it, uncomfortable, and was in similar danger of dissolution—pecuniary, I mean, not physical.

So far are the altered conditions of his life provocative of that feverish genius of enterprise, that he has, *mirabile dictu*,

given birth and publicity to an invention whereby sugar ratoons can be planted, cut, and carried without white or black labour. Now the wildest flight of his imagination in his palmy squatting days, was embodied in a remark he once made, when we were counting sheep out of a fold: "Why not reckon by threes," said he, "instead of twos?"

They tell me he is now going to run for Legislature for his district; so I suppose he has thrown his conscience, as he has his lethargy, to the winds. Legislature! Now can any one conceive a greater moral degradation than to be a member of Assembly or Council? You are elected or nominated for a purpose which is, as a rule, diametrically opposed to your own interests, and you have to swallow principles remarkable only for their want of backbone. If you come in "on a ticket," you have either to carry it out or not; and I know not whether he is the greater scamp who acts against his own firmly-rooted beliefs, or he who disregards his pledges. Then, again, you address Jones of Poona, or Macintosh of Warrabungles, as your honourable friend, when you know, or shrewdly may guess, that the poor man, though flawless up to date of election, is hypocritically arguing for the immense advantages which will accrue to the community by a projected railway—*through the heart of his own property.*

* * * * *

Sunday, April 10th, 1887.

Sundays are essentially *dies non* in the bush; visiting days when visitors may expect treatment as such, not viewed, as on week-days, in the light of quasi-intruders.

They are days when, so to speak, one does not put off one's slippers, and so they afford excellent occasion for these memoirs, or, as my wife would say, scribbles.

I had made little headway last Sunday before I was called away to welcome Burroughes and his wife who had just driven up; and with mixed feelings I threw down my ancient and inky station quill.

Burroughes is my neighbour, and colleague in the commission of the peace to boot; and when he makes up his mind to

ride over the twelve or fourteen miles which separate his homestead from ours, if he comes in company with his wife, we know that, as the saying goes, something is astir.

So when I saw him lifting his sweet English wife like a child from the buggy, I naturally assumed that his visit was of a serious character. Nor was I long left to conjecture; for the ladies, my wife and his, having retired to discuss various matters of importance, including, doubtless, the last new fashion-plate in the *Queen* or *Pictorial*, Burroughes faced round to me with his lips open and his eyes big with news.

"There's a regular bobbery in the township. Jem Blake hit down a black and got his blow back with interest. Mawson, for whom Blake was managing, was away at the time, but his colonial-experience man* came over yesterday in a blue funk, and I rode straight off to see into it. I found that Blake's house was discovered in the morning rifled, with Blake himself lying dead upon his bed with a big spear through his heart, and Mrs. Blake was gone without sign or symptom." Burroughes waited for breath.

"Mawson's station! Murgaba! That's on the Carnegie Stock route, isn't it?" asked I.

"The same," replied Burroughes; "and it's always been the most exposed to blacks of any you know. It appears that Blake found the black stealing a side of mutton from the shambles and remonstrated."

"With his fist?"

"I suppose so. He always was a violent man. At any rate the black avenged the blow terribly. There appear to have been more than one engaged in the crime."

"Well, what have you done?"

"Oh, I sent the colonial-experience man down to Deverill and told him to bring out a couple of troopers and black trackers at once; but I'm afraid that we shall be outnumbered."

"And so, Burroughes, I've got to give up my Sabbath rest and jump into the pig-skin, with my men after me, all because

* A newcomer to the colony learning colonial ways and work.—Ed.

a station manager has been killed and his wife disappeared," said I rather warmly.

"Come, come!" said Burroughes, half mystified, "don't talk so; you know you feel mad at heart about the poor creature."

"Friend Burroughes, have you no suspicion about her?" inquired I.

"Gracious me, no," replied he; "she was, I understand, a most demure and patient little woman, working hard and happy, in a cheerful, contented way, with her big husband; quite a girl in years."

"Most unsuspecting of men; supposing it turns out that the lady is a willing prisoner?"

"Ugh!" replied Burroughes, expressing his disgust more in his face and a violent expectation than by his words; then somewhat inconsequently added: "What a cold-blooded fish you are, Bateman!"

"My boy, you've caught hold of the black idea too quickly. I only wanted to show you that there are other explanations of this dastardly double crime, and that you must not be surprised if the raid on the blacks does not satisfy justice. Remember, you and I may have to hear the case in the first instance as J.P.'s, and must not be prejudiced. I say that as a J.P.; now, as a neighbour and a man, I will of course help and muster half-a-dozen guns by nightfall."

The upshot of all this palaver was that Burroughes drove back, and the same evening I started off for the rendezvous, on the Carnegie Stock route, with five of my station hands, a motley crew, horsed on brumbies, as we call our unbroken half-wild horses.

Though so heterogeneous our band, one and all, out of some mysterious store, produced good rifles, and some of the men strapped on a revolver in its pouch.

We had five days' hard riding before we arrived home again, as the three blacks, whose tracks we followed, doubled round and mixed themselves with a mob of their own race, amongst whom we should never have found them had they not fatuously decked themselves out with the watch-chain and other belongings of the murdered manager.

After a long corroborree* and talkee-talkee, the mob, being overawed by our guns, gave up the offenders, though they denied all knowledge of the murder and the whereabouts of Mrs. Blake, the murdered manager's girl-wife. They said they found the manager dead with a spear in his side and the house empty. That was their defence; but they never had an opportunity of testing it in a court of law, for I regret to say that on our way back the criminals were lynched, and I very much fear with Burroughes' connivance.

Mrs. Blake is still missing, and, as Burroughes says, "without a sign or symptom" to show how or where she has gone. We made diligent search for traces, but have to confess ourselves foiled. Doubtless the *Town and County* or the *Australasian* will chronicle the strange disappearance; and then the matter will sink, like hosts of other disasters, into oblivion.

For myself, I believe that the blacks did not know her whereabouts, and that they were innocent of the murder; but the reasons for my belief are founded in sentiment, not logic, and are directly opposed to the finding of the coroner's jury. It is true that these good men and true slavishly followed the advice of Dr. Fentom, our local medical man and coroner; but when a man makes the medical investigation, is the only expert witness, and coroner all in one, there exists a complication about the exercise of his functions which renders his views somewhat one-sided. So my difference with the verdict does not necessarily prove me in the wrong. Time will perhaps show!

* Generally used of the dances by firelight in which the blacks indulge; probably Mr. Bateman means simply a meeting of jabbering, excited blacks.—Ed.

CHAPTER II.

A CLUE.

AN incident has happened since I last wrote which has brought some degree of care and anxiety into an otherwise harmonious, nay, I might almost say humdrum, life.

A letter came from my cousin Jeremy, of sugar-planting fame, some two or three days since, referring to his son, Jeremy the younger, known in this household as Jeremy Bentham, because of his abhorrence of all books, including the philosophical treatises of the original Jeremy. This letter would not of itself have caused us any perturbation, for Jeremy Bentham is of an erratic nature; but his father evidently expected that the boy would have reached us on a short visit some time ago. It matters little that we had no notice from the lad himself, for he is no letter-writer, but our station, with its big and small game, has always exercised such a fascination over him, that I know of nothing that he would have preferred for his Easter vacation before a few days' run in the "paddocks" with a gun in his hand.

Our son and heir Jack, who is also an undergraduate at the Sydney University, has gone to a friend in Wagga, and although we have written him for news of his cousin's movements, we have little hope of hearing much from him, as the cousins are not, in College parlance, "chummy." Jeremy the elder, on receiving our telegram, wired us in reply that he was coming to us *via* Sydney, and a letter has just come from him saying that in answer to his urgent inquiries from the College authorities he can learn nothing, except that the lad took the train in our direction.

My wife, who has a motherly eye for the motherless lad, expressed herself a good deal concerned about his safety, saying—

"Well, I do hope that he's come to no harm; I haven't had a minute's quiet since I heard he was missing."

"Then," replied an individual, who rather fancies he is witty, but who shall be nameless, "your facial control, my dear, does you infinite credit; for you have appeared the same smiling, buxom, and placid head of the house during the last five days as theretofore."

"Nonsense, T. B.!" said she, adopting a style of address she uses when pleased. "Nonsense! you know very well what I mean; and I can never forget that he has no mother to look after his things and—his morals, nor had since he was ten years old."

"Come, come," said I; "clever woman that you are, you cannot say that his want of a mother is responsible for the fact that he is at present lost to his friends."

"I don't say anything of the sort," replied she; "but I dare say that it's a great deal due to his being motherless, and to his father's neglect, that he has grown so wild lately at college."

"Hallo! how do you know anything about his wild oats?" asked I, with a lurking suspicion that Master Jack had been telling tales out of school.

"Well, T. B., you see," said my wife, with a slight hesitation and a rising colour—the sight of which took me back more than twenty years in my life, to a sweet sunny-haired Scotch lassie, with blushing cheeks—"Agnes—"

"The Lord forbid!" said I, startled out of all composure.

"Is it so bad as that?" asked my wife anxiously.

"Where are the girls?" I asked, evasively.

"They've gone for a stroll to the upper dam to see the wild swans that flew up yesterday."

"Very well then, my dear, I may say without evasion that, dearly as I love that eldest girl of ours, I would rather have her topple over into the dam and drown, than link her fate with Cousin Jeremy's son."

"But," said my wife, "the boy is handsome and has a wealthy father and good prospects; and besides, he is not so *very* wild."

There was an insinuating emphasis on the "very" which made my heart sink. To find the common-sense of my wife linked with her womanly appreciation of a handsome face was, to say the least of it, disappointing.

"Oh, you women!" said I, rather bitterly; "let ever so great a villain wear a smooth countenance and——"

"Now, Thomas, that is what you would yourself call the language of exaggeration. The boy is not a villain, or anything like it, I hope. Remember, he is our cousin's motherless son, and think of your own in his place."

"My dearest," responded I, serious to a degree; "we must get him clean out of Agnes's thoughts. It is not a case of wild oats I fear; those, according to the world's, and especially the female world's ideas, must be sown; but rather there is some old-established kink in the coils of his mind which prevents the healthy flow of pure thought as much as the bend in the Chinaman's hose over there prevents his watering the garden."

"But, T. B., have you any proof of this, for it is a serious accusation?"

"There, my dear, you carry the fire into the enemy's quarters. The young man has never had an opportunity of showing me the worst side of his nature; but his actions, unimportant as they are, that I have noticed, indicate inconsiderate selfishness and utter want of principle; and if the foundations will not bear a frame-house, how can they bear a stone mansion?"

"What do you mean? Do speak plainly, Tom," said my wife, now really disturbed.

I felt abashed, for I rather pride myself upon being able to break news, so I replied rather severely: "I certainly won't tell you anything at all, if you're going to lose your self-possession and coolness."

The tears were in her eyes as she repressed her feelings, and turning her awed face towards me replied, with a touch of dignity—

"I shall not be startled again; I had thought only of boiysh pranks, not of a family scandal."

"That is exactly what it is," replied I very moodily; "a family scandal! And in the bush too, where scandal finds a congenial element, and gives birth to a thousand scandal-bearing germs. But that is gross selfishness to think of one's own comfort, when one ought to be thinking for poor Cousin Jeremy and his shame, if it be true that his son has had anything to do with the disappearance of pretty Annie Blake."

"Tom!" exclaimed my wife, leaning eagerly forward—

"I met Burroughes yesterday at Bungal, and listened patiently to one of his long-winded yarns, hoping amongst the heap of mullock to find a grain of gold. He had been drunk enough to be communicative without being disputatious, and he told me a thousand unimportant items, and at last the grain came, but hardly golden. A young man had, he discovered, stopped one night, about a fortnight ago, at the Blakes' on his way here, so he said; and made some excuse to stay two or three nights afterwards, going away the very day before poor Blake was murdered. Now there were two points about this young man which did not strike Burroughes; and they were, firstly, that his description tallied with that of Jeremy, and secondly, that Jeremy was at that very time coming, but never came here."

"Gracious goodness!" exclaimed my wife; "why didn't you tell me of this before? You remember I asked you at dinner whether your inquiries had been of any use?"

"And you remember, my dear, that the girls were with us, and baby Rover too. I sought the first opportunity, and now disburden myself."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" said my wife, her eyes glistening with large drops again; "poor cousin Jeremy! what will he say? He has never done a dishonourable thing in his life."

"Well, not yet, but he's going to be a Legislator, you know; so may be more forgiving to others who err." I was thus frivolous to counteract the lugubrious hints I had thrown out.

"How can you be jesting at such a time, Thomas?" said my wife, with some heat.

Having effected my object, I ignored the question, and proceeded to throw some doubts upon my own fears.

"Well, you see, on the other hand, this may be all quick apprehension on my part; Australia teems with good-looking young men, any one of whom may have got an introduction to me, and have been making his way up here; and he may have been the culprit, or in fact some one may have bragged of coming here so as to get a lift along, overstayed his time at Mawson's, and decamped. Then again, the description may have been wrong. I got it from Mawson's colonial-experience man, who is manager *pro tem.*, and who was in Bungal at the time; and as Jeremy junior is *not* an unknown quantity on our station, it seems to me that had he been so near us, he would have been seen and recognised by some one who knew him as our cousin."

"Well, then, all this anxiety is needless; but oh no, you would not have said so much as you have, if you had not strong reasons," said my discerning wife.

"To tell you the truth, my dear, there were two ugly facts that I got from the colonial-experience man. One was that the handsome visitor had his right arm in a sling, and the——"

"I know what you would say," replied my wife. "Jack wrote us, only a few weeks back, that his cousin had sprained his wrist while sculling in the harbour. But sprained wrists don't last for ever."

"That's true; but they're very troublesome, particularly with an active young fellow like Jeremy junior, who would be sure to disobey doctor's orders and use his hand before he ought. However, that might not be very amiss, for in a rough-and-tumble country like this sprains and contusions are not such rarities that an arm-sling should hang a man; but one thing *was* curious and rare. The handsome visitor never once used an oath or strong language of any sort. You know that is one of Jeremy's peculiarities."

"Perhaps he was a new chum?" said my practical wife.

"No. That's just what he wasn't, according to the colonial-experience man."

"The store-keeper didn't know, very likely; he is a new chum himself, isn't he?"

"No; not so new that he doesn't know the difference between a native and a new chum."

"But *is* that a peculiarity of Jeremy's?" urged my better-half.

"Yes, it *is*; and it's a very noticeable one too, in a land which flows with a good deal of the milk of human kindness, but very little honey of the Queen's language."

"But Jack doesn't swear!"

"Of course not, before you and the girls; why, hardly one of the men, except the bullock-driver, would do that, and he can't help it—it's part of his vocation. But Jack, alone or away from his maternal apron-strings——"

"Tom, how can you!"

"Indulges himself occasionally in a big big D, or the like, at the expense of some duck or kangaroo which will *not* be shot, or some horse that won't be ridden."

"Still, all that you say amounts to very little; certainly not enough on which to build up the identity of this handsome visitor of the Mawsons or the Blakes with Jeremy the younger," persisted my wife, valiantly doing battle for her absent nephew.

"True of all but the last, which is insuperable. And yet you may be right. God grant you may. I expect his father here in a day or two, and then we must tell him all we know, and leave him to judge for himself."

"How will he take it?" asked my wife anxiously.

"Without moving a muscle."

CHAPTER III.

THE EXPEDITION.

AND I was right! Jeremy senior arrived some four days since, and as soon as I conveniently could I told him all I knew and feared. His face set stolidly and became almost expressionless; while I, in return for the scanty news he brought me, retailed what I had gathered and what I had effected.

In a quiet, dignified fashion he sought my help and advice; but before I had finished my narrative I could see that he had, in his self-reliance, made up his mind what to do. He had seen the college authorities, and I fear had a stormy interview. He told me that he had with some heat reproached his son's tutor for not looking closer after his son, and the pedagogue had replied that his duties were scholastic not parental, and that a father who neglected his own children could hardly expect that others would take much interest in them. Cousin Jeremy did not appreciate the retort, as he believes that he has given his son the best education, moral and mental, which he could afford, and so views all consequences with an easy conscience. So he left the tutor and posted up here.

He has brought with him as servant a Queensland black, Wirri-wirri by name, who, sharing the usual hatred of one tribe of blacks for another, will, he thinks, prove useful in finding out the secrets of the blacks who appeared at Mawson's at the same time that Blake died and his wife disappeared. The black is a powerfully built fellow of jet-black skin and hair, bloodshot eyes, and dusky lips—altogether a finer specimen of humanity than we see around here.

Another arrival at our station has created almost as much

excitement. Master Jack has come up, to tell us all he possibly can about his missing cousin. This is not much.

And now, curious to relate, a third arrival took place yesterday. Our local visiting minister dropped in to dinner, an intelligent High Church enthusiast, of some seven or eight and twenty, and a sort of transitional new chum, having only been six months in the colony.

Having some private means—a few hundreds a year, I believe—he manages to carry out his duties with a good horse under him and a good coat to his back. His clerical attire and his diminutive horse, when I first saw him on a baking hot day about Christmas time, suggested Don Quixote; but he has changed all that, and tumbles quickly into colonial ways. He has also lost some of the self-consciousness he had; he realizes that there are other subjects than himself of interest, and that *ego* is not the wisest word to use in the bush. It is true that the station atmosphere does not admit just now of any other discussion than that of the missing boy, and our slow-going homestead is really beginning to smack of Scotland Yard and the Criminal Investigation Department.

Mitford is a great favourite with my three girls, from eight to eighteen, as well as their mother, who is quick to perceive, underlying his vanity, something good and sound, and they all appreciate the fine, old-fashioned courtesy he shows to women. If the truth be known, bush life, however high the standard may be which one sets up, is not conducive to those old-world fashions of gallantry and courtesy which we read of, but so seldom see, even in towns. Hence, even I have felt some of the charm of Mitford's gentle unobtrusive chivalry.

None of us have worked so hard as Cousin Jeremy, who has been busy organizing a search party, for our inquiries and searches in the immediate neighbourhood having led to no result, we fear that the young fellow has fled away into the interior. Yesterday the father came riding in from the township evidently tired out, but more sanguine in expression than before, so we, one and all, asked if he had heard anything?

"Well," said he, after a deliberate pause and a glance at each face, to see the effect of his words, "I believe I know which way the young man has gone; but whether he has turned back or why he went I cannot tell, nor whether he was alone or accompanied."

"Nor, for that matter, whether the young man is Jeremy," said I.

"No. Nor that. I found that out three days ago."

"And you never told us?" said my wife reproachfully.

"How did you discover that as a fact?" I asked.

"I met a man who knew him, and hearing that I was his father, came to me and said he had seen him at the station, and believed he knew which way the boy went off. But he says that he did not see any one with him. It was the dead of night, and my informant could not see far."

"Isn't it very curious that the man didn't come forward before?" asked I. "Why, the whole neighbourhood has been ringing with the disappearance! What is his name?"

"Blackie—John Pettie Blackie—he told me," replied Jeremy.

"I don't know the name," said I. "What is he like?"

"A big lumbering fellow, with broad shoulders, heavy jaws, big nostrils, small blue eyes, high cheek-bones, black hair, very white teeth, which he shows whenever he smiles, as though he were acting the wolf in Red Riding Hood."

"Is he straight, think you?" said I.

"Well, I hope so, for, subject to your approval, I have taken him on."

"How will Wirri-Wirri like the rivalry?" asked my wife.

"Oh, Wirri-Wirri will have to lump it, I should think; he won't be asked his pleasure. In Queensland he has been accustomed to take what comes and be grateful for it. This man-and-a-brother theory doesn't suit us in Queensland, Mr. Mitford," continued cousin Jeremy, looking fixedly at the clergyman.

"It would suit you if you cared to make it," replied Mitford. "It is not that theories are wrong, but that their application is absurd; *that* makes their result incompatible.

I have now been actively working among these blacks for some months, and find that they are greatly underrated. They have many savage traits, but they are teachable to a degree."

"When you have been as many years amongst them as you have been months, I fancy you will modify your ideas," replied Jeremy. "A man and a brother! To beat their wives about just like—like——"

"Our navvies do at home," said Mr. Mitford quietly.

"Ah! but they buy their wives for so much gum or beads like——"

"Our millionaires do at home," said Mitford as before.

"Yes, but to get beastly drunk and howl and shout and dance like——"

"Our classes and masses both do," interrupted the clergyman.

"Oh, very well; I see you're wedded to your views," said Cousin Jeremy, a little testily. "But in a very few years you'll be more for coercion than myself, I believe."

"Oh, do not misunderstand me," said Mitford. "I compare the blacks to children, whom they very much resemble in their hot passions, their desires, their quickly passing griefs, and I would coax them as I would a child, and try to get them to feel that they too were men with souls to be saved; but I would use the strictest coercion when necessary."

"You would try coaxing first?" asked Cousin Jeremy. "Well now, I reverse the order; I first give the rod, then I hand the cake; I have had the management of savages of one sort and the other, either blacks, South Sea Islanders, or Chinamen, almost all my life, and speak from experience, which is better than abstract thought."

"Well," said Agnes, "Uncle Jeremy, you may have been successful in spite of your theories, because of your personal courage and presence of mind, and Mr. Mitford's rule might have brought you greater success, or gained you firmer friends, might it not?"

"Oh, my child! friends! What! make a friend out of a nigger? But there, that's just the way with you unpractical

people. You put a thing down on paper or in your mind, and think it looks so nice that it must be true."

"Well," said Mitford, "without being on terms of equality with these children of nature——"

"Children of the devil," growled Cousin Jeremy—"begging your pardon, my dear lady."

"Why not try the conciliatory spirit I have referred to, just to see its effect?"

"Oh, I can just tell the effect at once," said Jeremy; "I don't want to experiment with my life. Conciliation they would view as weakness, and the first fine day they could they would mutiny against me, and let daylight into me. No, no, my dear sir; I always on principle address them as though I were a judge on the bench, sentencing them to be hung, or an officer drilling an awkward squad."

"So far as I have tried my system and got others to try it, I have found success," said Mitford. "What do you think, Mr. Bateman?" continued he turning to me, who had been silent all this while.

"I am afraid I'm a prejudiced person and ought not to give an opinion," said I. "I was born with the English idea of the superiority of the white, and have never been able to eradicate it; in consequence, my mind has been the scene of serious conflicts, the inborn prejudice fighting with the more Christianlike spirit which Mr. Mitford shows."

"That's all very well, that Christianlike spirit," returned Cousin Jeremy, who fancied he was being laughed at. "I'm not much given to the weakness of profession I believe, but for all that I conceive self-preservation to be the highest natural instinct, and to that extent the divinest motive."

There was a chorus of disapproval from the younger members of the family group, against the man of the world's remarks, and Mr. Mitford gave form and utterance to the murmurs by asking—

"What! do you mean to say, that you would think yourself justified to make a dozen human beings uncomfortable for your comfort, or kill even one other that you might live?"

"Certainly," said Cousin Jeremy stoutly; "I never had

such an easy riddle to solve. Ask another! Come! Wouldn't you?"

"I, my dear sir? Do you know what the professions of my cloth are?" said Mitford, rather grandiloquently; but his pomposity was perhaps excusable, because of the fair sympathetic eyes which were fixed upon him.

"Yes," said Cousin Jeremy; "I know what the *professions* are, but come down to *practice*. Conceive yourself in the midst of a band of howling blacks, all brandishing waddies and nullahs* and spears and boomerangs, and greedy for your blood; wouldn't you try, if you had a revolver, to thin their ranks and so save your life?"

"No," said the clergyman firmly. "Why should I take their lives? I would protect mine as far as I could—I conceive that to be my duty; but why should I take any one else's to do that? If it came to that, what right have I to preserve my life at the expense of another?"

"The same right as that other has to kill you, which he would otherwise do. Come, my dear parson, you know the doctrine of survival of the fittest. I dare say you have read all the books on the point. Do you not know that that doctrine involves the destruction by one of another? The stronger drives the weaker to the wall in vegetable as well as animal life. If that is nature, and nature is but the servant of the Deity, it must be a proper rule to square our conduct by."

"Are God and nature then at strife?" quoted my wife, who is a great admirer of the Poet Laureate.

"Exactly," said Cousin Jeremy. "I believe in the sermons of the fields and the forests, the seas and the rivers, not the sermons on mounts or anywhere else."

Mr. Mitford looked rather shocked, so I came to the rescue.

"You must forgive Cousin Jeremy, my dear parson," said I. "He has been ruralising and rusting away many miles from parson or church for so long, and he reads such little literature besides his *Australasian*, that he is a long way back in the scepticism of thirty years ago. You must come with us

* Clubs.—Ed.

on our search to-morrow and take him in hand." I spoke in jest, but Mitford took up the idea in earnest.

"Oh, I should only be too glad!" said he. Then astonished at his own enthusiasm, he added with a flush, "My life at home was so devoid of the usual adventure and boyish scrapes that I am only just passing through the phase of love for wild scenes and excitement."

Cousin Jeremy raised his eyebrows in astonishment, and remarked—

"Ah, but, my dear sir, you must leave a good many of your notions behind, if you are to be any help and service to the party, for it is not unlikely that we may have a brush with natives."

"I shall hope before we meet them to have converted you to my system. Besides, I am known to many of the tribes west of here, which I understand is the direction you propose to take, and have got a smattering of their language, and I might be able to reach some of the poor benighted souls who have never heard the glad tidings which I humbly preach."

"Hum," said Cousin Jeremy; an expression fraught with various meanings according to the taste of the listener.

"So far as I am concerned," I said, "you are quite welcome to join us. I don't fancy we shall have such a long journey as my cousin does. We shall, I dare say, find Mr. Jeremy junior in some secluded spot close by, hiding until the affair has blown over."

By which the reader may see that we had got to consider young Jeremy's part in the crime at Mawson's Station as purely imaginary, and could speak quite hopefully of finding him.

Mr. Mitford was about to reply, when Jeremy said—

"Come, do not commit yourself. Take time to consider. There may be serious perils upon our journey, and which instead of being a four days' pleasure ride through neighbours' paddocks, may extend for days, if not weeks, into the interior."

My wife and daughters at once commenced to dissuade

Mitford from joining in the hazards of our expedition; but he, like most young men, became the more obstinate as more and more pressure was brought to bear upon him.

Jeremy had some misgivings about allowing Jack to accompany us, so was not in the humour to have another inexperienced tender-foot to look after.

But Mitford had made up his mind, in his usual enthusiastic fashion, and was not to be turned aside; nor was he, I felt, notwithstanding his pronounced opinions against fighting, one whit less courageous than Jeremy or Jack. It is certainly a curious position of ours, to have as companion on a rough, perilous journey, which may at any moment involve us in bloodshed, a peace-loving, peace-making clergyman of somewhat stilted notions.

We are to start to-morrow on what to most men would seem a wild-goose chase; as well, one might think, to look for a needle in a haystack as march without any guidance, except that of John Pettie Blackie, whoever he may be, in search of a young man and woman who may be even now lying in some gully twenty or thirty miles to the westward; lying never to rise again, stiff and stark; killed by blacks or starvation. For all that I have a presentiment (and confess to it) that these two people are alive and well.

CHAPTER IV.

A STORY AND ITS TELLER.

THIS is the first day of the expedition, for such is the dignity and magnitude of our undertaking that the compound word search-party which was first accorded us is not sufficiently grandiloquent. We number some twenty men, including Cousin Jeremy, Jack, Mitford (in a very sensible costume myself, my stockman Jim, and Jeremy's two attendants black and white. The other members of the expedition are hired hands, men of stout fibre and tough muscles, by whose side Mitford and Jack look delicate lads. They are all picked men, the rank-and-file, passed first by Jeremy, then by myself, and lastly by our local medical practitioner.

There are horses for all, though all are not mounted, for Wirri-wirri is unaccustomed to the pig-skin, and prefers to stride along leading his horse, or tying it to the long strings of mules which carry our provisions. We are provisioned for the overland route, nor do I think that there is anything in the shape of tinned meats or goods procurable at Bungal of which Jeremy has not laid in an ample store, although at exorbitant prices, for Bungal storekeepers excuse themselves for charging six times the fair price, by referring to the many hundred miles which separate us from Sydney. We have also levels and mathematical instruments, borrowed from a local surveyor, together with a sextant and a nautical almanac, by the aid of which our young collegian and budding mathematician promises to find out our exact position at any time.

We have also a small medicine-chest and a medical *vade mecum*, which the most obtuse intellect could follow successfully; a host of beads and trinkets wherewith to propitiate savages; tools, tents, guns, and almost every conceivable article which we might require upon our journey. Had

there been any time to procure camels, I have not the slightest doubt but that we should have a troop, for Cousin Jeremy has a maw capacious enough to swallow even a camel. He promised to tell us his reasons for so many precautions when he was gathering his forces together. He said he had every reason to believe that we should have to go far afield. To prevent our losing ourselves, each of us has a map and compass.

We received a tremendous ovation this morning in Bungal. All the township turned out to meet us, and had we not given strict orders that not a man should touch a drop without permission, I verily believe that we should at this moment have been lying prone like skittles in a bowling-alley away back in some hotel; for the hospitable instincts of Australia were for the nonce concentrated in the two cross streets which make up our township, and I fear that many a hearty well-wisher is even now shaking his head with dismal forebodings over our fate, in that we did not drink, "Here's luck" * to ourselves.

The leave-taking from the homestead was of a very different character, although we strove to be merry and light-hearted. Evidently my wife and children saw through the jest in which I promised to be back in two or three weeks' time, and Cousin Jeremy, noticing their grief, exclaimed, "I'm a selfish brute! Bateman, you sha'n't go! Why should you risk anything for me and my ill-starred son?"

But of course we could not think of turning back from our words and promises at five minutes to the twelfth hour, so to speak, and so my dear wife tried through her tears to respond to my jest, and smiled away most valiantly.

Agnes, picking a little spray of mignonette, which has just flowered in the shadow of the homestead, handed it to Mitford with a blush and a light laugh. A whisper from her and a merry little nod from him, and he had vaulted into his saddle, gaily putting the sprig in the ribbon of his hat. I suppose I'm an old hunk for my pains, but I

* A universal custom in the colonies when persons are treating one another.—Ed.

couldn't help thinking that my girl was sending a message to Jeremy the younger. However, she did not take me into her confidence, so I had to be content with wishing Mitford might forget the message. Then we were off, and, as we passed Mawson's Station, Jeremy and I had a talk with Mawson himself and his "colonial-experience."

This young fellow Mawson was quite willing to spare, but he would not be spared; evidently he did not relish volunteering where there was risk.

From to-night we consign ourselves to Mr. J. P. Blackie's care and guidance. This is the programme which Jeremy has confided to us. I cannot say that I have any confidence in the fellow. He is so overweening in his conceit, and so self-assured, though in a certain sense respectful even to civility, and I must admit that he has the knack of doing anything. Our colonies show, amongst the many opportunities they afford of bringing out the bright points of a man's genius or character, one great disadvantage—that is, the excess of self-confidence we one and all display.

Cousin Jeremy, who leans over me occasionally and has just read the above lines, wants to argue the point. He says that self-reliance is bound to go to extremes because of the peculiar condition under which, in this primitive country, every man must be all in all to himself, and excess is counter-balanced in course of time by prudence, while lethargy requires a vigorous spur applied to drive it on to action and enterprise.

"It is better," says he, "to have to hold back your horse than to be forced to drive him with spur and whip."

"Talking of that," I say, "what a difference between your energetic shire-horse and the stubborn mules which carry our baggage! You would hardly think they are of the same race."

"Yet," says he, "I would back the mules against my horse for endurance, if it ever comes to a test of that nature between them. The horse is, in my mind, something like an exotic which *will* have the best method of cultivation,

while the mules are the common garden flower, which will bloom under any conditions."

"And what about the camels you were bemoaning the absence of?"

"I fancy that we are well rid of them. It seems to me, from what I learn of the experiences of Sturt, Stuart, and others, that camels are more bother than they're worth. All that about ships of the desert, independent water supply, and so on, when boiled down, comes to very little solid advantage."

"I very much agree with you. Our party is already rather unwieldy. What course do you propose to adopt if the rest of the reports we expect to-morrow give us no clue?"

"Well, I should advise keeping due west until we strike the Darling; then, making up to some of the townships on its banks, inquiring as we go. If my conjectures prove true—that my son has crossed the river and buried himself in the uncivilised and unexplored tracts of Queensland or Central Australia—we must, of course, do our best to follow. But I will not risk any lives—that is, of our party," he added, significantly.

"You say *advise*," I said. "You use the wrong word. It is for you to command, me to advise."

"But you are the eldest and longest-headed of the party," remonstrated my cousin.

"The eldest I may be, but not only my modesty but my reason forbids me to accept your compound epithet," I answered, with a laugh. "And as for claims to leadership, I fancy that you, who are the father of the boy we are seeking, and the organiser of the whole expedition, are by very nature *the* one to lead. My greater age is a disadvantage."

"Very well. If you will have it so, we will be joint leaders."

"No, I won't have it so. You must be the chief, I your lieutenant; Mr. Mitford is, of course, the chaplain; while Jack"—that young man was lying near our camp-fire enjoy-

ing an after-supper pipe—"will pose as Her Majesty's non-commissioned roustabout."*

Jack smiled good-temperedly and cried out that he was quite agreeable.

After we had thus settled our respective posts, Jeremy called Blackie to our circle from the larger camp-fire, a few yards away, where the men were spinning yarns or laughing at some strange antic or pigeon-English of Wirri-wirri.

"Now," said Jeremy, "you shall hear what I have heard. You shall judge if I was right to strike out in this direction, as I have done upon the faith of Blackie's guidance."

The man attended our summons with a civil "Yes, sir."

He is a powerful man to look upon, and there seems, underlying his heavy frame and square face, an intensity of purpose unusual in a hired man of his class, even where that class, as in Australia, comprises recruits from so many ranks.

One would call him bovine, were it not that there is something of a cruel, feline look about his mouth when he opens it. He appears to be a man of some education, but, above all, a very courteous fellow, whose civility becomes servile in comparison with the free and easy manners which the rest of the men adopt. There are very few of them but think that the use of the word "sir" is superfluous. I should not have noticed the omission myself, but Mitford, being comparatively fresh from home, remarked upon it to-day. For all that, we see no reason to alter our good opinion of our other willing, sturdy fellows, rough and uncouth, perhaps, but hard as iron.

"Now, Blackie," said Cousin Jeremy, "we have been consulting about our future course."

The man looked from one to the other of us, bowing courteously to me.

"Well, sir, and gentlemen all, I reckon I can put you in the way of that."

He spoke in a curiously subdued voice, as though speaking in a room instead of in the open.

"Very well, then, give us your reasons," said Jeremy.

* Colonial for handy-man or Jack-of-all-trades.—Ed.

"Shall I tell the story, sir?" said Blackie.

"Yes, you'd better; the others haven't heard it."

"You must know, gentlemen all, that I was shepherding for Mr. Blake since about January last, and had been sheep-shearing for Mr. Bateman last August, although he doesn't seem to recollect it—do you sir?" he said, turning to me with an inquiring look.

"No, Blackie, but that's quite consistent with your having been there, for all that, I mean."

"Oh! I know what you mean, sir. I assure you it's the blessed truth—so help me, and all the rest of it, as they say in the Law Courts. Well, of course I had seen Mr. Jeremy Bateman the younger at the station, and when he came to Mawson's I recognised him at once. He told me he had broken his arm or something, and had had to put it in a sling, but was almost right again. He certainly ought to have been, for he rode almost all the brumbies* we had run in from the outlying country away back of the run, and didn't budge an inch however they bucked. He said he was coming along to his uncle, as he called you, sir, and expected a jolly good time. But Blake, who wanted to have a kangaroo drive, persuaded him to stay for a couple of days and help shoot or knock down the 'varmint,' and the young gentleman was only too glad; but the drive never came off after all, for on the day before Blake was speared, for some reason or other the young gentleman left in a huff. I was by the homestead at the time and saw Blake ride up one day for lunch—a thing he hardly ever did. He had no sooner gone into the house than I heard a thundering row, and in a minute or two Mr. Blake was kicking the young gentleman out of the place, while a sound as of a woman sobbing came from inside. For all the world there was as much commotion as though Blake had turned bush-ranger."

He looked round upon us with a smile, which, however, I didn't reciprocate. For all the man's apparent frankness my early prejudice would not be eradicated.

* Unbroken horses who are often confirmed buckjumpers.—Ed.

"Well, what happened next?" urged Jeremy, who had heard all this before, and was impatient.

"The young gentleman, with a face like a devil—begging your pardon, sir, for the simile—came down to the stables and got out a horse, but said not a word to me, though I stood by and helped him mount. As he rode by the homestead he shouted out something, and Blake came out with a five-shooter, as though he thought the other meant business. My, it was like the old times! But the young gent only called out: 'Look here, you mountain of flesh, you Falstaff of a man with a fairy of a wife, you shall suffer for this, I promise you!' 'And look here,' shouts out Mr. Blake, as angry as he could well be, with white foam coming from his mouth and choking his words; 'if you don't clear off the run in half a minute I'll riddle you with the whole five charges, if I have to swing for it. And look here again,' says he; 'you may tell all other young cornstalks or banana-men * like yourself, that if they come poaching about on my preserves, they'll get worse treatment than you've got. It's only for the sake of your blessed uncle, or cousin, or whatever he is, that I've let you off so easy this time.' The young gent was a plucky one, for he stood there, contemptuous-like, laughing at the great man in the verandah, and he cries out: 'Your words are brave, Falstaff, and you'd better make the most of them; you're a doomed man,' and then, in his very face, he calls out to Mrs. Blake, who was standing by the window, all in tears: '*Au revoir*, Annette, my love, *au revoir*!' Blake didn't understand what he meant by *au revoir*."

"Did you?" I asked quickly.

"Of course," said he, with a slight smile of contempt; then correcting himself: "You see, sir, I came over from home with a lot of Frenchies, and they were always talking little bits—'ajoo' and 'or river,' and so forth."

"Well, go on," said Cousin Jeremy; "let us get to the part which interests me."

The man, who had stared wholly at me, kept his eyes—his

* Colonial slang for Victorians and Queenslanders.—ED.

little retreating eyes—fixed upon me during the rest of his narrative, as though to be prepared for any interjections I might make.

"Well, after that the young gen'man rode away, and I heard the manager storming and going on at his wife; then he busied himself about the homestead for the rest of the day, and moved out to his own frame-house in the afternoon, and locked up the homestead. I had to ride out with stores that afternoon to a place this side of the run, and so I didn't see this myself, but I saw on my way home a fire lit in the bush, and thinking perhaps to find a camp of chaps on the tramp and get a cup of tea I made towards the blaze. But there was no whites there, only a lot of blacks having a talkee-talkee, so I left them alone, and made off as hard as I could, for when they caught sight of me they gave chase. I told Mr. Blake when I got back about them, but he was in a great passion, and told me not to be such a d—d coward, for which I thanked him, and went to the men's hut. Well, though the night was dark, I couldn't sleep, so I stepped out with a gun to look for a dingo * which had been troubling us lately in the tank paddocks at the west. I hadn't gone far before I heard a squish squish; so, drawing up in the dark of a bush I waited for my dingo. It was nary dingo, but the young master riding towards the station. He recognised me, and told me he was going on to his uncle's, and so we stopped, talking away, until he asked me if I knew any good country to the westward. I had been shepherding out this way, as he knew, and told him that it was all taken up, except a bit I had heard of a long way out westward near the sand desert. 'But,' said I, 'what do you want to know for?' 'Curiosity,' said he. 'I may turn squatter some day,' but he said he didn't think he'd be a free selector in the desert, and then he laughed and rode away. But some time after, as I was waiting for the cursed dingo, I heard a horse's squish squish again coming in the opposite direction. Then I heard the young gent saying

* A wild dog, very destructive of sheep.

something, and a woman's voice replied. It might have been Mrs. Blake's. I couldn't hear what they said. But he seemed coaxing, as it were, and she (if there was a she) was crying and talking thick, and saying, 'Oh, God!'

"Why, you said you couldn't hear what they were speaking," said I.

"No, I didn't, sir. I only heard that one cry. It was out loud, as though something had hurt the person who cried. Well, they passed me and went on across the plains to the west, and I followed up for some time to find if I could what was up. I couldn't even see where the other horse was, nor find a single trace of it, and I don't think any horse could have carried two people over that mud-flat, for the rain had just churned up the black soil something fearful. After a time I got tired, turned back, and got to bed. But when I turned out in the morning, and went round to the homestead for orders, I found the storekeeper all pale with fright, and saying that the blacks had murdered the manager. I didn't say what I had seen, but went to look at Blake. I saw a native spear right through his heart, as though he had been taken asleep. There was hardly any sign of struggle, only a bottle or two off a shelf close by knocked down. And I thought if the blacks had done that they was cleverer than I thought them. But I didn't say nothing."

"Why didn't you say what you have now said at the inquest," asked I; "or tell us all this before we set out after the blacks?"

"Because I asked the colonial-experience man if I should say anything about what I knew, and he said there wasn't no necessity. That was the reason, sir. But when I heard as Mr. Bateman here was the young gentleman's father and looking for him, I thought I'd better say what I have just told, and also how I tracked the horse-hoofs for some thirty miles clean out of our run, across Johnson's, and into The Freeholders."

"Are the signs still to be seen?" said Cousin Jeremy.

"I should think not, sir. You see, what with the rain we've had since, and the number of sheep and cattle along

and over the route, there's hardly any chance. But we may come up with some signs to-morrow."

"How did they bear—always west?"

"Always due west, sir."

"And have you any doubt that there was a lady riding with my son?"

"Only what I have said, sir. The marks were of a small-shaped hoof, not a strong-built beast such as could carry a lady in pillion fashion, and they didn't seem to be pressed down with double weight, as they would have been if the horse had two riders. But then there was two voices, I'm sertain of that—right down sertain!"

"Was it all so dark you couldn't see?" asked I.

"Not my hand before me, sir," said the man.

"That I can't understand; wasn't there a moon that night?"

"If there was, sir, he didn't shine through clouds and thick scrub."

"No; but you followed some distance?"

"Only in the scrub, sir; they would have seen me in the open."

"Very well; but you could have been hidden in the scrub and yet have seen them in the open."

"Not very well, sir; the scrub doesn't leave off sudden like, but gets thinner and thinner; and while I was getting through there I roused up a snake."

"Roused up a snake? Why, how could you tell that?"

"Because the blamed reptile crawled up my leg in a moment. Ugh! I suppose the flood had drowned it out of its hole. I didn't think no more about horses then; I just caught its head with me hand and gave it a heave away, and cut and run back as hard as I could."

He looked so self-satisfied at the little laugh that went up from our group round the fire, and so triumphantly towards me, though I know not why, that I could not help thinking the whole story to be a fabrication. However, I did not think it prudent to raise any further doubts, and said complacently—

"The wisest thing you could have done; but it was a pity

you did not tell us this before. You might have saved the lives of the three blacks who were lynched for the crime."

"Well, sir, I don't reckon on a black's life much myself. Besides which I've heard they're not sorry to lose their lives by violence, as they think they will become white men then, and live on the fat of the land."

Mitford looked very interested; but took the opportunity of saying—

"My good fellow, your white skin doesn't give you any right to think that a man who is brown or black will not value his life."

Blackie said nothing, only looked submissive.

When the man had gone, Jeremy looked at me, and said—

"Now what do you think of the man?"

"Candid opinion?" I asked.

"Certainly," said he.

"H-u-m-b-u-g," I spelt out.

"Why do you say that?" said Jeremy.

"Instinct and reason prompt me," I replied, less laconically.

"Instinct or prejudice says, 'Don't trust him; his eyes and mouth are against him. His jaws are cruel, and his politeness assumed; while his language is alternately educated and uneducated. Half-a-dozen times he pulled himself up speaking like you or I, and began to talk with bad grammar and coarse pronunciation. Take again the *au revoir* case. He pronounced the word properly first, then he called it 'or river.' Why? Why did he want to humbug us like that? And if he did in one instance, is he not humbugging us throughout? I don't know why he should, but I think he is. His story is a mass of contradictions."

Jeremy replied in the man's defence; evidently his deference had won my cousin's heart, and the one or two objections I took to the man were waved away as merely the exaggeration of prejudice.

Mitford had not noticed the man closely, and though Jack said he had, and backed me up, Jeremy laughingly said—

"Oh, of course, my boy, you must stick to your dad! I shouldn't expect anything else. But as you and your dad

only make one, we are two to one, and carry the day. The man, J. P. Blackie, leaves the court without a stain on his character."

"Don't speak quite so loud," said Mitford; "his back doesn't recede very fast, and looks attentive."

But the idea of a man having "an attentive back" was too much for Jeremy's risible muscles, which, for the first time since his arrival at the station, relaxed in a good hearty laugh.

Jeremy has just been to ask me to turn my notes into a journal of the expedition, as he is a bad writer, and he thinks one of the two heads ought to keep some such book.

I ask him to turn Mitford into a secretary, as his chaplaincy will not be called upon, at any rate for some time; but Jeremy has a dislike for Mitford; his very enthusiasm is so foreign to Jeremy's nature, that though they are both bigots in their respective ways of scepticism and doctrine, and should therefore shake hands, they adopt that exceedingly polite address to one another which is amongst men of education a sure sign of dislike. I am sorry that Mitford has come, as Jack thinks him a "soft," and though I can see many very admirable points in the man, I find these peculiarities, which amused me at first, begin to be somewhat angular and inconvenient when we are thus thrown together. However, the expedition may, after all, turn tail and come back in double quick time in a few days, and we can doubtless put up with one another, and shake down somehow for the time.

* * * * *

We have now been on the road four days, and have averaged about thirty miles a day. The day before yesterday we passed the Darling not far from Bourke, where, however, we could find no traces of the fugitives, but this has been a red-letter day of all others, for though we found tracks of a horse, and occasionally of a man on foot, as though leading the horse, and have since then discovered one camp where the traveller, whoever it was, rested for the night and lit a fire, we have had, until to-day, no notion whose tracks we were following.

CHAPTER V.

"ME BAIL GOT."

TO-NIGHT we are camping on a spot where this traveller must have made his second camp, for, though the traces of fire and disorder have been carefully stowed away, Wirri-wirri, noticing the charred extremity of a tree trunk, searched about until he found the *débris* carefully deposited beneath a bush. But that which gave us most clue was a scrap of paper, with a few words in writing upon it. The excitement which Wirri-wirri showed was only equalled by the triumph in Blackie's face when this was discovered. The writing is in a very bold but feminine hand, and I have carefully pinned it into the Journal as one of our records.

Here it is:—

re. that you w
up to these m
vision of
or to know the
any more till to
A Blake

There! It was not much upon which to build hopes and conjectures; but it was the only straw which we drowning

men had to catch at. On the whole the discovery of this fragment of letter is by no means an unmixed blessing, for it suggests a collusion in this dastardly crime between two persons, one of whom looks very like Jerry (short for Jeremy), and the other the misguided manager's widow. At least that is the interpretation I have placed upon it. Jeremy, I find, has supplied the missing part almost exactly as I have, and looks pale and stern. He well may. It is a horrible, damning letter, according to our reading:—

"So I HOPE THAT YOU WILL TAKE great . . .
care JERRY FOR THERE MUST NOT BE
any SUSPICION OF EITHER OF US. Bring a
Black SPEAR TO THROW THE BLAME ON THE NATIVES
NOT ANY MORE TILL TO-NIGHT.

"ANNETTE BLAKE."

A more diabolical or cold-blooded crime was never perpetrated. Jeremy's face became gray as, after having read out to me his own interpretation with a pretence of laughter at the very diabolical meaning he, the father, had found in the little scrap of paper, he heard my confirmation; but Mitford put quite a different aspect upon matters by his version of the letter of which this formed a scrap.

Mitford's version ran—

"I HOPE THAT YOU will not do anything to
WORRY (HIM) FOR THERE MUST NEVER BE A BREATH OF
SUSPICION OF EITHER OF OUR LIVES. I DON'T WANT
TO APPEAR TO THROW THE BLAME ON YOU, BUT I CANNOT SEE YOU
ANY MORE TILL TO-DAY'S TROUBLE IS FORGOTTEN.

"ANNETTE BLAKE."

Jeremy looked quite gratefully at Mitford, and we have plucked up heart again; if we could have felt that my version was the only one to put on that letter, we should, I am sure, have abandoned our search, for to what purpose should a father hunt down a criminal son? It is against nature.

To-day we passed the last vestige of civilisation we are

likely to meet with if we continue in this direction, and as an extra precaution we have a drove of store sheep with us. These of course hamper our movements very much, and our rate of marching is not above ten miles a day. The delay is harassing to all of us; but the men whom we have engaged are seemingly content and muster well, with one exception, who disappeared to-day, but will no doubt turn up to-morrow, as he is an old bushman, and has his compass, besides a few provisions in his saddle-bags.

* * * * *

I grieve to have to chronicle that we are without doubt being deserted by our men, though none of us can tell just how and when they leave us.

The first absentee did not, as we hoped, come back, and his bad example has been followed by three others, so that we have only four of the line with us, besides my body-guard and Jeremy's two servants. I have an idea, though it has no foundation in observation or logic, that Blackie has something to do with these mysterious disappearances, yet if he has, why does he not decamp himself? He must see how impracticable it is to fight single-handed against us, and that even bereft of our rank and file, we are strong enough for most purposes. However, I have got my man Jim to sound the remaining men, so as to prevent, any future desertion, and as we had no unpleasant "loss" yesterday, I trust that already his influence is beginning to show itself.

Since the first fragment of letter which I have inserted above, we have on two occasions found other fragments, or rather they have been found for us by Wirri-wirri. Now I have noticed that these discoveries happen when Blackie has ridden on ahead to select a place for the camp, and Wirri-wirri has gone with him to set a fire going for the evening meal. So to-day I got Jeremy to engage Blackie in conversation and keep him by his side while I rode on with Wirri-wirri and Jack.

As soon as we were out of earshot, I engaged Wirri-wirri in conversation, or at least I tried to, but the black, to every remark or question of mine, answered with a complacent grin and a nod of his head, occasionally giving a grunt or

a click in his native tongue. I was perfectly certain that he was not so obtuse as he pretended to be, so I said—

"Black fellow think he going to find more white paper letter to-day?"

But Wirri-wirri simply smiled and nodded.

"Why do you think so?" asked I.

A similar unintelligible answer left me as wise as before. At last, pretending to be angry with him, as we had got round a bend of the scrub, and were hidden from the rest of our party, I leant over towards him and cried—

"Now look here, Wirri-wirri, if you no show me white piece paper to-day, I very angry."

Then the black was startled, and cried out—

"Me bail* got. Me bail got one piece lilly white paper—me get um paper——"

What more he would have said was interrupted by Blackie, who came thundering along, saying—

"Colonel Jeremy"—that is the way the men address my cousin now—"told me to ride on and keep a good look-out for blacks, sir, as we may expect to meet them at any minute."

I turned and gazed steadily at the man, but his eyes were unreadable; they are somewhat sunken, and are a little short-sighted at times, but then they spoke of nothing except candour and civility. The black was evidently relieved by Blackie's timely arrival, and stopped blubbing. Now I was determined to get at the bottom of this mystery, if there was one, so I said to Blackie—

"Very well, just ride back and tell my cousin that there is no trace of them here, and after we have passed the gully ahead we shall travel over level ground for miles."

"Thank you, sir, I'll tell him, but not now, sir; for he told me to be particularly careful, and see that you did not run into any danger. He said he could ill afford to lose you."

I turned sharply towards the man, and caught just the tail-end of a smile whisking round the corner of his eyes. His mouth could not be seen, his shaggy moustache covered it completely. Now, I am a man who does not like to feel that he is losing a point, and certainly whatever importance the

* Bail: *Anglicè*, not.

point might have, it did seem to me that I was being frustrated. So I replied—

“Very good. I’m much obliged to my cousin for his forethought, and you for the way in which you express it; but come, just canter back to him and take this report from his lieutenant, that we have the choice of camping in a gully or on the level plain beyond. Which will he choose?”

“Oh, I think he’ll leave that to me, sir; I’ve had a lot of experience in choosing camps for a body of men.”

“I dare say you have,” I said, looking fixedly at him; “but not in this part of the country.”

“Oh, yes, indeed,” he replied, without one deviation from his customary mien of civility; “I know a good deal of the country to the west of this.”

“Very good,” I said, “I’m glad to hear it. Now which do you advise, the gully or the plain?”

“The plain, sir, by all means. We are not likely to meet the blacks here, and if we do, they are not likely to attack us. Now, in the gully, at any moment the rain may fall in the mountains, and the creek come down a banker,* washing us away.”

“Don’t you know,” I said, “that we have no rain in this district for months in the year, and that the farther we go in our north-westerly course the less rain we have?”

“Oh, dear me, no, sir, that’s what is commonly said; but three or four hundred miles to the north-west—”

He stopped short, as though his tongue had been cut off in the middle of articulation. I had my eyes on him, and noticed a peculiar look of vexation pass over his face—one of the first expressions I had been able to read there.

“Yes,” I said; “three or four hundred miles to the north-west there is abundance, is there?”

“I have heard there is some, sir,” said he.

“And seen it?” said I.

“Oh, dear, no!” replied he. “I’ve never been so far west as that. There’s no shepherding west of the Darling that I know of, at least down here; and I’ve never been more than a hundred miles or so further this way.”

* An expression used of the sudden filling up of dry watercourses to the top of their banks.—Ed.

“No shepherding of any sort?” said I. “Not of mines or men, aye?”

He had started as though he had been stung; then, in a slow, deliberate voice, unlike his own, he said—

“I don’t understand. What can you mean, sir?” Then more naturally he added: “Whoever heard of mines or men out in the desert?”

“A good many people have,” I replied. “I for one.”

“Oh,” he said, and his voice came as near to a contemptuous ring as it has ever done during his employment—“Have you heard of that, sir? And how do the people live away in the desert of sand and quartz?”

He had overreached himself, and he saw it. How did he know of the quartz? How could the shepherd be so well versed in the geography and geology of the interior if he had not himself seen it?

“Well,” I said, satisfied that I had broken down his mask by a hair’s breadth, “now you take the report back to my cousin that you advise the camp on the plain, and that I concur.”

“I don’t think he wants us to do that, sir,” persisted the man.

“Very well; but just do it, please,” said I, getting warm.

Had he disobeyed then it would have been mutiny, and for a moment his eyes looked so bright in their deep, cavernous sockets that it almost seemed as if he would adopt this desperate alternative. But he thought better, for the flash was instantaneous, and his countenance wore its usual unreadable placidity as he touched his hand to his slouch hat, and saying, “Very well, sir,” called to the black and rode off.

“Wirri-wirri,” I shouted, “stop here!”

But that dark-skinned rascal either did not or would not hear, for he neither turned back nor slackened his pace. It was useless to run after him. Thought I, there is some secret understanding between the black and John Pettie Blackie which I do not know, but which I ought to know. To-morrow we will manage better, and I will take care that Jeremy does not let the man stir from his side an instant.

Jack, who had quietly observed the scene, and is tolerably quick at reading between the lines, said to me—

“Why did you put him through his catechism, father?”

I explained that it was for the sake of getting some information of our whereabouts, as we were ignorant whether we were not after all on a wild-goose chase.

"But the bits of letters, father?"

"My boy, does it not strike you that bits of letters would not have been overlooked if the person who left them took so much trouble to conceal his traces by hiding all the ashes of his fires?"

"Then you tried to trip him up?"

"Yes, I did, and succeeded twice. Both times he confessed he had been into the desert and beyond it. But both times he pretended he did not confess it; and evidently wishes us to believe that he is simply a shepherd."

"Well, he speaks like one, you must confess, and understands a good deal about sheep work!"

"Yes, he does that; but I am convinced that that is a blind. I am telling you more than I have even Cousin Jeremy, for he is infatuated with the man; but for my own part I suspect he has quite a different motive from ours in coming this way, and these letters or bits of letters are, I believe, salted by him."

"What! planted there for us to find?"

"The same," I said. "You'll see whether we find any letters to-night."

And we have not. Cousin Jeremy is consequently a little depressed, and talks about the traces being lost. Traces? Why, what traces have there ever been that we have found, or that we could have found, unless the fugitives had intentionally left traces. Since they passed here, if they ever did, which must have been weeks ago, the rain has washed down the soil over and over again. But for our journey the weather has been delightful, and the herbage which has sprung up in the wake of Jupiter Pluvius is highly appreciated by our sheep and beasts of burden, who stroll along, lazily luxuriating in a paradise of plenty. Plain after plain of waving grasses, mallows, native carrots, and florets of varied hue, have we passed; for these are separated often by dense belts of scrub or forest, where signs of bush-fires, themselves evidence of severe droughts, are manifest. Here and there, hundreds of acres of forest have

been charred and laid bare; though young myalls and burra-burra, quandong, and other trees, are springing up quickly.

So far Jack has managed to observe and calculate to his own satisfaction our longitude and latitude, but as his table of logarithms is worked out for Greenwich mean-time, and my chronometer watch is timed to Sydney time, there is always a complicated calculation required before he announces the result, and I shrewdly believe that linear calculations are not foreign to his mind in checking such results. Although we one and all have the profoundest belief in Jack's ability, we are always relieved to find that his calculations tally with our rougher estimates.

Seated by the camp fire just now, I asked Cousin Jeremy—

"Seems as though I'm going to be well taken care of, doesn't it?"

"How's that?" replied he.

"You ought to know. Who sent Blackie after me this very afternoon, to see that I didn't get into mischief?"

"Can't think, my boy, what you are talking of," said he, avoiding any dispensable words as he puffed his pipe.

So I explained how Blackie had come with a message, and it turns out that that energetic person volunteered to ride forward so as to prevent our "falling into an ambushade." These were his words to Jeremy. What he meant I don't know, there are no ambushades to fear here, no natives apprised of our coming to oppose cunning to fire-arms; but it is evident that any excuse was good enough to prevent my holding a *tête-à-tête* with Wirri-wirri, at least, so it seems to me. I may be an old fogey for all these suspicions, and their object may turn out of most unimpeachable integrity; and, not wanting to cry wolf until there is good cause, I hold my tongue. Ergo, my pen writes all the more readily.

Mitford, finding little excitement or variety in our humdrum marches, fills up his time with wood carving. He has some talent in this line, and has cut two or three weird-looking heads to gnarled sticks of myall, one very cleverly representing a snake encircling a kangaroo.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS.

By a curious coincidence, my last words in the last chapter were of a kangaroo, while my first to-day must relate a lively chase after a mob of bounding kangaroos, which nearly had a fatal ending for one of us. My old hound, Nina, who could not be left out of the expedition, started a mob, and my horse Colossus bounded after, followed by two or three other station-horses, who enjoy a run as much as their riders. Then commenced one of those riotous stampedes over the plains which defy riders' muscles. With their necks stretched out, our horses raced one another as though they had been entered for the Canbelego Welter Handicap. I was surprised to see Blackie, who pretends to be an indifferent rider, racing against me. Just as we came up with the hind-most of the quarry, Nina made a dash and a spring at a buck kangaroo, and at the same moment Blackie's horse came crashing into mine. Had not my trusty Colossus been old in bush ways, and seen the impending collision out of the corner of his eye, I should have been in "kingdom come," for we were tearing along at a lightning rate. As it was, my horse jumping to one side, gave my right leg such a scrape against a huge bastard-box that I shall ride stiffly for a week. But had he gone over or stumbled, my head must have been the cushion instead of my leg, and I fear that to try conclusions with a solid iron-like trunk would have broken even my thick skull. Of course Blackie was full of apologies, and complained of his horse having a mouth of cast-steel, but my yesterday's suspicions were revived, and I look upon him and his mysterious tricks and double-sided ways with increased anxiety. Who may be his next victim?

* * * * *

To-day I fancy I can answer this question.

I wrote four days since that Mr. Mitford was beginning to feel that the expedition was intolerably dull; I can only say that if he still holds that opinion he is incorrigible. The day after I last wrote, which happened, by the way, to be the 1st of June, Wirri-wirri was missing. Cousin Jeremy looked grave, very grave, when Jack rode up to report that on calling muster-roll down at the men's camp the black did not hail as he usually does with a broad grin, "Me here." But nothing could be done that night, and we hoped that with his unerring instinct the black would find us. However, morning came and still he had not turned up, so as there could be no possible reason for Wirri-wirri to desert alone, unaided, and without his accoutrements and his horse, which was tied to the baggage mules, we instituted a strict inquiry as to who had last seen him. The men one and all were unable to fix the exact time when they had first missed the familiar jabber-jabber, though I remembered when I had asked Jeremy to keep Blackie, and had arranged for the black to accompany me, I was told that Wirri-wirri had started some time since alone. I fancy it was Blackie who told me this, but I could not say, for he, on being closely interrogated, denied all knowledge of having said or thought such a thing, having no care or anxiety about Wirri-wirri's movements. Perhaps then the poor fellow had dropped in the scrub, bitten by a snake, or stung by a scorpion, though it was unlikely, as the blacks are wonderfully careful where they place their steps; and snakes and scorpions are rare up in this part of the continent.

The upshot was that some of us, including Jeremy and a couple of the men and Blackie, went back along our track, while I and the others went slowly forward, arranging to march in a due westerly direction.

In the middle of the day we camped for a short time in a patch of scrub near a river bed, which I took to be Cooper's Creek, and found, on getting up, that our sheep had strayed away. Cantering along with Nina at my heels, I soon rounded up half-a-dozen of our small flock; but the others

had turned down a gully which lay right in our course, so calling to Mitford and the others I slowly rode on. Nina, who generally follows down near Colossus's heels, imperiling her nose at every step, pricked up her ears and ran forward as though she had sighted a kangaroo, but there was no kangaroo visible, nor anything else, to account for the low growl which the hound gave as she stood with rigid muscles and dilated nostrils sniffing the air. Jack and the others were straggling along behind, for the day was warm and close, when I heard away down in the gully a jabber-jabber, which I at once recognized as peculiar to blacks. Hallo, thought I, Wirri-wirri has found some compatriots, has he? So motioning the others to be quiet I slid off my horse and handed his reins to Jack, then went forward and looked down into the gully. There were trees here and there, but I neither heard nor saw anything else than a few of our sheep running along the watercourse as though greatly startled. If it had not been for that I should have thought my ears had deceived me, but before I could step or make a sign I saw, as in the twinkling of an eye, a spear gleam through the bushes and one of the sheep fall; another and another went down before the ambushed blacks, for it was clear that we had chanced upon a mob, and were fortunate that their spears had fleshed in this delicious mutton rather than in our tougher bodies. While I stood looking, a whoop rang through the gully, and a boomerang struck the soil at my feet, knocking some of the mould into one of my eyes and almost blinding me. The weapon leapt high in the air and fortunately came down clear of any one else. But it was the signal for conflict, and running back to my companions, and shouting out as I ran, I mounted Colossus and headed our little party. All had guns in their hands with the exception of Mitford, who resolutely refused to arm himself, except with the carved myall stick which lay across his saddle-bow.

I was greatly disturbed at this attack. Why should the natives attack us thus in the day-time, and with strategy?

"Fire over their heads," I shouted, thinking to frighten them, as I had often done before, and to save bloodshed.

But the enemy refused to be routed out thus easily; so I divided my little band into two, and taking Jack, Mitford, and a couple of hands, charged right down the gully, while Jim and two others scoured the side and turned the enemy's flank. As soon as we were fairly in the watercourse I had almost regretted my temerity, for there sprang up some fifty or sixty heads amongst the grasses and bushes; heads not of "gins," "lubras,"* or boys, but of fighting men, armed with clubs, spears, and boomerangs. Some had light shields, such as the natives of West Australia use. The type of men was fiercer and finer than any I had seen, and most of the warriors had a circlet round the loins; for natives of the interior this is alone remarkable. But we had little spare time on our hands to observe.

Shouting "Peace, peace," as we charged along, we restrained ourselves from firing, but were met with discordant cries and shouts which were evidently far from peacefully intended.

Just then Jim with his little band galloping down towards us turned the tide; fancying that we were a larger body, the blacks stayed not a second, but scrambled up the gully sides and scampered over the plain, flinging down arms and shields the better to flee away.

Two wounded men remained on the field, and one other, who stared as though paralysed with horror at Mitford.

In five minutes the "incident," as Jack called it, was completed and, except a few bruises, not a man on our side was wounded; still the blacks might rally and return unless we routed them out of the neighbourhood. Scrambling up the other side of the watercourse, we saw them in hot flight over the plain, and after a little skirmishing and a few shots, which of course fell far short, but were only intended to frighten them, we cantered back to the baggage mules, whom we found lazily chewing the scanty herbage. Our chief anxiety was for the sheep, which had got scared and made

* *Anglicè*, wives and girls.—Ed.

off, some here and some there; but by patience and dint of hard riding we soon rounded up the little flock, now reduced by three, who lay weltering in the watercourse in their blood. When I had left the flock in charge of Jim, who is invaluable, I ran down to look after Mitford, whom I had last seen attending to the natives. He had constituted himself medical attendant to the expedition, and with a ready capacity for acquiring knowledge, had absorbed what little store of the healing science was to be found in our *vademecum*. The blacks he had decently bandaged with strips of linen which he had found in the medicine-chest, but his proceedings were viewed with mixed awe and curiosity by the third black, who seemed to regard him as some very mysterious and wonderful medicine-man. The stick lying across the saddle of the horse, tethered close by, attracted all the balance of attention which the black could spare from its owner, and evidently was regarded in the light of a god, or fetish, or something of the sort. The clergyman's face, as he looked at me, showed a curious blending of pride and humility.

"They're both clean wounds," said he, "and I don't think will trouble the poor fellows much. One is only a graze along the side of the thigh, and the other is in the arm; but there is no bullet there, I think, and certainly I can't feel any bones broken."

"You call them poor fellows," replied I, "and I am right glad to see you attending to their wants; but let me tell you, these same 'poor fellows' would, but for our superior tactics, have been even now perched upon our dead bodies and picking out tit-bits for supper."

Mitford shuddered. "What is to be done with these?" he asked pointing to the bandaged blacks.

"They must come with us; they appear to be able to walk, or perhaps the man with the grazed leg can get a lift on a baggage mule. We sha'n't move on to-day, for we must look after Cousin Jeremy. This ambush may be one of several. Cooper's Creek is a sort of natural gorge, from any part of which these natives may, if so intent, attack and massacre any intruders."

So we roped the blacks together as prisoners of war, and posted a sentry to look after them, and two more men patrolled the sides of the gully, while the others kept our little flock of sheep together and skinned and cut up our wounded, *i.e.*, sheep, laying out the meat in the sun to "jerk."

The afternoon went by without any sign of Jeremy or his party, although we had only moved five miles from our morning camp, and the whole way in a straight route by compass.

So, to prevent accidents, I ordered one of the hands to fire blank cartridge at frequent intervals, and for some time sat anxiously awaiting the return of the wanderers. Mitford had, in the meantime, been engaged in conversing, as well as he could, with the prisoners, whose language or dialect his experience among the Darling blacks enabled him, though with difficulty, to understand.

He soon learned that they were the advance body of a large number of tribes who wandered up and down the district, and who resented the coming of strangers. They did not fear the shooting barrels of the whites so much as their charms and enchantments, and they were all amazed to see the carelessness with which the medicine-man grasped the wampum or staff with the terrible sign on the head of it, by which they expected he could kill them.

"I should work on that theory," I said, "and let them believe that this is some terrible weapon of offence in your hands alone."

"I cannot deceive them," said Mitford. "Would you have me tell a lie?"

"I would have you tell them that it is a deadly thing for them to touch, and that punishment follows any misuse of it. That may be difficult to translate into their language," I added, for Mitford was smiling at my long-winded words, "but it's the blessed truth, isn't it?"

Mitford concurred, and they still looked so fearfully at the carving, that I hazarded that it resembled some fetish or evil spirit they were accustomed to propitiate.

So we waited while the evening was drawing in, and, as Jeremy was still absent, I lit a great fire of logs and tree trunks in order that the smoke and flame might be seen for miles around, and asked who would volunteer to ride along the gully and see whether the colonel had struck it lower down. Higher up I knew he could not pass unnoticed, for the plains extended interminably in that direction, but to the south of us were many patches of scrub.

Jim and Jack at once volunteered, the oldest and youngest men present. Jack's offer I did not entertain; the ride was, I knew, hazardous in the extreme, and I could not reconcile it to my sense of duty to risk my son's life if I could help it. The signals by which we should know, if within gunshot, that Jim was attacked or had sighted Cousin Jeremy, were arranged, and he set off on horseback, keeping within the shadow of the trees. An hour, two hours passed, and though I pretended to feel at ease, I could not conceal the gravity and anxiety of our situation from myself. How these accidents had conspired to separate us just at a time when concerted action was most necessary! Our pickets at the distance on the plain had fortunately moonlight to help them, and could have seen moving objects, so I did not fear a surprise by the blacks. We had given them a great scare to-day, that I knew, and were not likely to be disturbed for some time; but the smaller party, with Jeremy at their head, might blunder right upon them and be massacred without chance of escape. As I sat and ruminated, it began to strike me that these obstacles in our path seemed to have more than mere accidental origin. Were they not part of a design? If so, who originated the system? With the many difficulties of transport and the impediments to communication, what possible tie could bind the originator of the dismemberment of our party with these ambushes of the blacks? Their usual plan would be doubtless to attack, had they been desirous of doing so, at night. But here there was a body of fighting men sent out apparently from their camp to obstruct us in this most open and resolute fashion.

I was still meditating and striving to solve the puzzle,

when I heard three revolver shots away down the gully. It was Jim's signal that the wanderers were found, and I can hardly now believe how much lighter of heart I then felt when the good news was thus telegraphed forward. I have been used all my life to command, and have been in many dangers and perils by land and water, so I had no particular timidity about conducting the expedition; but from whatever reason I was pleased I know not, the fact remains that, apart from my congratulations to Jeremy at his turning up, I paid myself a good many congratulations at the reunion of our party.

They came bringing Wirri-wirri with them, but he was strapped upon a horse to prevent his falling off, while the rider walked by his side. Here was another mystery. As soon as we had supplied them all with a good cup of strong hot tea and some fresh mutton and hot damper, I asked Jeremy to tell me how he had discovered the black, and why he was so weak?

"As soon as I have put myself outside another ration, I'll spin the whole yarn, my boy," replied Jeremy, with his mouth full and a smile on his face.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEXT VICTIM.

So we waited patiently until this important operation had been ended. Then, without preface of any sort, he took a deep draught of tea, sighed with relief, and began:—

“When we had left you about five miles this morning, we came to the water-hole where we watered the sheep and horses yesterday at noon, and there, in the mud by the side of the stream, we saw a naked foot-mark, which we took to be the black’s. So we had settled that he had been lost within a comparatively small area. We started, I and one man in one direction and Blackie and the other man in the other direction.”

“Did you choose, or did he?” I asked.

“I don’t think either,” said Jeremy. “If I remember right, he said that he supposed he’d better take the south and I the north. Well, we kept on making bigger and bigger circles, searching over the plain and in the bush as we went, until midday, when we were to meet Blackie at a large gum-tree in the centre of the plain, opposite the water-hole. There, sure enough, he was, without any better news.

“He had a wry face, and said he feared the black had deserted, and by this time he would be some twenty or thirty miles away. But I didn’t share his opinion, and having always been accustomed to check and be checked in what I do, so as to be sure of being right, I told him to take the north and we would take the south until three o’clock.”

“Did he fall in with that?” asked I.

“Not at first. He said he had searched every nook and corner, every patch of scrub.”

“Did his comrade back him up?”

“Oh, yes; swore every word after the other, filling up the

gaps with strong language. However, as you know, I generally have my way when I want to, and so had it in this case. Well, I hadn’t been searching half an hour before the man with me said: ‘What’s that dam kangaroo a-doing rolling over there?’ pointing to a patch of scrub where a brown kangaroo was evidently crawling about. ‘Shall I fire?’ said the man. ‘No, don’t do that,’ said I; ‘the poor beast is wounded; let’s go and see it.’ So we rode up and found that ‘dam kangaroo’ a very funny sight altogether. Two big black legs peeped out under its tail, and a gurgling sound came from its breast. I jumped down and cut one or two threads which bound the skin, and out rolled, more dead than alive, Wirri-wirri. He was almost suffocated with the heat and exhausted with thirst. But I gave him a dose of whisky from the flask and propped him up against a tree. He couldn’t talk for a long time, and then I noticed that his arms were tied together to his sides, and with such tight ligatures of raw hide that he could not move either arm or finger. His legs were tied at the knees and ankles tightly, and both legs looked blue, as though they were dead. However, we gave him a good rubbing, and I suppose the blood came into them, for they swelled up soon, and he yelled again and again with the pain. It was getting near three by this time, so we tied him on horseback, as you saw him just now, and started off to the tree.”

“Did you bring the skin with you?”

“Yes, that we did, to seat him; for he has no strength, and we did not want to chafe his arms and legs again. Well, when we got back to the tree, there were Blackie and the man, and I can tell you they just looked blue at having been such gum-suckers as not to be able to find him. The poor devil wouldn’t tell us who did this, but looked so awfully frightened that we didn’t press him. However, we went steadily on, and came up to last night’s camp, then moved on to meet you; but somehow or other we didn’t strike this route at all, and if you hadn’t sent Jim, I don’t know how far away we might not have been by this time!”

I then told him about our meeting with the blacks, of

which Jim had not informed him, and his face grew grave and stern as he asked to see the prisoners. Mitford, who was seated close by, said—

“Mr. Bateman, I hope you will let me make one of my experiments here. I’ve got along amazingly with them this afternoon, and think I could bring round the others to being friendly if I had the chance.”

“What do you call the chance, my dear parson?”

“I mean if you wouldn’t march against them until I have gone on ahead as a herald.”

“What, alone?” cried Cousin Jeremy. “Why, that would be sheer madness!”

“Yes, alone,” rejoined Mitford, with a rising colour, “except that I would ask to have one of the prisoners to guide me. I endanger no lives of the expedition, and the attempt is worth making. Come, isn’t it? Won’t it save us all perhaps an infinite amount of trouble and bloodshed if we can but make friends with these fellows?”

Jeremy, who had thought Mitford was either joking or not in his senses, cried out—

“Oh, I could not think of your going so! It would be to certain death. And they would gobble you up with all the more relish because you would be such an easy prey. That wouldn’t quite agree with your views of the resurrection, would it?”

Mitford flushed deeper than before, and said, with some dignity—

“Come, sir, I do not obtrude my religious beliefs in the matter. I have a great horror of cannibalism, but I have no doubt that my Master will get over any material difficulty like that if He thought fit. I have asked a fair question; give me a fair answer?”

“My dear parson,” said Jeremy, with a frown; “you are one of those unpractical persons who would bring the best organised expedition to confusion and ruin. The very fact that you were unarmed—I suppose you don’t mean to be armed?”

“Certainly not!” said Mitford, vehemently.

“Well, that fact would operate against you in the first

instance, and us afterwards; I cannot consent to such a foolhardy risk.”

“Mr. Bateman, you are afraid that my experiment would succeed, and your theories have to give way to mine,” said Mitford slowly.

He spoke to some effect, as Jeremy is proud to a degree, and could not bear that any one should think he took any unfair advantages. So rather warmly he replied—

“Oh, if you think that, go by all means. I hope you will come back alive, but I do not expect it. Bring up the prisoners to me,” he added, turning towards Jim.

“They do not understand English,” said Mitford, stepping forward.

“Oh, they’ll understand mine quickly enough. Look here, you jolly bad rascals; what in the—ahem, do you mean by fighting against us like this? I’ve a jolly good mind to string you all up like crows on the trees.”

The men who had been brought forward smiled in an affrighted way. They could not understand one word of this harangue; but the expression on Jeremy’s face was more eloquent than words.

So, being able to make nothing of them, he ordered them to be taken back and kept under guard, for he did not care to ask Mitford to act as interpreter, being a man of somewhat narrow mind, *though* my relation.

“Well, you have told us a good deal,” said I, “but not enough. How was it you missed the track and had to be brought in?”

“I suppose it was because I was attending to Wirri-wirri, who once or twice almost gave in. We wandered on until we came to the creek lower down, and halted there for the night, after scouring some way up and down. The scrub was too thick to let us see far; perhaps it was fortunate that it was so, for otherwise your friends the blacks might have caught sight of us, and we might by this time have been beyond all help. We lit a fire, and were just going to compose ourselves to two draws at our pipes in absence of supper as well as dinner when we heard Jim

whistling the Magpie whistle away up the creek. We of course didn't know it was he, but I answered back the signal, and we soon had the pleasure of seeing him, and here we are."

"Didn't you see the fire or smoke we made?" inquired I.

"Not a bit; never caught a glimpse of it!"

"Didn't any of the men?"

"Not that I know of."

"Here, Blackie!" shouted I.

"Yes, sir," said the man, stepping forward briskly.

"How far can you see through the bush?"

"Well, I'm rather short-sighted, sir."

"Could you see a smoke fire some way off, do you think?"

"I think not, sir," returned he, looking straight at Jeremy.

"Of course if he had seen it he would have noticed it," returned Jeremy, "and we should not have come so far out of our way."

"Well, supposing you didn't see it, Blackie, surely you're too good a bushman to lose your way?"

"Well, sir, you see," the man replied rather sulkily, "we were all thinking of Wirri-wirri, and on the look-out for the blacks who had tied him up so."

"Oh, is that the theory?" asked I. "Were they blacks think you, that did it?"

"I'm sure of it, sir. The man says so himself."

"Did you ever know the blacks shoot a kangaroo and tie a man up in his skin with English twine and raw hide, when they could have with less trouble shot the man himself," said I.

"Oh, they didn't shoot it, they speared it," said he.

"Oh, did they," said I. "How do you know that?"

"Because there isn't a bullet mark in the skin," he responded quickly.

"Oh, have you looked? Let me see."

The man brought the skin, and there and then we examined it by the light of our fire. It was true there was a bullet hole through it. But there was no spear hole either

"Where, then, did the spear go through?" asked Jack, who was interested, knowing my suspicions of the man.

"Here, sir," he said, pointing to a slit in the skin.

"That," said I, "was made after the skin was taken off, and, I should think, is somewhat fresh. Had the beast been stabbed there would be blood round the mark."

"So there is," said he, turning the skin over. "Look here."

"Ah! but it would have been inside, too," said Cousin Jeremy, who saw which way the argument was leading us. "I never saw a beast yet that was stabbed that the inside of the skin did not show. However, leave it here, Blackie, and go and get to sleep. I'm sure you will want a good snooze."

"Thank ye, sir," said the man, turning away as quietly as possible. "Good-night, gentlemen all."

When he had gone out of earshot, Jeremy turned to me and said—

"What do you make of this?"

"Why, that the kangaroo in which Wirri-wirri was almost suffocated was shot, not stabbed, and probably these two little holes can tell us something about the weapon which fired."

I pointed to two small shot holes, which a closer examination showed me in the breast portion of the skin, which had evidently been carelessly or hurriedly skinned, for a portion had been torn off.

"I should say," said Cousin Jeremy, "that the missing piece of skin is not far from here, for it looks like a fresh tear."

"However, we don't want it, for we know, or can easily find out, who had our two fowling-pieces yesterday," said I. "Now, to tell you the truth, there are many points in your narrative and Blackie's which I don't like. Why couldn't he find the poor black? Why couldn't he see our signal fire? Why couldn't he, apart from signals, lead the party right? And why is he so concerned to make out that the kangaroo was killed by a spear, when the evidence is all against it? Besides, the idea of blacks taking the trouble to

tie up another when they could dispatch and eat him is too flimsy."

"Well," said Cousin Jeremy, "I laughed at your hints and prejudices before, but I must say there seems to be ground for them now. Yet, what are we to do? We cannot send the man back alone on such small evidence of suspicion. And if he is working against us he will be sure to expose himself again, and will be less dangerous if we can keep our eyes upon him."

"I am much of the same opinion," said I. "But let us take care to watch his movements and prevent any further mischief or treachery. Is it true, think you, that Wirri-wirri has told him that he was attacked by blacks?"

"That may be true, but I must confess myself at a loss to understand why, if they had attacked him, they left him alive. Besides, where did they get the hide and string from?"

"Very well, I see that you are unbelieving—continue so," I said, "and let us all keep our eyes open. I must say that the expedition is none the easier because of this additional trouble—a house divided against itself. Or perhaps——"

"Come, Tom," said Cousin Jeremy, "don't take the bread out of our chaplain's mouth. Quotations from Holy Writ are his prerogative, not yours."

"Nay," said Mitford, "they are yours and mine and all of ours. There are a lot of people who think that only clergymen and devils may quote Scripture for their purpose; but, perhaps, if the prejudice were broken down, the Scriptures would suffer little, and the quoters might even gain something."

"Well, my dear parson," said Cousin Jeremy with a smile, "the best thing for you to do is to turn in and save your quotations and your brains till to-morrow, when you will want the whole of them on this hare-brained expedition of yours, as, saving your presence, I must call it."

Mitford smiled in rather a superior way and replied—

"Thanks for the hint, but let me ask you not to tell any one about it, nor let any one follow me or leave your party for two days."

"Ah, but are we to wait and lose two precious days while you palaver or fatten up?" said Cousin Jeremy, good temperedly, though rather coarsely.

"I will meet you in two days' time, if not before, in a direction due west of here," said Mitford; "that is, due west by my compass, and if I fail to find you there, I will put a notice on every large isolated tree up and down in a line from north to south, as far west as I can get. If all is well, I will also cooee at intervals twice in succession. If not, and I am alive, I will give you only one cooee loud and long."

"That will do," said Jeremy.

And the clergyman turned round, and within a few minutes was, as his breathing proclaimed, sleeping as sweetly as ever he did on spring mattress and gilt bedstead, I'll be bound.

"I tell you," said Jeremy, leaning over near me, "there's more pluck in that man than I expected. For him to suggest going alone and unarmed amongst a lot of howling blacks, and yet to go to sleep like he does on the very eve of his execution, betokens a splendid courage, perhaps of the fanatic order, but none the less admirable."

"Is it fair to let him go?" I inquired. "We know his risk, he only guesses vaguely; and to pose in the abstract as a martyr is in keeping with the traditions of his cloth."

"Hallo, Tom, you a heretic, too! I can't fancy he'll come to grief. I've got one of your presentiment attacks."

"Well, I haven't—at least, I expect the worst, and we oughtn't to let him hand over his life in a fanatic spirit, just to satisfy the cravings of a score of natives for a few hours. If they attack him, which is a moral certainty, they'll kill him. If they kill him, they'll eat him, and I must say I sympathise with his horror of cannibalism performed upon oneself."

"Why, I don't," answered Jeremy. "Of course the idea is revolting in general, but what can it matter to you or me, when once dead, what is done with our bodies. I dare say blacks are cleaner feeders than dingoes or worms."

"Phaugh!" said I, expressively.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHO PUT THE SCORPION THERE?

THE next morning, long before the men were astir, Mitford was up, and, selecting the unwounded black as an interpreter, rode off in the direction which the blacks had taken when fleeing from the creek the day before. When the men were astir, some surprise was manifested that the chaplain was gone, and Jim came to me and said the men thought that some one ought to go with him, as he was a "good fellow, and had shown that he knew something of doctoring, though he did talk goody." But of course I told my man that the chaplain particularly requested no one to accompany him, and I asked him who started the idea of disputing orders amongst the men. Jim blushed, and said he thought they all shared the same opinion, but he had given it utterance.

"And what did your friend Blackie do?" I asked.

"Don't call him my friend, boss," said Jim. "I aren't werry thick with him, I aren't. He's a deal too much thinkin' of hisself, he is. He didn't say anythink only that we'd better leave it alone."

"Why? Did he say?"

"Yes; he said that one way and another the expedition was blarsted. One thing after another had sprung up to show mismanagement, and there was no doubt things was agen us."

"Oh, he said that. And what did the others say?"

"Well, boss, they sort of agreed: one chap, the big Queenslander, called out that he'd been of that opinion from the 'ginning.' Never knew good come of havin' two masters, he said. He remembered when Burke and Willis came to grief, he did, and didn't want to be a King as had to live on cat's meat and nardoo."

"And what did you say, Jim?" asked I, rather alarmed at the element of discord evidently engendering among the men.

"Well, boss," said Jim—and his bronzed face got as red as a girl's—"I did the best I could; said as how you were only lieutenant, as you had given the Colonel first chop, and that two heads, and they old ones, was better than one, and *that* a thick un. They laughed at that, and the big Queenslander, Watson, looked obfuscated."

"That's right. And so they decided that you should ask us to send one of them after the chaplain, eh? Well, who was the one?"

"They thought that Blackie seemed to know his way about best of all, boss."

"And do you think so too?"

"Yes; at any rate, I guess he knows more than he lets out. I shouldn't be surprised if he'd been this way before."

"Nor should I, Jim. Have you ever heard of a man of his name out so far?"

"No, I can't think I hev; but I remember hearing years ago a yarn that there was a lot of whites 'scaped from New California, what made their way through here somehow. Still, he can't be one of them, as they would be Frenchies, wouldn't they, sir?"

"Yes, mostly; perhaps there might be an Englishman amongst them. But I don't think much of that story, for how could they live?"

"Oh, yes, he say he's always heard that there's a big desert for hundreds of miles between here and the telegraph line, so that's certain they can't be there."

"Has he ever said anything about grass country away over west?"

"Not that I heard on, sir."

"Well, Jim, did you find out whether any of the men were thinking of losing themselves again?"

"No, boss, I didn't, except that Watson talked big the other night about giving up the will-'o-the-wisp, as he calls it, we're after, and getting the others to come up and have a

laver with the Colonel. But both I and Blackie put our oars in, and told him to shet up, for he was a fool, and I said there was such a thing as mutiny, which was a shooting matter when I was on board one of Her Majesty's ships, God bless her," and the old sailor, doing homage more, I'm afraid, to his old ship than his Queen, pulled his fore-knot.

"That will do, Jim, my boy," said I; "now go and tell the men that we wanted Mr. Mitford to take an escort with him; but he not only declined, but made us promise not to let any one follow him. Just watch what they say and do when they hear that. I think you'll find they'll be rather glad they didn't have to go too."

But later on my man rode up to me as I was riding at the rear, and said that all but Blackie had been satisfied with the answer, but that he had gone away muttering under his teeth, and looking as "black as thunder."

However, we did not feel particularly careful of Mr. Blackie's feelings, and took good care that not one straggler fell away from the cavalcade. The country opened more and more, and we have made a decided change for the worse in shifting our quarters, for the grasses we have been accustomed to are getting thinner, the scrub is becoming more stunted, and spinifex, that horror of all explorers in the interior, is making our horses' hoofs tingle and tingle again. However, the sheep manage, by nibbling here and there, to find a scanty livelihood on the sandy ground, and to keep their feet free from any serious wounds. Jack's horse involved his rider in what might have been a serious accident as we were on the march, for shortly after our midday rest he commenced rearing and plunging and fighting the air as though he were one possessed with a devil. Blackie, who was behind, cried out that he had got cut by spinifex, and as usual blundered along to help, but only made the horse more excited, as the beast, hearing hoofs behind him, broke away, and commenced a mad rush over the plain, heading for a bit of scrub. Knowing Jack was a good horseman, I forbore to follow, for I could not catch him up, and should only add to his beast's fright. I shouted also to stop Blackie and the others

who were following; but Blackie was apparently unable to rein in his own horse, and every moment seemed in imminent peril of falling out of his saddle. Jack was as though he had been part of the beast which was running away with him, and Jeremy, who was riding close by me, said, in the deep, slow voice which expresses with him emotion—

"He rides well. He'll pull through."

"All this excitement over a runaway horse," I hear some one exclaiming, "Surely that is but an incident as common as sunshine in Australian life!"

Well, there was something about the way that the brute would prop* dead still and fight the air, and then start off again in headlong speed, which was most uncanny; and, though Blackie managed to catch the reins once, he did no good, for the beast broke loose, and pulled Blackie out of his saddle on to the ground. The way in which the man slipped his feet out of the stirrups and vaulted up again and on to his horse's back before it could run off, showed me he was no mean horseman, and that in one more respect he had been acting, that is, in his assumed clumsiness on horse-back. But Jack's horse, more frightened than ever, tore straight at the bush, and though it was more than three-quarters of a mile off, we could hear the crash as the infuriated animal threw itself clean into the middle of the undergrowth, scraping off rider, saddle, and everything in its excitement, and giving a parting kick out behind, which fortunately only hurled the saddle against Jack's wind. Had it not been for this buffer, my boy's brains must have been dashed out, and as it was, we saw him lying still on the ground, and hastened up. But Blackie was before us, leaning over Jack. As we rode up, he said—

"He's all right, sir, only winded."

The poor lad was speechless with the blow in his lungs, but happily seemed to have few, if any, bones broken. Fortunately for him, the bush had broken the force of his fall. In a few moments he recovered sufficiently to say he did not feel much pain, except a bruise or two, and expressed

* Used of bush-horses stopping suddenly when going full speed.—Ed.

a wish that some one would look after the horse. But Blackie had already disappeared in quest. However, I was not satisfied that he would find it, as he had been so unfortunate in the search for Wirri-wirri, so dismounting, I hurried after him. The path which the infuriated animal had made through the undergrowth was very plain, nor had I gone far before I heard his squeal through the forest. This guided me away to the side, and turning round a wattle what was my surprise to find Blackie in the act of drawing his knife across the beast's throat. The horse was standing still, merely squealing, and Blackie had pulled out his knife and would have cut the animal as he stood had I not shouted aloud and stayed his hand, and made the animal rear. In consequence, the knife only made a slight gash, and that in the lower part of the neck, through the gullet and fleshy part of the forequarter.

The man scowled as he turned round. I saw that his face was ashy pale, but he looked so dangerous for a second that I took good care to let him see my revolver hanging in my belt-pouch. This was the second time I had seen his impressionless face assume an expression, and each time the result was far from reassuring. Stepping towards me, he said, as calmly as ever, and resuming his usual courtesy of manner and expression—

"I was afraid the beast had an attack of the glanders and was going to dispatch it, sir; but perhaps you will."

"No, I certainly won't!" said I. "We can't afford to sacrifice a valuable horse because he bolts once in a way."

"Oh, he looks just mad, sir! Look at his eyes."

I went forward, pulling out my revolver as I went, as though to arm myself against the horse; but he and I both knew what each meant. So he put his knife back into its sheath and himself stepped back towards the horse. Its eyes were certainly red, and it looked very distressed. The gash in its throat and chest had not of course improved matters, and was accountable for some loss of blood; but the frightened look in its eyes, the way it lay back its ears, and the frequent

turns of its head, reminded me of a former experience, where a tarantula had bitten a bush-horse of mine. So I carefully examined its body, and on the off side found a lump just where the saddle had been—a big gall it could not be; evidently some insect or reptile had bitten or stung it. But if we were to do anything for the horse, it must be done before it could bleed to death, so, hurriedly telling Blackie to gather some astringent leaves from the shrubs around, I led the beast back to the plain.

When there I was greeted with a shout from Jim.

"I found it, sir. It's a scorpion—one of them derved little black 'uns as gets in cracks"—and he pointed to the saddle-cloth lying on the ground, with one of those detestable insects crushed to death by his great heel.

How could it have got there? It seemed impossible that it could have crawled in by itself. Some one must have put it there, that was certain, and with what intention was obvious. Such thoughts coursed through my brain as I bound up the injured animal's wounds.

Blackie was at hand with the leaves, and, making a hasty poultice, we applied it as a styptic; but as we could not delay our march, the poor beast stood little chance of recovery. Every movement only opened the wound afresh, though we went on, as has necessarily been our custom, but slowly. Blackie was most anxious that Mr. Jack should have his horse, and he was quite content to walk until the other horse could bear riding. *Until?* When will that be, I wonder?

Wirri-wirri, who had been accommodated with a species of stretcher or palanquin between two baggage mules in consequence of the great stiffness and pain his swollen legs and arms still gave him, looked eagerly out as we came up, and I am ready to swear that he directed a frightened, appealing look at Blackie. But the white gave no answer, nor made any show of having seen the black's signal.

The same evening Jeremy held an inquiry into the matter, to which he imparted quite a judicial character. Seated under the large gum which stood in the centre of a broad,

sandy, and rather barren plain, he reminded me of the judges of Israel dispensing justice in the olden days, and I have no doubt, in his rough and ready fashion, he was quite as efficient.

The inquiry, however, was absolutely abortive. He made no fresh discoveries, and the matter is as much a mystery as before; knowledge in such a matter helps but a small way, conjecture born of our past experience only furnished us with questions to put to the men, and particularly Blackie. But the men's answers were not noteworthy, and Blackie's replies were very clever imitations, if not signs, of ignorance; *which* we could not determine! But he is certainly answerable for the loss of Jack's horse, which I believe would have recovered from the scorpion sting. But it fell down exhausted from pain and loss of blood some way back, and would not be moved. It is possible that the poor beast may recover and perhaps roam the plains in willful freedom; but it is useless to us from henceforth.

This day we have made good progress, and found a large tree which ought to answer Mitford's purpose as a signal post. At any rate here we are camped for the night, and shall probably remain here longer, while we scour the country for signs of the absentee.

As we are in a hostile country, we have hobbled our horses and posted vedettes, while our few remaining sheep are penned in by packages and a few branches. Every day the vegetation gets sparser, so that we have often to cut down branches of foliage as feed for our sheep; their fat is consequently fast disappearing, and their flesh is getting twangy and bitter, tasting of "gum" and "burra." From our maps we seem to be on the confines of the great desert which Stuart explored over twenty years ago, and which no white has trodden since. The fine dust, which a hot wind has peppered us with to-day, confirms us in our conjectures of our whereabouts. Naturally our thoughts turn to the misguided boy and girl whom we are supposed to be following. If we have met with serious obstacles, and had to fight our way as a strong and well-provisioned caravan, how can those two poor

young creatures have survived; and even though they may have struggled so far successfully, what mercy have they found in the pitiless desert? What fate have they long ago met? Thirst and hunger, intolerable heat and biting cold—all of which they must weeks ago have endured—are less easily eluded than blacks, and are more relentless than man! God forgive them their sins if they have sinned. "De mortuis nil nisi bonum."

CHAPTER IX.

FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BRAVE.

SINCE I last wrote, a change, a decided improvement in our fortunes and our prospects, has taken place. The ensuing morning we were out patrolling in couples along the plains, and examining carefully every isolated tree. Mr. Blackie was, however, kept with Jim and one or two others at the camp, with instructions to sound an alarm should it be necessary. It was a beautiful morning; the sunshine filled the fresh dry air with germs of vitality and bright thoughts, which seemed incompatible with the anxieties we had before us. I took Jack, who finds in Blackie's horse a tolerably good substitute for his own, along with me, and started due south, while others went north, arranging to meet us at a point about five miles west, so that we might scour a wide area of country. Others again were told off to explore the ground through which our track of yesterday lay, so as to lose no single chance of meeting our good parson, if indeed he still lived. We were in tolerably open country, with watercourses at very rare intervals, dry and shallow; but for all that we had all our senses alive, and were ready to take note of the least movement in the scene, for Mitford might have fallen a victim to his heroism, and the natives might be waiting in ambush for the rest of us at every turn and corner. Under these circumstances, it would seem foolhardy for us to leave the camp. So it was; but sentiment prevailed over reason; the sentiment that we must endeavour to save and help our comrade, who had so bravely given his life into the hands of these savages for our and their sakes.

We had not ridden four miles before we came through a block of bush, and seemed in another country altogether. Tall grass was growing instead of the stunted spinifex;

some parts the ground was springy and moist under our horses' feet, and some ducks and swans which we disturbed were evidence in themselves that, at any rate for the time, we were in a land of fodder, water, and game. The surprise which we both of us received was not lessened by finding a "blaze" upon a tree near at hand, which had evidently been renewed not long since. There it was, the clean axe-cut into the bark at about eight feet from the ground, such as a man on horseback would cut as he momentarily halted in passing. Two or three cuts of different ages seemed to show that this was a high-road in some direction. Was it southward, or in what other direction of the needle? As the oasis seemed to trend westward and eastward, I came to the conclusion that the trail was in that direction also, and accordingly rode on another half mile to the west, meeting two more trees on my way similarly marked. Then we rode back again, and traced two more blazes to the east. Evidently my first guess had been true, and this was some highroad to—where? The interior? Sturt told us *that* was desert. The cable authorities said the same. The journals of Burke and Wills confirmed the statement, and the Queensland expedition of later years has added its evidence. How then was this trail used? No savage would have taken the trouble to blaze the track, though, indeed, the blazes were cunningly made, and unless one were on the look-out for marks on trees, as we were, we might never have found them. One thing puzzled me for a time—the marks were all on the western side of the trees. Now a blaze for a trail which is used in both directions would be marked indifferently on one or the other side, or on the part of the trunk facing, so to speak, the passer-by. Of course there were no traces of a pathway; the grasses had grown luxuriantly, and hidden every trace of the passage of men or beasts made even a few weeks since. The herbage was in parts three feet high, and growing rapidly. Flowers nestled down amongst the grass stalks,—wild flowers of attractive hues though small of petal—just as our pimpernel and poppy do in the cornfields at home. The living carpet must have grown within very recent times;

probably since the break up of the drought but a few weeks before, and the wildfowl and swans had followed the rain from their accustomed haunts to pastures new. Whatever its cause, this carpet effectually concealed from our eyes any traces of a path or roadway. Our horses could barely thrust themselves through the tall grasses by dint of their weight; and very loth were they to push on, fearing apparently of exchanging such bliss and wealth of fodder for the spinifex and comparatively bare plateau we had been lately traversing.

Our dray of fodder we had not yet touched, reserving it until we should really want it; but it had been a great help at times to our progress, particularly in passing over creeks. Now here was a chance of renewing the failing strength of our beasts, fattening our sheep, and giving us a big water supply! But the very thickness of the verdure compelled us to be on the alert, for it might very easily conceal blacks who could dart upon and spear us or our horses, and then disappear amongst the waving grasses over the quaking swamps without our being, if alive, able to follow. I expressed my wonder at the signs on the trees in an undertone to Jack.

"Perhaps it is the return route of some explorers," suggested he.

"I've heard of none, and we should have been sure to have heard, for exploration is becoming a rarer feat day by day. Besides, why should they blaze the track if they were getting home?"

"Could it be that we are out of our reckoning, and have struck Sturt's track?"

"Well, Mr. Navigator, you ought to know," said I. "You are responsible to some extent for the scientific observations of the expedition. But we can hardly be so far north as to touch any track where Sturt made east and west. His course is almost due north and south at this point. Besides, what are we talking of? That was forty years ago. No; these signs have been recently made, though some of them have been, I dare say, cut over twelve years ago."

"I have it, father," cried Jack.

"My dear boy," I whispered, "remember where we are. We cannot be too careful in this strange country. You may have it in earnest if you cry out, and I shall have the melancholy satisfaction of remarking *Habet*."

Looking very contrite, he explained that he guessed that the marks were not intended to be seen by men coming up-country, and if seen, to point down to the east, and to lead people to believe that there was no use to penetrate further west.

"Some poor devil, who has come up here prospecting for land, I dare say," said he; "and who wants to guard others from his own mistakes."

"Then that poor devil would never have let this land alone until the Government had given him an occupation grant of a considerable area for his discovery. We are probably close to the border of New South Wales; and the Government of our colony, or of South Australia, would only be too glad to extend its area in this direction."

"Well, then, I give it up," said Jack.

"I think you are right," said I, "but not in giving it up. I believe with you that the person or persons who cut those blazes only wanted to see them themselves, and not for others to be guided by them; not, indeed, because they wished to pose as philanthropists, but from more selfish motives, that is, they didn't want others to discover their whereabouts, or some gold mine which they have found out beyond this."

We had halted at the last tree on the eastern end, which we found blazed, and Jack crossed over to look at something moving in the distance above the herbage, when I heard him give a low whistle, and stretching out his hand to the trunk he tore down a piece of paper stuck up with a hairpin. It was but a little bit of brown paper, such as a shopman uses for parcels, not four inches square, but as he handed it over to me he was greatly excited. He had caught the glint of lead pencil upon it. The corners were curved in by exposure to rain and sun, and the writing was faded, but the sun, which had by its very heat prevented the over-exposure of the paper, also allowed us to catch the glint of

the pencil-marks. For some time we could not make any thing intelligible of it. At last we made out, as we considered satisfactorily, the following:—

To JAMES P. BURTON,—

Followed on the blazed trail as far as here. June 6th. Both well. Am going to take the north-west route to the valley you spoke of, as it seems on my map shorter. Have plenty of ammunition still and game. Shall expect you.

(Signed) JEREMY BATEMAN, JUNR.

6/6/1887.

Conceive, if you can, our looks as we spelt out that ragged piece of brown paper. How unromantically had it commenced its life as paper perhaps in some store in Melbourne, or in the old country; and what little value did any shop assistant or customer set upon it! But to us it was an equivalent to untold gold. We had been right after all, then. Our quest was guided if not by reason, at any rate by instinct, which was true, as it must have been providential. But who was James P. Burton? How did he know anything of the trail? What did the hairpin mean? Who were "both," and what above all, was the valley that J. P. Burton spoke of? J. P. B.! The initials were the same as Mr. Blackie's. Was it possible? But what could the young man have known of Blackie? It was true they had been on Mawson's Station at the same time, but they had not conversed—at least, as Blackie's story went. Then was Blackie's story true? I was prejudiced against him and I thought not. Perhaps, though, I was allowing my prejudice to blind me. Such were the thoughts that passed through my mind as I gazed at the innocent little piece of brown paper in my hand; and I have no doubt Jack's were much the same. But we were both prevented further thought by a voice which startled us into attention and into cocking our rifles with the promptitude of clockwork.

"Mr. Bateman, Mr. Bateman," rang out in Mitford's voice and there in the flesh, riding his slow way through the

grass, was the man himself. I had never known how much I liked him till that hour; never until I felt how glad I was to see him again safe and well.

With him was a band of about ten or fifteen blacks, all armed with their nullahs and spears, but looking friendly.

I leaned over and shook hands heartily with him for the space of some seconds; an unusual display of emotion on my part, which brought tears to the parson's eyes; but whether they were of reciprocal emotion or of physical pain—for he is smaller-made than I—I know not. Suffice it, that after I had let him go, Jack commenced pump-handling him vigorously. What a peculiar civilised habit is the shaking of hands! How much can be conveyed by it! How much more than by the kiss which women, and Frenchmen, interchange! The blacks, who had, I suppose, rarely seen so much greeting in the bush, where the courtesies are generally limited to a "How d'ye," set up a great chorus of jabbering and laughter. They were evidently pleased to see how well the parson was received by us. In the bustle something fell from Mitford's saddle-bow to the ground, and a couple of savages sprang forward to pick it up, surprising me much by such a show of courtesy. But the cries of the others arrested them—cries of disgust or alarm. "Ugh agh! ugh agh!" and looking down I saw that the innocent cause of all the bother was Mitford's myall stick with the carved snake upon it. The blacks were evidently greatly scared, and jabbered together at a great rate, retreating a little as if suspicious of what would next happen; and when Jack sprang out of his saddle, picked the piece of carved wood up, and handed it back to Mitford, the cries of the blacks were redoubled. They were evidently terribly alarmed.

"Let me see, Mitford, what you have been doing with the stick," said I to him, reaching out my hand as I spoke, "that makes the blacks so terrified."

He reached over and handed it to me, laughing as he said: "They will none of them touch it; and every one of the band was similarly impressed with it when I got to the camp." The blacks no longer shouted, they remained

perfectly still and, as I afterwards learnt from Mitford, whom they told, they expected both Jack and myself, with both our horses, to fall dead. We did not know this at the time, or I fear that Jack, who loves practical jokes, if they do no harm, would have acted his expected part, so I went on asking how he had fared and how he had met us.

"Well," said he, "it's a long story. But two things I can tell you: I arrived safely, and you can travel in safety and without further fear of hard knocks. It was mentioned that no one was killed the other day. This deputation is only about one fiftieth part of the blacks assembled in the neighbourhood, whose numbers are overwhelming."

We handed him the paper we had just found, which we certainly should not have hit upon had we not been searching for him; and he looked both grieved and pleased, grieved, I doubt not, at the hairpin and the "both"; pleased to find that we were at least on the right track.

It was now past noon, so long had we been deciphering the note, and accordingly we turned, and, followed by the blacks, led the way towards the rendezvous.

As we rode, Mitford told us the story of his visit. He said: "As you know, I rode away the day before yesterday, early in the morning, accompanied by Wangewata."

"Who's that?"

"The black whom we took prisoner, and who is marching behind at the head of the deputation. He is a chief in his tribe, not as we understand a chief, that is, a man who exercises authority over his fellows, but one who bullies them, and knocks them into doing what he tells them to do. He's a tolerably strong man, and somewhat courageous."

"How was it, then, that he didn't give a good account of himself in the fight the other day?" asked Jack.

"I'm afraid that with him, as with many blacks, superstition deadens all his courage. They have a great veneration for me as the carrier of this poor carved stick, which appears to them to be a symbol of immense power. I have tried to tell them what it really is, but they will not believe me; they fancy that I have the power, with this stick

to do much more wonderful things than the young ladies in Lord Lytton's book, did with their 'vril' sticks."

"I shouldn't disabuse them further," said I; "it may be worth a king's ransom to us, and it can't hurt them."

"Oh, I disagree," said Mitford. "Would you have me lend myself to deceit? That is what it comes to."

"Well, at any rate they won't let you undeceive them, so it doesn't matter what you say," said I.

"Oh, I live in the hope that by continual dropping I may wear away this stumbling-block in their way."

"I don't," I remarked drily.

"Well," said he, "to continue: Wangewata, as soon as he saw that he was free, began to run away as fast as his legs would allow; but when I put spurs to my horse, and shouted out to him that I wanted to speak to him, he came to me trembling in every limb, and eyeing the terrible stick as though it had been a veritable snake. I found out that he was a member of a tribe who were posted there to prevent any further approach up country, but I could not make out under whose orders they acted. He had some foolish notions of a valley full of white men, who directed their movements; but he did not know where they were, and had never seen them. So I concluded that he was handing down some tradition of which the blacks have plenty, and that Sturt and the other explorers had been too strong for or evaded them in past times. Well, of course I told him why we were coming up country, that we wanted no land, would buy everything we wanted, and would not touch a hair of the head of any one of them if we were left alone. He at first did not believe it, and said that he thought all white men could say what they pleased. I was rather incensed, and shook my stick at him, and from that time first became aware what a mighty power it was in my conversion of that savage into a humble follower. He fell down as though he had been shot, grovelled on the ground, and prayed for his life as though I had ordered him to the stake, and no assurances on my part would convince him that I had no homicidal intentions. However, after a bit he was persuaded

to get up and follow after me, pointing out now this way, now that, as the route taken by his comrades. Very shortly we came upon the edge of the long savannah which stretches out a long way south, and which is a continuation of the plain of grass where I met you. I was surprised at this, and asked him what it meant. He told me that the blacks knew it well, and that it stretched almost up to the great river, by which I presume he meant the Darling. As we were talking about it, and my horse was leisurely pushing his way through the herbage, munching the soft green grasses as he went, I heard first one whistle, then another, and very shortly afterwards, though Wangewata whistled a peculiar low answer, a spear came flying out of a thick clump of grass, a little ahead of me. The savage who threw it jumped out, and Wangewata, calling out to him in his loud, bullying voice, told him to go and hide his face among the women, for he had tried to kill a sacred man. I'm afraid that there was little of my clerical cloth which bespoke me sacred just then; the stick had evidently a good deal to answer for. From every clump of grass and bush black heads and brown faces peered out and many blacks ran up, still, however, threatening me as they came with their clubs and spears. But when they were near enough, Wangewata commenced a long speech, in which he told them such terrible tales of the powers of my stick—at which they gazed wonderstruck—that they all fell back in confusion, wailing and crying. The man who had thrown the spear was brought forward, and was handed to me to do what I pleased with, the other blacks averting their eyes from the terrible stick, which they evidently expected would pour out death upon the man and kill him as he stood. But of course I made no such pretence. I simply lectured the man for trying to take a human life, and told him not to do it again. He walked away looking very astonished," added Mitford drily.

I roared again and again with laughter. "I should think," said I, "he did look astonished; he didn't expect to get a sermon; he came for a stone and you gave him bread; a viper, and you gave him a fish, as you would say."

"Well, to proceed," continued he. "When the others saw I had pardoned the man, they were at first dumb-founded. Evidently they doubted my powers; but after a little, when Wangewata explained that I was a man devoted to peace and peaceful ways, they commenced such a wild dance and corroboree that I declare I felt much more timid than I had before. The way the fellows jumped up towards me, brandishing their sticks and spears and crying out as they danced, reminded me of—well, of a Highland fling with claymores."

"It's a good thing for you, young man," I said, "that my wife is some hundreds of miles away, otherwise your ears would tingle."

Mitford smiled.

"Well, they kept up the dancing for a long time, then they brought me a supper of kangaroo kid, roasted in a grass-lined hole, which was not at all distasteful after my long fast, for the afternoon was drawing in. But of course the purpose of my visit had not been achieved, and when I explained to Wangewata what I had come about, he decided to send out messengers to all the tribes in the neighbourhood, and started off about forty active runners for the purpose. They must have run very fast and well, for the next morning there was such a collection of blacks to be seen as will delight your heart. All fighting men, no woman or child amongst them; and I must say for a minute or two I felt distrustful, and wondered whether I had not after all brought them together to our common hurt. However, my suspense was soon at an end, for a great meeting was held, in which one after the other spoke, not perhaps with great dignity, but at any rate with fearful volubility; and the upshot was that they have decided to accompany us as a bodyguard, to see that we commit no depredations, and to hand us over to the similar attentions of any other peoples whom we may meet. I caught a good many references to the carved snake, which doubtless is responsible for some of the friendliness we are destined to receive from these people. The body of blacks away behind are a

deputation sent to convey the friendly intentions of the tribe, as I said that a large body would probably alarm you, and cause them to be fired upon.

"Well, we have to thank you for a good deal, that's clear, apart from the heroism which you have shown."

Mitford blushed and interrupted me—

"My dear friend, never speak of such natural conduct on my part as heroism. I simply fulfilled my duty. I am thankful that it was permitted to serve you so well as it probably will."

"Very well, then, I will say no more of that; but I must congratulate you on your diplomacy, which is worthy in tact and ability of an ambassador."

"So I am an ambassador—an ambassador of truth," replied he; "and that is what annoys me about this stupid stick, namely, that it should be such a living lie. I've a good mind to throw it away or burn it."

"For goodness' sake," I cried out, alarmed, "don't do anything of the sort! I can, perhaps, give you an explanation of its influence. Supposing that these natives are actually ordered about, as you say, by some body of whites who have assumed the sign of a snake crushing a wallaby, or some marsupial, as their emblem—the cunning of the white man overcoming the strength of a black—and they recognise in this stick the emblem of authority, what then?"

"That would certainly be better than superstition; but what makes you suggest such a far-fetched explanation of its powers?"

"Simply what you have told me, coupled with my observations of this morning. Everything appears to my mind to point to some oasis or spot where there is a strong settlement of whites. Mr. J. P. Burton, whoever he is, knew of it; a blazed track appears to lead to it; there also appear to be two routes to it, one by the north-west and another some other way. The natives speak of it, though they have not known it. Now, if the settlement exists, how does it manage to exist, why do we know nothing of it, and

how does it, unnoticed, hold communication for necessities with the coast? These questions are to my mind unanswerable; but yet the settlement may have an outlet by some other route to Carpentaria or Burke Town, where perhaps the coming and going of men would not be so much noticed. It is true no explorer has set down such an oasis north-west of here, but Sturt mentions one spot and Giles mentions another a good deal further west, where hills and valleys were clothed with verdure, water ran and grass grew, while all around was the interminable desert. So this valley—Happy Valley, I should call it—that the blacks and young Jeremy speak of, may be a similar oasis, unknown and almost unapproachable except by a fearful journey across the desert; yet to those who know how to get there—and in my notion Mr. Blackie is one such—the journey may in certain seasons be almost agreeable and short."

"Of course such a spot would be a very Elysium for men who were refugees from justice, or hermits," said Mitford. "But why should Jeremy Bateman seek out such a spot without previous knowledge?"

"I fancy because he comes within your category, and is a refugee from justice, as he thinks, and prefers the evils he knows not to those he knows and fears, reversing the advice of the poet."

CHAPTER X.

MUTINY AND DESERTION.

"Cooee-e!" went Jack, letting the full force of his lungs play so near my ears that at another time I might have been startled.

"Cooee-e!" came back in return from a tree out in the centre of the plain ahead of us, where Jack's sharp eyes had espied the party which we were to meet at the rendezvous. They, of course, had not had the distractions which had hindered us, and had been long awaiting our arrival. However, when we did come up, and my cousin and his two attendants saw the parson, they sent up three English cheers, which sounded very oddly away out on the plains. "Hip, hip, hip, hurrah!" they shouted, much to Mitford's confusion and to the blacks' delight. Nor were they less pleased when Jeremy, who I could see was glad to see Mitford back again, took the parson by both shoulders—they were standing on the ground, as we had dismounted—and, looking him straight in the face, he said—

"Forgive me for all my banter; you've heaped up coals of fire, as they say."

Mitford looked positively hurt that so much should be made of what he considered so simple and natural a feat as that he had just performed, and blushed like a girl. But there was pleasure as well as pain in his heightened colour; the very natural pleasure that he had broken down some, if not all, of Jeremy's ridicule against him and his cloth.

When we had told our stories, and Jeremy had read his son's letter, which he did with as quiet a face as though it had been a newspaper paragraph ten years old, he told us that he had discovered that the country to the north and west seemed a broad treeless plain with sandy ridges and

scarcely any herbage except some spinifex, and that we were evidently on the verge of the desert. He had made for and reached a little hillock whence he could see for some miles around, but nothing was to be seen north or west but a glittering sea of sand.

After a short halt we made for the camp, which lay some five miles behind us, and jogged along with our attendant company of blacks more serenely than we had done since we left the homestead.

The evening was drawing in when we passed through the belt of forest which separated us from the broad plain where our camp was pitched yesterday.

"Hallo, lazy dogs," cried Jack, "they've let the fire out."

It was true. No fire was burning, as there certainly should have been, as a beacon to guide us back to camp, and the absence of any movement at the base of the tree and of any signs of life made me say—

"Surely, Jeremy, we, old bush hands as we both are, haven't got bushed and missed the tree?"

"No, no," said he, with a laugh; "I've taken note of the landmarks, and that gap over there, with the rising ground before it, is the one we came through yesterday. I'll give it the lazy dogs, as Jack says, when we get back. Here, Tom and Dick, just canter on ahead and rouse them up; they've gone to sleep. Filled their own stomachs, I suppose, and never given a thought for ours."

The two men rode off at a gallop across the plain, racing one another as though they had been a couple of schoolboys out for a holiday on donkeys. They were both light-hearted, willing fellows, old stockmen who had enlisted for the spree of the thing, men whose education was certainly far superior to that of their class; probably they had been unfortunate clerks or merchants years ago, and throwing care to the winds, had given misfortune the slip in this paradise of labour.

"You may be right about the gap and the ground," said I; "but there's one man who won't have acted so inconsiderately, I'll bet; that is Jim."

"Oh, I'm afraid that Jim is, after all, but human," said Jeremy, with a laugh. I noticed how much lighter-hearted he had got since he had read the little brown letter which he folded up and put in his inner breast-pocket.

"Well, bar drink, I would trust Jim to do his duty always," replied I; "but when he gets sight of a bottle, he is lost to all sense of honour and duty."

"There, Mr. Mitford," said Jeremy, "see how my cousin is continually trending upon your vocation. However, it's a text this time, not a sermon."

Mitford smiled. "I wish," said he, "I could bring home to the men I come across what a terrible curse this drink is to them; how it saps away every virtue and good feeling, how it makes a man a criminal, a robber, a murderer. They will not see it. They always say that they know when they've had enough, and that it will not affect them so. Why, I have only been in the country a few months—not quite a year—and yet have buried five as good and stout men as you would find; honest and kindly, but killed in drunken brawls, or by their own hands, when suffering from the madness of their drink. It is fearful——"

"Cooee-e—cooee—cooee," came over the plain, while simultaneously a bright light shot up.

"That is an urgent cry," said Jeremy. "Come, Jack, and let us go ahead. But no, we had better not separate. Mitford, will you tell the blacks that we have to canter on, and ask them either to run after or come on leisurely."

The communication was made, and the black fellows elected to come on at their leisure; as they might well do, having walked some fifteen miles since morning, and not being very fond of long marches.

Accordingly we galloped ahead, and soon came up to the tree where the fires were now burning briskly, having, I suppose, only been smouldering before.

"Foul play!" called out Tom the stockman. "There has been foul play here!"

"Good God, what's that?" cried Jeremy, slipping down from his horse as he spoke, and leaning over the body

of a man on the ground, where the two men were now standing.

"Why, it's Jim!" cried out the other stockman, as the flames of the fire shot up and shone on the face of the recumbent man. He put his face down to Jim's head, and, sniffing, cried out, "Drunk, by the living Hallelujah." My dog Nina, which had run ahead of us, stood shivering and whining with fear.

I had jumped down and placed my hand upon the man's heart. It was beating feebly; but as I drew out my hand, half-disgusted at the man's disobedience and want of common honesty, I felt the cool air on my fingers in a way which made me examine them by the light of the fire. They glistened, and were wet with blood! Hastily pulling aside his coat and shirt, I found a gaping wound near his neck, and then, for the first time, we saw that he had lost a good deal of blood, as his clothes at the back were saturated with it, and the sandy ground stained where he had been lying.

Mitford had meanwhile been ransacking our medicine-chest, and with the guidance of his *vade-mecum* administered at frequent intervals a dose of cordial or pick-me-up of some sort which he found recommended.

In the meanwhile Jeremy and the men were fanning the fire so as to make further search. What had become of the other men, their horses, and the baggage mules, nay, of the baggage itself? The dray with the fodder was close by; but the horses had all gone. The men had mutinied, and, looting the camp, had gone! Had they taken the black with them? Who was there to give any idea of what had transpired?

At last we heard the pitter-patter of the feet of our black allies, and soon they had gathered round—a motley crew, looking on with wonder at the curious, unexpected spectacle. Then, as we still waited for Mitford's restoratives to do their work, we heard the hasty guttural of the blacks announcing some other arrival, while my old hound pricked up his ears and growled again. The circle of blacks opened, and the two men who had ridden away to the east in the morning came back, and with them was Wirri-wirri.

"Hallo, Wirri-wirri," cried Jeremy, "come here! What does it all mean?"

But the black's teeth chattered with fright and cold; for the evening was chilly, and he had no blanket upon his bare, glossy skin.

"Well, Tom, wot's the meanin' of this little lark, eh?" said one of the new arrivals to the stockman. "I shud have thought you was above misleading a mate out on the desert at night-time."

"What do ye mean, man?" said Tom.

"Why, we've bin lookin' about for more'n an 'our 'n a half," said the grumbler. "Couldn't make out what you'd done with the fire."

Tom explained, and the two men looked so genuinely surprised, that it was evident they knew nothing of the defection.

But Mitford having managed to stimulate the wounded man's heart, and brought a little glow of colour into his pale, bloodless skin, set himself to work calming Wirri-wirri's fears, and finding out what he knew of the matter. The other natives were taken down to the larger fire, and given half a sheep out of compliment to their visit; and soon we heard them jabbering away delightedly as they pulled the meat to pieces, and half-roasting it on spits, gulped it down hot and juicy with greedy haste.

Wirri-wirri required a good deal of patient examination by our chaplain before a connected story could be extracted from him. At last, just as the men had prepared our much-needed supper of camp-bread and mutton, the clergyman told him he might go and join his coloured friends. Then he sat himself down and told us the tale while we supped.

"Very soon after 'the Colonel' had left for his tour to the north—and he left after you by some half hour," said the clergyman to me; "so at least the black says."

"Quite right," said Jeremy; "go on."

"Almost immediately the Colonel was out of sight, Blackie came to Jim with a square bottle of fire water, and asked him to drink a drain with a mate. Jim eyed it longingly, but wanted to know where it came from, so Blackie called

out that he needn't make so much pucker, it was out of a private store of his own."

"That must have been a lie," said Jeremy, "unless," he added, with a dry smile, "he reckoned upon his chickens as they were going to be hatched so soon. Well, what did Jim do?"

"He took a glass and drank it off, and another and another, and Blackie pretended to drink too; but no one else had a drop, so Jim held out his glass to Watson, the big bushman, who pushed it away, saying he would have none of it; he was going to have much better stuff very soon, and no thanks to anybody. So Jim went on drinking by himself until he spoke as though he had 'um pebble in um mouth,' as Wirri-wirri said. Then Blackie called out, 'Now, my men,' to the other two, 'all is ready. Who's coming with me?' Jim wanted to know where he was going. And the other replied, 'Where you can't follow.' He commenced fastening up the horses' reins, undid their hobbles, and put the baggage mules together with their loads; and when he had done so, Jim found his legs and rolled up to him saying, 'What are you doing? we ain't going off.' The black says that he interlarded his words with native chicks and clicks; but I guess that they were English hiccoughs," said Mitford, with the ghost of a smile.

"Oh, Jim, oh, Jim," I cried; "how could you be betrayed so?" The wounded man, who had turned round slightly towards the warmth of the fire, hearing his name called, said in an undertone, "Here!" as though answering muster-roll. His voice was still thick from the effects of the drink he had taken.

Mitford went to the man, helped him into an easier position, saw that the bandages were right, and then came back. Resuming, he said—

"Well, when Jim rolled up so, Blackie turned round and said, 'You drunken beast, if you don't clear off I'll give you what for,' and he held out his revolver threateningly. But Jim was equal to the occasion, and, pulling out his own weapon with more activity than would seem possible, he braced himself for a bit, then pointing the weapon at Blackie, said, 'Mutiny! I'll lay you in irons, by God!' At least,

Wirri-wirri is sure only of mutiny, irons, and God, which he knows, he says, from Queensland experience."

Here Mitford looked at Jeremy, who answered—

"Yes, we had a mutiny on the plantation once, and Wirri-wirri came through it on our side, and we had to put up some of the mutineers in irons. But I'm afraid his acquaintance with the Deity's name is not from the plantation, but grog shops."

Mitford glanced at Jeremy again, and he blushed.

"Beg your pardon, chaplain; no offence, you know."

Mitford smiled, and went on—

"When Wirri-wirri saw them pulling out revolvers, he thought his presence was no longer required. He explained to me that Jim's hand was so unsteady that he feared he should get a stray shot; so he ran and hid in the dray under two bales of hay, which were a little apart, but could not hide right in, because of some hard thing which stopped him. However, only his head peeped out, and that he covered with loose hay, only just allowing his eyes to peer through it. He does not seem to have been noticed during the fracas, for when he had completed his arrangements he saw Jim on the ground catching at his breast, and Blackie, with his coat off, standing near, with his revolver in his hand, burning at the barrel, as Wirri-wirri says. His arm was bare, and bleeding from a wound, which Watson was tying up. Meanwhile the other man had started off the cavalcade of baggage mules in the direction which Mr. Thomas Bateman took this morning."

"Ah, the rascal knew of the grass-country very well, I doubt not, and this was his *coup-d'état*," said I. "Is that all?"

"Little more! The two others finished their surgical operation, and jumped into their saddles, and were off in a canter in the same direction, with their rifles in their hands and their revolvers and knives hanging at their belts. When they had disappeared, the black crept out and found Jim prostrate on the ground, writhing in pain and cursing, with his revolver in his hand. He had strength enough to aim shots at the black, who retreated to his hiding-place, and only just came out as the last two stockmen rode up."

CHAPTER XI.

A DESPERATE MOVE.

"WHEW!" said Cousin Jeremy, when the clergyman's story was finished. "Now, my fellow committee-men, what is to be done?"

But we all sat silent, and unable to answer the knotty question.

"One thing in my mind is certain," said he again; "and that is, that J. P. Burton and J. P. Blackie are identical. Another is, that the fellow knows my son, and that he knows the way too. Let us first decide whether there is such a valley to the north-west as they say, or not."

"Does that matter?" said I, "whether or no there is a valley? It seems clear to my mind that unless this paper is a lie, Jeremy has gone to find it, and will assuredly want help if he simply finds a sandy desert, while, if there be such a valley, perhaps his companion may get him into trouble, like Abraham's wife."

"Passing over the deplorable system you have of trenching upon Mitford's privileges," said Cousin Jeremy, "I think you are right. So that is decided, is it? We still march forward to the north-west in search of the Happy Valley." He was, notwithstanding the great blow to our hopes and plans given us by the mutinous trio, more light-hearted and sanguine, because of the veritable traces of his son, than he had ever been before.

As all assented, he went on—

"Now, what does the committee say to the course to be adopted? Are we to jog along the belt of verdure which lies to the south, and overtake our mutineers, who doubtless think the blacks have gobbled us all up, or strike away to the north-west over the desert at once, after my boy?"

"The difficulties we shall meet in the latter course are tremendous," I said. "We have only one spare horse, our only provender are live sheep, which will hamper us, and we have only hand water-kegs sufficient to last perhaps a day, not more, for ourselves. Now, how about the horses? The herbage and the dew, if there be any, may help them a little, as the rains have been recent; but not for long. We are almost on the tropic, aren't we, Jack?"

Jack, pleased at being consulted, pointed out the exact spot which he made out on the map we occupied, and we found that we were within a hundred and fifty miles of the tropic, having come a more northerly course than I had supposed.

"What my cousin says," said Jeremy, "has great weight. He has told us of the *cons*; now for the *pros*. I fancy that by making a direct cut across the desert in this north-westerly direction, we shall be able to get in advance of Blackie and his rascally friends, if indeed they have gone by the belt and round in some such direction, and if we do, does it not strike you, my friends, that we are many more than they, and could cook their goose for them, and recover our stolen property? Besides, they will never believe we have cut across, and so we will take them by surprise in front."

"How about ammunition?" said I.

Jeremy looked blank. Here was a stone wall indeed. It was true that we carried cartridge belts, but they contained but a few charges, while the mutineers had the whole of our ammunition with them on the pack-horses.

"Well," said Jeremy, "we have a forlorn hope in being able to find an ambush and pot them off. It's a thing I hate. Fair fighting and no favour, say I; but beggars can't be choosers. Who is in favour of my idea?—say who."

Mitford held up his hand with a smile. Jeremy looked astonished, and the clergyman blushed and said—

"I am in favour of the short cut, though I fear you underrate the obstacles. Pluck and determination may overcome them. Of course I'll take no part in the fighting, and, if I can, carry a flag of truce."

"You might just as well carry a piece of stilton cheese," said Jeremy, with a smile. "They are desperate now; their lives they will reckon as forfeit, and they would rather die game than by the hangman's noose, for I doubt not that poor Jim cannot survive this."

"Ah, how about Jim?—you have not settled about him yet," said I. "He couldn't possibly accompany us, and we can't possibly leave him here to die untended."

"No, of course not. I fancy we had better leave Tom and Dick behind with the waggon, at or near the belt of grass. As the natives are friendly now, we need not fear for their safety, and they will, as it were, form a depot for us to fall back upon should we return."

Should we return! What a lugubrious expression! I made a wry face, and Jeremy laughingly continued—

"We have to look every possibility in the face. I am sorry for you others, and, if you please, I will leave you instead of Tom and Dick; but you can't expect me to drop the expedition just at the moment when we look like bringing it to a successful issue."

"And just when the apple has sprung back almost out of our grasp," remarked I. "Don't misconstrue my caution. I am here to go through thick and thin. Blood is thicker than water, and Jack and I will stand by you to the end. But Mitford here ought not to imperil his life again. He has already shown what stuff he is made of. Let that suffice. Let him live to serve a brilliant purpose in some other direction, carrying out the labours which he has embraced as his life duties. I am still uncertain of the advantages to accrue from your *coup-d'état*, Jeremy. Supposing we do not find the Happy Valley, and have to turn back when almost spent, how can we hope to get back alive, with no water or fodder for our horses, and no food for ourselves? Did you ever read how Ernest Giles and other great Australian explorers suffered? Did you ever read Sir Samuel Baker's account of his journeys through Central Africa, or the journals of Speke and Grant? If you did, you will remember what fearful sufferings these endured, and

what trials they passed through, and how they had sometimes to turn back and walk their jaded, starving beasts till they dropped, and themselves were reduced to shadows."

"Very good," said Jeremy; "you are arguing against. That is only fair. Now, in return, do you remember how every one of the great men you have mentioned triumphed over their obstacles? and that, whereas they had only the exploration of continents and savage lands as their object, we are seeking to save a fellow-creature, and that my son. Think of Stanley's quest for Livingstone. Hang it, man, we shall have no swamps, no hostile dwarfs, no fevers to meet, no huge rivers to cross, no wild animals to fear—only a few hundred miles of desert."

"Which may prove worse than all," said I. "At least Stanley had plenty of water. Have you ever been for days without drinking, old man? No, I dare say you have not. Think of a burning sun and burning sand, with mirages of water and trees to torment us, without a pool or blessed drop within a hundred miles, that is, four days' journey."

"My son, my son!" cried Jeremy, with warmth.

"Very well, Jeremy, your son is paramount. Not another word from me and Jack shall you hear—eh, Jack?" said I, turning to that young man.

"I follow the leader!" cried Jack, with youthful enthusiasm. "We *must* succeed; we cannot fail if we put British pluck and determination into it, as Mr. Mitford says."

"And as for Mr. Mitford —" said I.

"Mr. Mitford," said that person, "isn't going to be left out in the cold, I assure you. He is not going to shirk risks that his fellows will incur—not by any means."

"A wilful man will have his way," said I, with a smile.

"Anyway, you know the risks."

"Yes," said Jeremy; "you took good care to paint those."

The words were harsh, but the smile disarmed them of all ulterior meaning.

"Now," said he, "we will resolve this committee into one of ways and means. How are we to provision our force? How

are we to find the valley? How many natives are we to take?"

Finally it was settled that Tom and Dick should be left with one horse and the dray to await our coming, or return to civilised districts if the food they found on the belt gave out; and in this event they were to post up notices and blaze their track. They were to tend Jim according to Mitford's instructions, removing him upon the dray to the cooler belt of grass on the morrow, and coming back for the fodder afterwards. The medicine-chest was to be distributed about our persons, sufficient of its contents being left with the two men for Jim's cure, besides some bark for fever. As to the natives, Mitford spoke to Wangewata, and he assured Gandamorani, or "The Holder of the Snake," that he and two or three others would accompany him wheresoever he went, that they would at once send back to their camp for some dried meats and other provisions, and that they would bring two or three skins of water for our and their use by dawn to-morrow if we would lend them a couple of horses. This demand tested our faith to its foundations, but as our position was desperate, we sent off a couple of our spare horses—those of Tom and Dick with them.

* * * * *

When we woke at dawn, the blacks had used such expedition that their messengers had returned with jerked kangaroo meat in plenty, and half-a-dozen water skins, made by tying up the skin of a freshly-killed kangaroo with his own sinews. These tribes had evidently come in contact with Europeans to have learnt even this. I never knew of a black who provided for the morrow. As some of the men were throwing off the bales of hay from our waggon, a shout announced an important discovery. There, to our delight, was a long oblong box marked "ammunition," and heavy, as it well might be, for, when we forced it open, we found some 5000 rounds of ball cartridges. The last few bales revealed an almost equally gladdening sight of two or three shovels, a pickaxe, and a few carpenters' tools. Then we remembered, and called ourselves foolish for having forgotten, that the

ammunition and the tools had come up from Sydney too late to be packed amongst the other mule packages, and had accordingly been shot into the bottom of the dray, where Wirri-wirri had doubtless grazed his heels against them when he hid himself.

The ammunition was our reserve of rifle and revolver cartridges, and was hailed by all, except indeed Mitford, as a God-send. We distributed amongst our party a large portion of the cartridges, filling our belts and weapons, for most of us carried Winchester repeating rifles. We also strapped a few tin cases into the saddle-bags, which we one and all carried. Killing three of our sheep, we cut the flesh into strips, and distributed it amongst our number, and by letting the strips hang exposed to the sun from our saddles, we managed to jerk them, though I fear that they will not be very appetising, flapping as they do against our horses' sides as we ride along.

The rest of our reduced herd—for the mutineers had killed and taken two with them—were left with our rear-guard; and after looking to Jim's comfort, and seeing him off with his escort of countrymen and blacks southwards, we started in a contrary direction about nine in the morning, on this our desperate attempt to rescue our kinsman, and head off the mutineers. Unfortunately we could learn nothing from Jim, who raves incoherently, and Wirri-wirri has exhausted his store of information. So we can only guess that the mutineers have gone to the Valley of which young Jeremy wrote in his note on the tree; but all things seem to point us that way.

The plain becomes more sterile at every step northwards. Here and there at rare intervals a salt-bush only a few inches high varies the line of glistening sand with its dusty green foliage, and even the spinifex struggles unsuccessfully for existence. Our horses, carrying extra loads of provisions and ammunition, look, poor beasts, in vain for a blade of grass. In speaking of provisions, I may seem to use a grandiose term, for we have jerked mutton and lukewarm water, and not enough of either. Every one is put on strict allowance;

our spirit flasks are sealed against orders, the kangaroo water-skins may only be opened by our leader's command, and no man may remove an ounce of meal or water without permission. If he is short when his stock is taken, he has to account for it, or have it placed to his account, which means his going without one or more meals. Such are the strict orders under which leaders and men have cheerfully placed themselves, knowing well that only by discipline and organisation can any one survive our perilous journey across this sea of sand.

Far out on the sandy plateau, miles away from our camping-ground of yesterday, we stumbled across a sight pregnant with warning to us if we fail. A heap of whitened bones strewed the plain, or lay half-concealed and half-revealed by the drifting sand. Some expedition, perhaps, or company of natives, lost upon this pathless desert, and overtaken by death within a few miles of life and safety. Life is a puzzle! We too may just be within grasp of safety and yet perish!

CHAPTER XII.

IS THAT A MAN OR A HORSE?

SINCE I last wrote five days have elapsed. Five days of burning by day—for we are within the tropics—and of freezing by night, so quickly are the sun's rays radiated back through the clear dry air at nightfall. We, who have been accustomed to the heat of our station and plantations, are of course fairly well seasoned; but Jack, for all his bright spirits and vivacity, is beginning to feel these extremes of temperature, and Mitford has an occasional fit of ague at night. The natives suffer most. So we have lent them two of our blankets, and they all huddle together for sleep so closely, that Jack declares no one could get a knife between one body and the next. Wirri-wirri at first took up a somewhat dignified position, holding himself too good to associate with Wangewata and his fellow tribesmen; for does he not wear a suit of clothes, and is he not comparatively civilised—that is, able to swear in English? But he has swallowed his pride, which he finds a poor substitute for warm blankets and numerous bed-fellows. The sand would be of itself hard enough to traverse; but, to add to our difficulties, here and there, where the impervious bed-rock apparently approaches the surface, and allows rain to collect, the spinifex grows, a trial to every one's patience and a torture to every horse's feet. Our poor animals at the end of the day's journey frequently have their hoofs bathed in blood from their leg wounds, though they are getting astonishingly wary and careful. One bale of hay, which we distributed amongst our burdens, has been almost consumed, though dealt with most sparingly. Were it not most rigidly protected, we should have lost it long since, for the poor brutes are so starved that they hang round us as we sleep, and

would almost pull us off our beds to get at the few stalks we still preserve for them. The scanty vegetation which grows near the spinifex in some places affords them a miserable repast, which, unfortunately, they cannot get very often without first pricking their poor noses and heads. Their underlips are swollen with tearing up the stunted growth, and their sides are getting lean with hunger. Fortunately, we have no want of water so far, finding a water-hole almost every day, though it is often shallow enough, and in a few weeks will, if more rain does not fall, be a hollow of caked mud. The underlying rocks crop out here and there near the surface, and I have, I believe, recognised some very fair-looking specimens of gold-bearing quartz amongst them. But of what use is gold quartz to us? Even if we found solid gold nuggets, we should be equally ungrateful; now, a cottage loaf with some fresh creamy butter— Jack, who is looking over, cries out against the allusion. He says: "It is as torturing to speak of the pleasures of the table out here as it was for the fasting prisoners in the Dutch prison at The Hague to have the odours from the governor's kitchen led up to them in tubes."

Our jerked meat begins to taste very much like boot-leather, but fortunately a mob of three ducks, which flew over our heads in a south-easterly direction yesterday, allowed us to vary our *ménu*, for two of them fell to a right and left shot by Jack, who caught up the only fowling-piece of the party carried by Wirri-wirri. The expenditure of two of our precious shot cartridges—for we have a very limited number, the box on the dray holding none at all—was watched by all with great interest and excitement, and loud were the plaudits which accompanied the fall of two-thirds of the mob. We gave one to the men and kept the other for ourselves, preferring to eat it cooked if possible rather than raw. The men made no such trouble, however, the blacks showing the way. We cleaned our bird and plucked and managed to roast him; but I grieve to say that so near are we all to starvation that the parts of our bird which we threw away disappeared very shortly afterwards when the

blacks passed. Ugh! I couldn't do that! I'd rather starve, but these fellows are like chickens—if they don't eat everything, at least they try to do so. One pleasing sign that our visitors brought us was that, amongst the contents of their crops, we found some green pea-like particles, and as they were coming from the direction in which we were going, we decided that we had come some way through the desert, and were nearing its further side.

Jeremy remarked this to me, and I, who am little of a botanist, referred the particle to Mitford and Jack. It certainly looked like a green pea, but it was flatter. "I know," said Jack, at last; "it's a green haricot bean!"

"Oh, ridiculous," said I; "that it cannot be; you might as well say it's a gold pencil-case, or some other refinement of luxury!"

"Well," said Mitford, "it certainly looks like one; perhaps it is one of the fruits of a leguminous flower of which Australia has so many species."

We eyed one another to see whether any one would have the courage to test it. But no one had.

"I say," said Jeremy, very quietly; "this is a curious species of duck that feeds on haricot beans and carries letters, isn't it?"

"Carries letters! Gracious goodness, what do you mean?" said Mitford, very much excited.

Jeremy, who had been plucking the bird, pulled out a piece of brown paper similar to the one we had seen with the hairpin stuck through it. It was screwed up and attached to the wing of the bird with two little ligatures, which prevented it from being plucked off, and yet had not impeded the duck's flight.

"You read it, Jack," said Cousin Jeremy, as though he had no interest in the note. Jack read it out:—

"Come quickly and rescue us, whoever you are. We are at the great rock pinnacle. My companion is dying.

"ANNETTE BATEMAN."

Annette Bateman! Annette Blake! So she had assumed

young Jeremy's name, and he was dying. But when and where was the great rock?"

"Just like a woman," said Jeremy brusquely; "she doesn't put any date to the letter and no proper address. Why didn't she say Australia, 1887—that would have been a little more definite? The great rock may be in Timbuctoo, and the note may have been written by some practical joker years ago."

As I saw that the father was relieving his overwrought feelings, you may be sure I said nothing for a time.

"Wherever the rock is," he continued, "it can't be a very grand place, or the duck would hardly have left it for the inhospitable desert; and it surely isn't very near the Happy Valley we hear of. No duck would have been such a fool as to leave that and venture over the burning sand."

"You don't know. The ducks have a wonderful instinct, and may be making east, down towards districts where the drought will not touch them; or it may have been, like us, making for this legendary valley, and got frightened back."

"The woman doesn't say anything of the valley, so she can't have seen it," said Jeremy. "But," he added, in rather a gentler tone, "she's shown a good deal of sense sending this messenger, and I dare say others, over the country. I guess Jeremy never thought of that. She has led us a pretty dance. At least, it's all through her that the boy has made us come here. Ah, *cherchez la femme*, indeed. Money is the root of all evil, they say. They are fools, Cousin Tom. Woman, sir, is the root, trunk, and branch; money is only the fruit and leaves. Most subordinate part it plays; and I can tell you that the tree knows how to shed the fruit and foliage too."

After our midday rest we started off again, and not long after we were startled to see Jack riding on ahead—poor boy, how thin he looked—and excitedly waving his hand. In the distance we saw, as we too ascended the little wave or hillock of sand which ran south and north, a dark mass on the desert. How our hearts beat! I can only speak for my own heart, but I can speak for Mitford's and Jeremy's faces.

Even the men pressed eagerly forward; and the blacks, who were a little in the rear—they were very footsore, and hampered our movements terribly—gave a feeble Agh, Agh—a substitute for a cheer. But they little knew what they were cheering about. What was this object we were approaching? Was it—? Even the thought would not resolve itself to frame a question implying such an end to our exertions. Nor was our anxiety lessened by seeing a bird, a large crow, or Australian raven, rise from the object, scared by Jack's shouts. Was *it* mutilated thus by crows? *It?* However, we soon got near enough to make out that the object was not certainly a human body, or not one alone; then the form showed more plainly, and we discovered that the body was that of a horse. The relief to our feelings was immense. Jeremy heaved a sigh of relief, and then, catching himself in this expression of his emotion, frowned, and made some casual remark on the heat of the day.

"Cousin Jeremy," said I, "that crow came from some district near here where there are trees, or at any rate verdure. Take hope—the wanderers will be found."

"Ah, dead or alive," he said, with a little laugh which sounded discordantly. "That is what they used to say at the head of notices for the capture of robbers and outlaws. The man who takes another's life, or robs another of his wife, is an outlaw."

"Have you ever asked yourself what you shall do if we find the boy alive?" said I.

"Yes, I have, a dozen times every minute," said he, with such energy and force in his tone that I started. "Would you like to know what my answer is? Yes, you would, I can see? It is this: Hand him over to Cousin Tom, the magistrate, and let the law take its course. That is a pleasing thing, is it not, for a father to have in view on looking for his only son? But Tom"—and his voice, grave and bitter as it had been, broke down as he brushed the tears away from his eyes—"you won't give him up? You'll let me take him away, won't you? I'll take him right out of the country, I

swear it, and you shall come in for no blame. Fool that I am, what do I say? No blame! Why, of course you will lose your commission; you will be degraded, perhaps prosecuted, prosecuted. But oh, Tom, he is my only boy, my only child!"

The strong man, strong for so long, nerved with bands of steel for weeks, broke into tears.

"Jerry," I said—it was a term I had not used since we had been boys together—"keep up heart and nerve. You may want it all. Don't think your own flesh and blood such a beast as to believe that he would betray you and your son after such privations and agony as both must have passed through. The majesty of the law! A fig for the majesty of the law!"

Jeremy caught over and took my hand, and, clasping it tightly in his own rugged palm, said—nothing. It was, perhaps, the best thing he could do, as he could not trust himself to words.

However, before we reached the carcass he had completely recovered from his temporary outburst, and he has been since the same cool, polite, sarcastic Roman father as before. The horse would alone have shown us whose it was, for the bridle and saddle were those which I had given the boy myself two years ago, and which he was wont to leave at an hotel close by the railway terminus to use when he came up to the homestead.

But as if to prevent the possibility of our making any mistake in the identity of the horse and its accoutrements, a piece of a linen handkerchief was fastened to one of the buckles, upon which, in lead pencil so clear and distinct that it might have been written the previous day, was written in Jeremy's own unmistakable handwriting—

"To J. P. BURTON,—

"Have struggled through so far, making less pace every day; provisions are giving out. We have had little else but water for long. Thank God, plenty of that. This horse has

not eaten anything for eight days. Are pressing on for the rock. But push on as soon as you see this.

"20th June, 1887."

"JEREMY BATEMAN."

Only a fortnight ago had that letter been written, that despairing appeal; but it was evidently written before the notice we had found on the duck. Fourteen days had the young man taken to reach a spot which had taken us but six; evidently we were fast gaining upon him, and he had taken but little forethought for the perils which lay before him. Then this great rock lay near; evidently very near, for the ducks had probably escaped thence but the day before, and they had come from a point almost due north-west, in which direction we were in fact heading ourselves. So that by to-morrow, or the next day at latest, we shall reach the pinnacle, and perhaps find that we have arrived too late. We are now hot on the scent, and we have pushed on well to-day, after first removing the saddle and other accoutrements of the horse, with a curious idea that they may turn in useful. I calculate that the animal must have fallen some week ago, and though his carcass is decidedly high to our nostrils, the blacks all tarried awhile behind, not caring to let so much good meat waste. Good meat, forsooth! Evidently the travellers had taken some few steaks where they could find them, and the poor brute was so angular and bony that it would have been difficult, I should think, to have found anything but bone and gristle upon him when he died; since then the crows have been busy. However, the natives are particularly brisk to-night, having refused their supper allowance, and so I doubt not that they satisfied their most pressing needs. We have journeyed so far north that we have opened up a new star away near the horizon; at least that is what I suppose it to be, the little twinkling light which shines in flickers in the clear night air of the desert, and yet is motionless, so far as I can make out. It may be that it has come such a short way over the horizon that its arc is unnoticeable; at any rate

has now disappeared, and the waning moon holds her silvery sway without any such astronomical rival. We are encamped to-night in a circlet of rocks, whose gaunt forms and moon-cast shadows remind one of Stonehenge. They are very good specimens of reef; such reef as at Gympie or Castlemaine, would probably produce six ounces to the ton or more. I always had a liking for the notion expressed by the Melbourne king of geologists, that Australia was one vast gold field with outcrops here and there. And here the quartz is pure white, and looks most ghostly, for the sand, driven by the winds which occasionally blow here, and which it has been our good fortune hitherto to escape, have kept the surface clean and even, as though it had been polished down.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DESERT GOLGOTHA.

TO-DAY has been such a day of surprises and adventures, strange and unlooked for, that I must chronicle them at once, ere other matters come to take precedence. In the early morning I woke, being seized with an intense desire to prospect around, and set to work grubbing amongst the rocks, knocking off little bits, and digging down amongst the sand to discover any "colour,"* which I had not been able to find. One mound particularly attracted me, a great sand-drift, which appeared to have been driven right against one of the largest rocks, and accordingly I dug down into it against the quartz. It was laborious work, but the morning was cool and I was fresh and am tough and wiry. As I dug, the sand kept flowing down almost like water, and multiplying my efforts, but Jack, who had been awakened by my hammer, came to the rescue and managed to prevent a good deal of the sand from slipping back. I stood up at last to straighten my back, after I had been thus engaged for some time, and Jack, offering to help me, leant forward. In doing so, he overbalanced and slid down the hole, of two or three feet in depth, which I had made, and with his weight brought down the slippery particles where he had stood.

"Look out!" I said hastily, for fear he should hurt himself against the shovel; and he, catching at it as he stumbled, only increased the disaster by his struggles.

"Ah!" I said, "a nice assistant you are; see, you have given me half-an-hour's work to get all that sand out again."

But Jack, who had turned round away from me, was hastily scraping away at the bank. "Merciful powers!" said he, "what is this?"

* A term used by gold-miners of signs of the precious metal.—Ed.

"What is what?" said I; "seeing that you are not transparent, my boy, I cannot tell whether you have found the biggest nugget on record or your fate."

"Look, father," cried he; and, as he stepped aside, I saw that he had been uncovering what looked like a mass of brown seaweed, such as one sees on a sandy beach. I stepped closer. It was hair, and looked, when he had dusted away some more sand from it, human. I plunged in my shovel and in a few minutes I had uncovered a mummy face. Dry and tense was the skin of the face, dark brown, and pulled away from the teeth, which were regular and white; the nostrils and the eye-sockets were similarly enlarged; the eyes were intact, but leathery and sunken.

"Another victim to this demon of the desert," said I, as we both uncovered our heads.

"*Requiescat in pace*," said Mitford, who had come up behind.

"That is Popish, isn't it?" asked Jeremy's cheery voice.

"Popish or not, it is a very fitting remark," said I; "and here I go to re-bury the poor fellow."

"Half a moment," said Jeremy; "what is that on his breast? Perhaps this may prove another discovery of value. The living are paramount; none can be more particular than myself about disturbing other people's graves, but we owe it to our very dangerous enterprise to get all the information we can." As he spoke, he brushed away the sand from the breast of what had been a human being, and discovered a rough jacket, hiding a shirt all dry, and, as it were, brittle with the intense siccative heat of the desert; the hands were folded over the chest, and bound with cords together at the wrists. They clasped a small tablet of marble-like quartz, on which was written in plain black Roman letters—

"Put away by starvation for mutiny. By order of the Valley Council." A.D. 1880.

We stared at one another. Were we dreaming? I saw Mitford pinch himself furtively, to ascertain if he were awake. Starved to death! What inhumanity, for mutiny to

be punished by so barbarous, so lingering a punishment! "Put away"—what a gruesome jest! Then, "by order of the Valley Council," to show any persons who might read, that the death was not caused by accident, but had been ordered by some authority. The Valley Council! What was that? The valley—ever the valley—this mysterious valley—in the middle of a desert. Where there were no hills, there could be no valley. What could it mean? I must confess that though generally reckoned a strong-minded person by my friends, the sight of that mummified body, with the terribly cold-blooded inscription upon it, gave me what Betsy Prig would call "a turn." And, what is more, I could see that the other members of the party were equally affected.

A cry from behind startled us. Wangewata was looking on with eyeballs starting from their sockets, and mouth open. For a black to start at the sight of anything dead, either horse or man, is so remarkable in my experience of a race which has so little appreciation of the terrors of death, and sets such little value on life, that I looked at him astonished, and strove to see what had caused him such emotion.

"The sign! the sign!" he said, in his own tongue, which Mitford translated to us, without, however, adding to our wisdom. After a while the black became quieter, and explained to Mitford that he had noticed a sign stamped on the dead man's forehead, and, looking closer, we too saw a mark or brand as of a snake encircling some stick or other object.

Was this, then, the meaning of the veneration paid Mitford? Was there such a valley in existence, and did its rulers exercise authority over such a wide area as to reach right down to the fringe of civilization? And were they so powerful that the mere sight of their crest or sign-manual was sufficient to excite such terror among their allies or subjects? At this moment one of the men who had been looking on stepped forward and trod against some hard object; so he scraped away the sand with his foot and discovered a huge nugget of gold, which must have weighed many pounds. To



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it was attached, by a piece of flax, a label upon which the following words were written—

“Gold! thou shall have it; may it do thee good.”

The man, being fired to make fresh discoveries, took up the shovel and commenced shovelling away at the sand, when he again struck against an object which he speedily uncovered. It was a glass case, such as a thick bell glass, or cloche, could make, if it had a sheet of glass cemented to the foot; and there was enclosed in it, amongst some débris, a stone jug, and a small loaf, with a placard containing the following announcement—

“Thus punishes the Valley Council the crime of mutiny against its laws.”

Then for the first time we noticed that the head of the body was turned in the direction of this case, but that solid stakes thrust deep into the sand, with great cords attaching the body to them, would have prevented the doomed man from moving his body in that direction, while the ligatures on his arms allowed no effort to save himself from this terrible end.

“What savage cruelty!” cried Mitford. “It was not enough to kill the poor wretch by this inhuman, slow starvation, but they must mock his struggles by the loaf and the jug full of that precious water which was doubtless once there. The poor wretch was evidently pinned down in the open, and has since been gradually covered by drifting sands.”

“It seems fiendish,” said I. “A relapse to the barbaric methods of the dark ages of Europe could hardly be more forcibly illustrated.”

“What can this council be, which vindicates its laws so terribly?” asked Jeremy.

“A council of inhuman monsters, not men, I fear,” said Mitford with warmth. “I shouldn’t like to come within their power myself.”

The thought, though it doubtless had struck each of us, having thus definite expression, carried with it a species of corollary.

"That is exactly what we stand every chance of doing."

We have none of us realised that there is such a valley as this spoken of by Jeremy the younger in his brown-paper despatches, but here were we face to face with independent evidence, which appeared to confirm those vague rumours we had lately heard and read. Appeared to confirm!—nay, they were more than confirmed. The Happy Valley no longer seemed anything but a valley of misery, peopled with cold-blooded monsters.

Mutiny against their laws! Who were they, to have laws? The country is within the South Australian area, and under the laws of that colony. And who were they, to punish disobedience in such a terrible fashion?

However, my reverie was interrupted by Cousin Jeremy, who said—

"Well, we can't wait here all day. I fancy we have all had a lesson from this. It behoves us to keep together and stand by one another through thick and thin. Come, let us restore the sand to its place, and re-cover the remains of this unfortunate person."

The man who had discovered the nugget was for taking it.

"I should think you'd better not," said Jeremy—"for two reasons. The first is, you'll have to carry it, and if you put it on your horse it would be his last straw; and another is, that should we have the misfortune to fall foul of the Valley Council, they may resent our taking away one of the properties of their tragedy."

So the man, with whom the first reason weighed more strongly than the other, concurred in this advice, but he was not the only one who watched with covetous eyes the marvellous lump of gold being covered in with shovel-fulls of sand.

"Just come here," said I to Cousin Jeremy. "I was knocking about at this rock to-day, and I heard a curious answering murmur. I have heard of singing sands, but never of singing rocks before. Now just put your ear down and listen when I knock."

At the sound of the hammer there came, not a reverbera-

tion nor a hollow note, but a buzz, such as one hears in a hive when the combs are jarred.

"It is very curious," said he. "It doesn't sound at all like the result of your knock. Try again."

I did so, but the murmur was absent, as though the rock had exhausted its curious reciprocating echo for a time. Nor could any subsequent blows of mine elicit the sound we had both first heard.

After our scanty breakfast, we started on our usual course, but shortly afterwards Mitford, whose horse was getting very weak, and who had alighted often lately to save the poor beast, ranged up alongside of me and said—

"Jack and I have just been talking of the star we saw last night, and we both imagine we can see some object in the direction where we saw it. Do you?"

"I can't say I do," said I; "though I'm blessed with fairly good eyesight."

"Well, sometimes, through the quivering, ascending streams of hot air, I fancy I see a tall rock or a tree on the horizon."

"Oh! that's very possibly mirage. I could have sworn the other day that we were coming to pools of water, with trees and sheep near them, and the others said the same, but you know when we came up we only saw the same dreary stretch of sand."

"Well, as we are going somewhat in the direction of my mirage, we shall soon see if my eyes are right. How far do you think one can see a mirage?"

"I should think some five miles—not more, on a plain of sand; but it would appear much further off, according to the state of the air. Isn't that so, Jack?"

"Yes. I should think that in five miles we shall be up with the mirage, if it is one; that is, provided it doesn't recede, as I have heard that some do. The test is, I believe, not to look in that direction for some time. If you continue to look, you cannot help fancying you still see the mirage; but if you make long breaks in looking, you are more likely to see only what actually exists."

"Come, Mr. Scientist," I said, "that seems logical. Where is all that knowledge to be found?"

"Under my cranium," he answered impudently.

"If it had its origin there, we must respect it for its originality, and congratulate you upon your imagination; but can scarcely credit you with scientific veracity—at any rate, until proven by experience to be true."

Jack laughed at my long words; somehow, the pedantry of civilised and public life, of which I suppose I have retained something, sound curiously out in the desert, where the eternal gold of the sand and azure of the sky, suggest thoughts of dame Nature and her Master.

"I am afraid I'm a plagiarist," said Jack; "if I led you to believe that my remarks were born in my brain, they are only the adopted children of college lectures and books."

"You don't mean," said I, "that you learn anything so useful as that at college? Surely they are doing you an injustice in wasting time on such matters, valuable time which ought to be given up to the study of the dead languages and Trigonometry or Differential Calculus. If I ever get out of this alive, I will accompany you to Sydney and have a serious discussion with the head of the college about this."

"Hallo!" shouted Jack presently; "there is the mirage again. See, it has moved back!"

Surely enough I could now distinguish on the horizon a peak or pinnacle of rock, somewhat to the north of our route, but if not an apparition it was many miles off. There is no such peak marked on any map amongst us, and so we should, but for young Jeremy's evident knowledge of some such peak, have passed by the rock. As it was, we altered our course a few degrees—over this interminable tract of sand one course is the same as another—and by midday we could see the rock refracted through the quivering currents of heated air, but evidently nearer.

"It must be a mountain one thousand or fifteen hundred feet high," I said; "to show thus clearly at such a distance, for it is probably still twenty miles off. There, at any

rate, may be the end of our present journey. But how about water and fodder?"

"If the mountain is so lofty, it is possible that it attracts and condenses the scanty moisture in the air," replied Jeremy.

He might well say "scanty,"—for days the sky has been of a clear electric blue, verging to mauve, and almost painful in its perfect serenity. Fortunately, the two or three water-holes which we till lately found, where the underlying rock formed, I suppose, a basin, had saved us from thirst and our beasts from dying; but, as for verdure of any sort, even around these pools, there was not the vestige of a blade, though our poor horses looked most wistfully about them as they dragged their feet over the burning ground. That water cannot compare in nutritious properties with oats and grasses our steeds soon discovered, and though they drank their fill before and after their long hot journeys, they must have often wished for a solid meal. For the last two days, however, they have not had even this pleasure of cooling their parched throats, and accordingly we looked forward with the greatest anxiety for what the day would bring us. Our kangaroo water-skins require rigid watchfulness to eke out their contents, for the blacks have more than once surreptitiously stolen a drink. I don't know when I have felt the heat so much as I have to-day. The air has been motionless, although the ascending columns of vapour from this immense plain would, I should think, bring in a rush of air from other parts of the continent. The prevalent wind here seems to be from west to east, as the sand-waves are all piled up from north to south, and almost as regularly as though they were the "lands" of a corn field. Late this afternoon, as the sun was going down, we found that we were much closer to the rock than we had thought; some five miles off it reared its rugged head—not a mountain, but a pillar of roughened rock, with steep sides, jagged and irregular against the northern sky. It was about 1200 feet high, so our estimate had been tolerably correct, and here and there at its base were dark cavernous openings, where doubtless some ancient

earthquake had cracked its foundations. But something which gave us much more interest was to be found in traces of footsteps, not certainly very distinct, for the particles of sand had run in and filled up the marks; but as any wind which could have blown lately would have blotted them out, there they were as they had been made, perhaps only two or three days before. They led, it is true, away from the rock, and were only two in number. Who could this be who was wandering alone, our hearts asked us? The man or the woman? Had Jeremy died, and was this poor outcast still holding on her course as a fugitive from justice? The footprints led us round and round in great circles, and it suddenly dawned upon us that they were probably made at night time, as in the day it was evident that they would have been at once directed to the rock. After a while we found indeed that they turned towards the rock, and we hastened our own footsteps in the same direction. Even our jaded horses seemed to feel that there was something to be gained by pressing on to the rock, and plucked up their spirits, that is, all but Mitford's horse, which dragged one leg wearily after the other, as though it could only hold on for a few yards longer. The poor man, though weak himself, was much concerned about his animal, and had insisted on removing all its much-lessened burden to his own back. While the others pressed on I waited behind with him to give his beast some heart, which I felt sure it would lose as soon as it saw all its fellows far ahead, and as we slowly walked over the desert, we talked of subjects far removed from the objects around us.

CHAPTER XIV.

WATER FROM THE ROCK.

I WAS astonished as I plodded on, to notice my horse greedily tearing at some object on the ground, and found that we had unconsciously been walking some distance over a plain, dotted with a species of sedum or mesembryanthemum, a succulent plant, which was evidently nectar and ambrosia in one to the parched and hungry animal. Though we tried to induce Mitford's steed to pluck the sedum, we did not succeed, for it was so weak that it was indifferent, and merely plodded on mechanically, with bowed head, drooping back, and hollow sides. The rock evidently attracted some more moisture than the surrounding country, and this was the result.

"Can you see aught ahead in the way of greenery," said I to Mitford; "for though the sedum is almost colourless, I fancy I see grass and trees on the eastern side of the rock. At any rate, I see bare outlines, like trees against the sky, half-way up on the rock."

"I certainly believe I see a grassy plain where you point," cried Mitford, with a cheery tone. "As poor Rover doesn't care to eat, I must make him;" and he gathered a dozen bunches of the little plant and thrust them to the horse's nose; the poor beast was evidently in a bad way, for though my own horse ate greedily, he would barely move his lip to pull in the esculent. Nor was it until after much patient coaxing that he could be got to eat spontaneously. However, when he did so, he manifested some of the same effects as my own horse had shown. The juices of the plant appeared to act as a stimulant upon them both, and they would have over-eaten themselves, had we not reined them in. Then we heard a cooe sounding on ahead. A double cooe, which showed that something of importance had been discovered.

"Evidently the greenery is grass, and there is water close by," said I.

"Praise be to God, that it is so, then," said Mitford; "but for the star we should never have seen it."

"I dare say we shall find that the star was of human, not divine, origin," said I. "If there are trees, there will be wood to make a fire, and perhaps the circles which we found traced again and again upon the desert arose from the want of the watch-fire, which was afterwards made, so as to prevent the wanderer, whoever he was, from being lost again."

Our horses were now pushing on more steadily, and though the evening was gathering in, we could see very plainly that the rest of our party were walking through plains of grass.

When some minutes later we came up with them, we found ourselves at the foot of a large frowning mass of rock, blood-red in tone, where the setting sun caught its western edges, and of a pure white quartz in other spots, where the scaling effects of sun or rain had polished down its darker angularities. It must have been some half a mile through at its base, and it looked very weird and magnificently solemn. At its foot on the eastern side were a few trees, stunted indeed, but for all that trees, veritable green trees with foliage upon them, at the sight of which, Jack sent up such a cooee as a native can alone sound; its echoes reverberated from rock to rock, and before it had died away, a flock of frightened ducks arose from a water-hole which had been concealed by long rushes and sedges, not far off, and made away in a northerly direction after whirling about on high.

Jeremy looked at me whimsically. "Supper gone!" said he.

"Not very far," said I; "and Jack is quite prepared to pay for his whoop by going after it, that is, if all duck is off in this neighbourhood. The sight of green trees, grass and water, requires some celebration, and must have some sacrifices."

The horses could hardly be restrained from tearing away great mouthfuls of the grasses and sedums that sprang up around, but I noticed very few plants which I recognized, and certainly none of the leguminous flowers which might bear a pea-like seed.

So Master Jack and I set off light-heartedly; he with a fowling-piece over his shoulder, and I with a bag, wherein to place the result of our sport. And we were still lighter hearted when we returned from our stalk with seven good-sized fat ducks and a black swan, having expended four cartridges to good advantage.

Once more, after many days, we enjoyed the sound of our axe on wood; once more the sight of a roasting fire; once more the smell of cooking supper; once more the taste of that same. Delicious! I will not apologise for a moment for the gourmets that we one and all became. How we twisted and twirled those luscious roast ducks round our tongues! How we enjoyed a pannikin of tea apiece, hot and strong as it should be for fresh appetites. How we glanced around us at the timber and the rock; how we made both ring again with our cheers, when the supper was declared done to a turn by our cooks!

The pool where we shot our supper is not large nor very deep, but looks marshy and permanent, being supplied apparently by a small spring away up the Rock, and at the other end it overflows on to the mead of grass and rushes, and is gradually absorbed by the sandy desert.

At any rate here is a centre where the water seems continuous, and whence we may make excursions, or recruit our strength for a short time, to enable us to complete our quest. For it appears that our search has not yet ended. That is our disappointment, as we sit around our fire to-night. We have reached the great rock evidently, but although Cousin Jeremy and Mitford have tramped around it, and found that on all other sides but this, the sand runs up almost to its face, with a sprinkling of sedum, there is no vestige of either the young man or his ingenious companion. However, nightfall, which follows on the sunset very quickly, may have prevented our observing signs of human beings, which daylight must disclose; and though this oasis is small, we may not have ransacked every hole and corner. Jack has made up his mind to light a beacon on a lofty part of rock, where it can be seen from far and wide, and Cousin Jeremy has volunteered with him, a reversal of their usual relations, which is amusing.

So they started off some time since, and away up aloft a great bonfire of wood is now crackling and blazing, in a way which must attract notice for miles in all directions but the west, for the rock juts out eastward, as though especially meant by nature for the purpose to which Jack has put it.

The two beacon-lighters have now returned, fatigued with their climb, and have both settled themselves to sleep, but under what different conditions to our previous nights in the desert! Before they went to sleep, they told me that they found out the source of the spring which waters the base of the rock. It appears that the water bubbles up, pure and cold out of a cleft in the rock, some hundred feet up, and springs out two or three feet, like a fountain projected with force. One can hardly account for water springing from a rock, here in the wilderness, on any ground except that it is an outlet of the great subterranean fresh-water ocean, which must underlie a large part of this otherwise dry-as-dust continent.

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Very shortly after I had written the last few lines, appearing in this journal, I dreamily noticed that Jack's bonfire up aloft, a moment before blazing and crackling furiously, was fast dying out, its flames flickering feebly, and finally vanishing upwards in a blue and ghostly fashion, which was alone sufficiently remarkable to wake me up.

In company with Jack, I climbed to the platform with revolver ready for any human assailants who might be there for the fire had not, I was sure, gone out of its own self.

When we reached the platform, however, we saw no one, and no trace of any one having been there. The blackened logs and ashes were there, not one quarter burnt through; extinguished cold and dead, but not by water, for we were able almost immediately to relight the fire and send its beacon light careering over the sea of sand all around. We had no sooner descended, however, than the light commenced to go out again in the same unearthly way, and all was soon black, and though I would have climbed back and relit the signal out of sheer pertinacity, Jack, whose nerves are rather overstrung with one thing and another, became so nervous that I gave up my project.

CHAPTER XV.

A BRUSH WITH DEATH.

In the early morning I went up the Rock with Mitford, for Jack was sleeping soundly, and I hoped to some purpose, as he looked thin and pale. On the way up we noted for the first time the remarkable colouring of the rocks, which scintillated in the morning sunlight with prismatic colours. There seemed to be numerous small pieces of pyrites, or some such substance, buried in the face of the rock. In some places the rock, which was evidently quartz, was of dazzling purity, and I imagined could hardly be so pure if it had been exposed ever since the foundations of the earth were disclosed. It looked as though some one had been polishing the surface here and there, or the sand-drifts had kept it free from the stain of time. We climbed by a more circuitous path than that of the previous evening, as we wished to get a broader view of the plain and, if possible, peer round the western side.

At first it seemed as though the ravines and great clefts in the rock, which we had noticed yesterday, would bar our way, but we managed to cross on hands and knees over the first chasm by a log, which had fallen as a natural bridge.

Black and silent was the abyss; far deeper than the rock itself; it appeared to pierce the very foundations of the pinnacle, and reach the bowels of the earth. My hammer broke off a corner of the quartz, and before I could stop it, a large lump of many pounds weight rolled down.

At the same moment Mitford cried out—

“There went some pounds worth of gold.”

“It certainly looked like it,” said I; “see, here is the vein of ore which I had broken through.”

The virgin gold lay in the broken face in an irregular blot, like a molten drop splashed in water.

The stone resounded as it struck first one then another side of the abyss, and disappeared from view; but we were both startled at hearing, faintly, it is true, a sound like a human cry, rising from the black depths into which the stone buried itself. Anxiously we peered over, fearing lest some unlucky member of our party had wandered to the rock, and had been struck by the descending ore. But we were soon relieved to find that no one could approach the abyss from below, as the rock was perpendicular, and a great rugged wall or lip fenced off the chasm from the plain.

Suddenly Mitford caught at my hand—

“Mr. Bateman, look there,” said he, pointing upwards with an agitated finger.

I read above the path we were intending to pass, an inscription, in letters of gold, on a white face of quartz, evidently levelled and polished for the purpose—

“Let no one commit an offence by passing beyond this point without leave of the Valley Council.”

Then followed the sign or mark of the snake curling round the kangaroo, the sight of which had spread such terror amongst our black allies.

“I acknowledge no such authority as the Valley Council,” said I. “We are in South Australia, and if it should please the Government to put up notices against trespassers, well and good, or if even this was private property, equally well and good.”

“It may be,” said Mitford.

“Then, my dear friend, it could not belong to a public body, as the Valley Council evidently is, to order one not to trespass.”

Notwithstanding Mitford’s dissuasion, I passed along the rocky path, and led the way round the corner, as curiosity, mother-bred, impelled me to discover what there was in this direction, which we were not to see. Mitford followed, though somewhat timorously, and turning round I laughed to find him stepping on tip-toe as though he were walking

over hot coals. The path was rugged, and on one side of us the rock fell down almost sheer, while on the other, our right hand, the quartz rose in rugged and steep steps to the summit, which sloped away a little towards the north. So though we had to be careful where to plant our feet, there was no such necessity to proceed with stealth as he was doing. He blushed when I laughed and said: “I was unconsciously repeating my boyish habits when passing through a preserve.”

As he spoke, we turned round the narrow ledge whereon we were walking, and came face to face with another tablet, wrought as the first one, on which in plain letters appeared:

“The Valley Council punishes first offences with a reprimand, second offences with the disgrace of the gold circlet, and third offences with Death. For any one to pass this stone without leave of the Council is a second offence.”

“Come,” said Mitford; “we have seen enough! Whatever these mysterious placards may mean, one thing is certain—we are at the end of the pathway.”

It was true; we had come to a dead wall of rock, so that the placard seemed superfluous. But, looking about, I saw on the face of the cliff below the path a couple of copper rings, fitted with stanchions into the rock, and let in flush, so that any but a careful search would have passed them over.

“Well, I don’t feel like tempting the Valley Council to punish me,” I said; “if that is the only way to open this rock—by hanging on those rings over eternity.”

“I should think not,” said Mitford. “It would be mad foolhardiness to throw away your life.”

“Hallo,” I cried; “this ring feels as though it were not so firmly fixed as I thought!” I had laid down and reached over; the stanchion seemed to be inclined to give like a bell-pull.

Mitford, who became excited, knelt down over the other ring some two yards away, and feeling about, at last pulled it.

At once I felt my own ring released, and, crying out to him to keep hold of his, I pulled up the ring about a foot. The stanchion was a semi-circular piece of metal, and the ring rested on the pathway.

"Well," I said; "we are not much nearer a solution of this most extraordinary matter. A body of men which has nothing better to do than to stick up placards to frighten women and children, and insert bell-pulls in the rock hundreds of feet up, must be a collection of all the folly which the world is capable of."

"Look! look!" cried Mitford; and, turning, I looked to see the dead wall of rock had given way sufficiently for us to pass through; but how and by what means I could not discover. The solid mass around appeared as rugged as before, and the stone which must have occupied the doorway was not recognisable. For the side of the precipice appeared intact, and the rock, through which the doorway opened, solid.

"Here we go," said I, scrambling through the portal and out on to the ledge of rock on the other side. "Who will follow where I lead?"

Mitford's face was pale, and I may own to a sneaking sensation at the pit of my stomach, which I thought it well to conceal by this braggadocio.

The pathway here was much wider, and took a turn in towards the rock, away from the precipice, to which it gradually sloped, allowing a clear roadway of some six or eight feet, with a sloping bank beyond.

Here for a moment we stopped to watch the scene before us, for until now we had not been able to catch a glimpse of the landscape on the western side of the hill. Simultaneously we cried out, "The Valley!"

For there, some twenty miles away was a range of mountains visible from the great height at which we stood, but doubtless invisible from the plain. They seemed more like a solid mass of table-rock, than a chain of hills, encircling a valley; but the distance was too great for us to see accurately. The reason for our thus naming this object was rather, that

this mysterious valley had been so much in our minds of late, and that as the mere sight of a hill suggested the usual accompaniment of a hill, that accompaniment, by a natural process of association, we called *The Valley*. The range stretched apparently for ten miles, almost due north and south, and lay a little south-west of our Rock; our compasses said west by south, for the northern end of the range, and south-west for its southern end. Hence, I calculated the approximate length of the chain. The sandy plain between us and the mountain-tops, looked arid and bare. No sign of grass or vegetation clung to the cliff or grew on the plain, as on the other side; evidently the prevailing wind was from this direction, and to the protection afforded by the lee of the rock, we owed the fact that vegetation had sprung up in the wake of the rivulet, and had not been suffocated by the drifting sand.

"To-night," said I to Mitford, "we must light a bonfire up here; if our poor young folks are still alive, and are away to the westward, they will see it."

"Perhaps it will be similarly unsuccessful to that on the eastern side," said he.

"Well," said Mitford, after a while; "we ought to be getting back to the camp, or they will be anxious. Hallo! there's another placard."

"No, there isn't," said I, doggedly. "Look in that direction, there is no placard to be seen." I was determined that I would not read any more of the schoolboys' productions that defaced the rocks. "We are on the quest for Cousin Jeremy's son and his companion, and in the interests of humanity can't afford to stop for the sake of some arrogant notice or other."

So on we walked, without reading the notice, to find that the path was intersected by another abyss, very much like that which we had first crossed on the log-bridge, only here a great rock spanned it, thrown down as though by nature; but to my mind, evidently set there by human ingenuity. Something just then prompted me to feel in my belt for my revolver. Why, I cannot say. It might have been instinct or coincidence. Noticing that one or two of the chambers

were discharged, mechanically I loaded it. I also noticed for the first time that Mitford wore a cartridge belt and revolver, though the latter had never been fired, and he, I knew, would never use it. He had been persuaded to carry them at the commencement of our perilous journey across the desert, and had put the accoutrements on as a matter of duty and habit ever since. Taking his weapon from his belt, I found, as I expected, that it had not a single barrel loaded, and proceeded to charge it. The events which followed showed how happy were the instincts which prompted me to do this. When I am carrying firearms for use in sport, I never allow one available arm to be unloaded. Years ago, when spending a day with a friend shooting at the Cape, I almost gave my life away to a rogue elephant by neglecting this precaution, and the lesson has served for the term of my natural life. We were following the path as it bent more and more round towards the west, when a startled exclamation from Mitford made me look up to see—a black poising a spear within a few feet of my chest.

A black standing in the pathway on this solitary rock, remote from every tribe of blacks, buried in the broad desert; where Wangewata assured me that none of his fellows would ever go! The hostile attitude was not so much to be alarmed at, for blacks are proverbially hostile to intruders, as perhaps, poor fellows, they may well be, knowing as they do what intrusion by the whites costs them. Of course my revolver was presented in a second, but still the savage held up his spear menacingly, and looked as though he meant business; he seemed so fearless of my revolver, that I set him down at once as a man who had never seen a firearm, and, not caring to take advantage of his ignorance, limited myself to covering his heart with the sight.

Mitford called out, as he subsequently explained to me—"All is well; we are friends. Wangewata and other blacks of the tribe are with us."

But the black replied not a word, still obstructing the passage; he did not understand, or pretended he did not. So Mitford, who has been studying dialects, tried the

"bronzed statue" with one language after another; but all to no purpose; there the man stood, nor stirred a muscle, nor moved a limb. Then I tried what I could do by frightening the fellow, and snatching Mitford's revolver from his belt, while with my right hand I still covered the black's heart, I pulled the trigger of the other pistol at a spike of rock near his side, and a large piece splintered off and fell to the ground. But still the man stood immovable. At last, noticing something particularly glassy about his stare, I pushed up to him and found that the black was a man of bronze indeed—a metal representation of a savage—very life-like, yet lifeless.

The way here had narrowed again, and the image must be passed, if at all, by force. I attempted to force it back, but to no avail. It might have been weighted with solid lead, and fixed by inch bolts to the rocky bed on which it stood. Remembering our experience of the copper rings, I looked about for some spring or other contrivance whereby to remove him. It seemed quite natural in this home of mystery that some such flimsy magic spring was to be found, and I laughed aloud.

"What bothers me," said I, "is that this council should think that little obstacles of this third-class melodramatic style should stand in the way of men who have passed through the terrors of starvation and thirst, and risked the horrors of the sand-storm for so many days. We have only to go down to the camp and collect a few pounds of gunpowder to blow the image into the 'middle of next week.' See there now, my friend," I added playfully, giving the image a pat on the chest. But that which had been a second before immovable, was now so mobile that the touch of my finger caused it, and a large part of the rock on which it stood, to revolve in a quadrant and stand close in to the rock, permitting of our passing one at a time.

I hesitated. So many events upon this rock had appeared unnatural, and such as might occur rather in the Arabian Nights' fairy tales, than in actual nineteenth century daily life, that, notwithstanding my brag, I hesitated before going further along this rugged rock-path. But, the glimpse I caught of a large platform beyond, was too much for my

curiosity. I hesitated no longer, and, followed by Mitford, who looked paler and more anxious than ever, I strode along. As we turned the corner of the rock, we saw for the first time what the platform really was upon which we had chanced. Slightly hollow, of saucer-like shape, it corresponded so much to that on the eastern side that they might have been especially made to balance one another. "Here," said I, turning to Mitford, "is the place for our bonfire to-night." But he was staring in a disconcerted manner, very unusual for him, and I, turning back again, saw to my dismay that we were looking on a platform of corpses; objects which had seemed to me at first, the gnarled trunks of trees were, in fact, the shrivelled bodies of men, aye, and of women too, spread out upon the broad platform in all imaginable attitudes; shrunken, black, and horrible to look upon. There was no unpleasant odour, nor living bird of prey, but among the corpses were the dessicated bodies of many crows, killed as they had alighted. I pushed further round. There I saw that a pathway was, as it were, made between the rows of the dead, and led to a huge rock arched like the door of a cavern, over which was inscribed in great letters of gold:—

"In the midst of life ye are in death."

Mitford brightened up at the quotation, or rather, misquotation, and said to me: "This is the first sign I have observed that the mysterious authority, which pervades this place, is conversant with Scriptural doctrines. Let us hope that its barbarities, as at the circle of rocks which we saw the other day, are a thing of the past. See here," continued he, pointing to the forehead of one of the bodies: "there is the same mark as I have on my stick, the same that we saw the other day at the circle of rocks."

It was true, the dry shrivelled forehead bore the deep brand of the snake and kangaroo unmistakably, burnt and scarred by comparison with the dried wrinkles of skin.

"Well," I said; "this is evidently the graveyard of some community. If the inhabitants of the valley, whoever they may be, bring their dead here, I can only congratulate them

on the sense they display in putting them out of harm's way. Doubtless the path leads and ends here, unless the rock to the side there holds a system of mysterious springs and secret passages, as I for one am quite prepared to believe. Come along."

We went to the great black arched opening in the rock and looked down, at least I tried to do so, but by some stumble of my foot I almost slipped in, and, had it not been for the accident of Mitford's standing near and clutching at me, I fear to say where I might have been by this time; for the abyss seemed to open like those on the face of the rock, right down to the bowels of the earth, and as I struggled to regain my feet, my revolver slipped from my hand, and echoing loud and long, as it dashed from side to side down the bottomless pit, appeared to fall until the noise it made when falling could no longer be heard. At last a faint report came from below; it had evidently hit its trigger on a projecting stone and had discharged its barrel, but after what an interval, and with what little audible report!

"Thanks, Mitford! But for your aid, I should have been where my pistol is"—I grasped his hand with gratitude. Then I examined the ground, but I could not see that it sloped to the abyss. How was it then that I slipped?

"Don't thank me. Thank Him whose humble instrument I was," said Mitford.

"Well, I won't argue about it now. Let us get out of this ghastly graveyard as soon as we can. But perhaps we ought to see whether poor young Jeremy may be one of these stiffened corpses."

To identify was hopeless, though Mitford attempted it. He had just stooped down near the horrible abyss, when I noticed him fall forward, and, but for a sharp dash I made at him, he must have overbalanced down the bottomless pit.

"One good turn deserves another," said I cheerily to him, as he lay heavily where I had pulled him. But he did not speak, and I could see he was unconscious. His nerves had been unable to stand the strain and he had fainted. So I thought. He had not been stunned, for his head had been over

the pit as I caught at him. Then, in a flash, I discovered the cause of his faintness. In a few moments he would be dead if I did not remove him. The foul, black abyss was belching out heavy, poisonous gases. I could feel the lethal currents against my face; I staggered, became dizzy, and in another moment must have fallen, when, with a dash, I rallied my wits, and, catching Mitford in my arms, rushed off to the pathway.

I turned the corner, and found that the figure of the black, which had opposed us on our way up, was now turned round, and threatened our advance through the narrow passage.



CHAPTER XVI.

THE COUNCIL CHEATED OF ITS PREY.

FORGETTING for a moment that I had found the threatening savage a man of bronze, I let Mitford slip to the ground for a second, and, pulling out my revolver, or rather Mitford's, in an instant of time, I fired at the bronzed face. Instead, I hit the point of the spear, which at once darted to the ground with such prodigious velocity that, had we been passing between it and the rock, we must have been impaled. Then before this metallic demon could make another plunge, I thrust Mitford between it and the rock, and myself scrambled through, though with more difficulty, as at fifty-six one has lost some of the slimness of twenty years ago. I did not dare to breathe for an instant; but, catching up my burden again, I hurled my way along the narrow causeway, which sloped more and more towards the precipice. It had never been at such an angle when we passed over it before. How could it have become so slippery? By the time I reached the stone bridge, I could hardly maintain my footing on the slippery, sloping rock. Here, however, to my infinite joy, I found that the stone still remained intact and horizontal, though, as I passed over it, I could feel its balance give way, and I had only time to fling myself, burden and all, upon the path on the other side, as the rocky bridge slid away and fell down the black chasm. The rift in the rocks was widening. A moment more and we should have been too late. There would have been no jumping the chasm with such a burden, for the run on the other side was far too slippery; and, as I looked back, I could see that the slope was then so angular that no one without nails in his boots could have hoped to have stood upon it. My eyes were, as I waited for breath for half a second, attracted by the placard

which I had instructed Mitford not to look at. It was of the same materials as the other two, but ran—

“A terrible death awaits any one who penetrates beyond this point without leave of the Valley Council.”

A terrible death! My God! Four terrible deaths had awaited us! But why? It was inexplicable. A graveyard is not a place which requires to be rigidly guarded from a visitor. However, fortunately, Mitford was recovering his senses. The rude shock on the rocky path and the cool air revived him, and he sat up and rubbed his eyes like a man in a dream.

“Come,” said I, “lest new dangers await us. The stone doorway may be closed. Who knows?”

He overcame his weakness and followed me; but when we turned the far side round towards the wooden bridge, my heart sank within me. The path broke off abruptly; the stone door had reclosed.

“Keep guard around,” said I to Mitford. “There must be some means of undoing this rock from this side as from the other.”

Sure enough, I found, at distances of about six feet apart, two similar rings to those on the other side, down about a foot in the face of the cliff. But, before I could pull them, a cry from Mitford caused me to lift my head.

Running down the pathway were men dressed in peculiar style with helmets upon their heads, of brass or gold, I could not tell which. Grasping my revolver I cried out to them, “Stand back, or I fire!”

They halted for a second. Apparently they had no fire-arms; and, at that blessed moment, I heard the voice of Cousin Jeremy, on the other side of the rock, calling out my name.

“Jerry, have you any one with you?” I cried, still facing the pathway.

“Yes,” said he. “Where are you?”

“Never mind that. Kneel down close to the rock; feel along the face of the precipice for a ring. Do you find it?”

“Yes.”

“Let whoever is with you feel about six feet further away. Does he feel it?” said I.

“Yes, father,” came Jack’s voice.

“Pull for the love of Almighty God,” said I. “Both of you pull like —”

The doorway swung open, and, bundling Mitford through, to their astonishment, I sprang through myself, narrowly escaping being caught in the closing doorway as they both let go their hold of the handles.

“What does this mean?” said Jeremy.

I suppose I looked somewhat discomposed, as Jack came to me and caught me by the arm.

“No fear, my boy,” I said, with a smile; “your old father isn’t going to faint. He’s too tough for that. Let us get out of this and down to *terra firma*.”

Hastily climbing back along the path to the log bridge, which was intact, we crossed, and, scrambling down, found ourselves at the base of the pinnacle where the others were encamped.

“Post guards,” I said to Jeremy, “along at some distance from the rock to watch it.”

“What, my boy, is it going to fall on our heads? Still, of course I’ll do that,” and, calling to two of our men, he gave the necessary orders.

I did not feel that we were safe from the malicious ingenuity of the inhabitants of the rock, if indeed these were they whom I had seen, until we had done this; then I drank off a good strong cup of hot tea, a counterpart of one that Mitford had himself eagerly swallowed, and being thus fortified, I told our experiences.

Jeremy and Jack could hardly believe their ears.

“Were the men black or white?”

“White men, slightly tanned by long exposure to the sun. They had javelins or spears in their hands, and wore armour; but it was all of golden hue, or brass, I know not which.”

“Were they strong, tall, or broad?”

"All three, I should say—a fine race of men."

"What made them forget their firearms, I wonder?" said Jack.

"Doubtless, if they had any, they did not want to arouse you more than they could help, and thought that the revolver that dropped down the abyss was our only weapon. And you? How did you manage to come up at the nick of time?"

"Oh! Jack had told me of your experience of last night, and we were climbing up when we heard a shot, I suppose the shot which you aimed at that almost impossible bronze figure. So we started along to meet you, and were just turning back, thinking we had missed our way, because of the wall of rock, when we heard your voice and followed your instructions. My heavens, I did pull at that ring, though I must say I was thunderstruck. How did you get to know of it?"

I explained that it was by accident.

"And the parson tried his hand on an unregenerate, did he?" asked Jeremy with a twinkle.

Mitford flushed and laughed.

"The joke is a good one, and against me," he said.

"At least you have made one valuable discovery; that is the range of hills to the S.-W. It is very improbable that we should have been able to catch sight of it on the route we are taking. I should propose first making this place our head centre, whence a part of us might make circular explorations of the plain on either side, to discover traces of the fugitives. I suppose you saw no trace," Jeremy added in his slow deep tones.

"Nothing but the plain, stretching interminably westward. In the other directions, we could scan it from the eastern platform, where the fire was last night."

"Ah! we have quite forgotten that in our excitement over this adventure of yours. We will, or some of us will, go up at once. Come, Jack, you guide us. I will take a couple of blacks too, Wirri-wirri and one of the others; though I fear they are not very much help, they may serve to show we are here in force."

Accordingly, when the morning meal was over—and we are not accustomed to dally long over our meals—while I thoroughly overhauled the accoutrements of the horses and men, examined their cartridge-belts; had weapons loaded and cleaned up, and had our water-bags filled, Jeremy and his three companions climbed to the platform, where, within a few minutes, I saw them walking about. Looking upward to them, my eye caught a piece of rock which I had not noticed before, a huge stone spar as it were a semaphore, stretched out towards the south.

"I could swear that wasn't there yesterday," said I.

"Which—how—when, and where?" asked Mitford, somewhat flippantly.

I explained that the figure of the rock had altered.

"Perhaps we have opened up a different view of it," said he. "I see the rock you mean. I cannot explain its position there, hitherto unnoticed by us in any way."

"The camp has not moved during the night, like Aladdin's palace," said I, "and when we looked up at the rock last night, we should surely have noticed such a strange angle. It looks as though it would topple down at any second."

Jeremy came back very soon with some news. He had found a notice written on one of the quartz slabs on the platform, as though addressed to us: "NO FIRES OR SIGNALS MAY BE MADE FROM THIS ROCK WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE VALLEY COUNCIL." So he with characteristic *sang-froid* had replied: "WE ARE NOT CHILDREN, TO BE FRIGHTENED WITH CONJURING TRICKS, BUT SEEK MY LOST SON AND ARE RESOLVED TO FIND HIM." He says he waited to see if the slabs would disappear, but nothing happening, came down. We decided to scour the country in bodies of two,* and take all our belongings with us, leaving none behind, lest they might be assailed by the pirates here.

The same cloudless sky, the same burning sand as yesterday, but our horses were refreshed, and were already looking

* My friend Mr. Bateman does not appear to have been a strategist of the first water.—ED.

marvellously better. We resolved to walk them quietly towards the four chief points of the compass, covering about ten miles out and back again, so as to return by nightfall. As the southerly was the most likely direction in which we might expect to meet the mutineers, the party there consisted of a body of three, of whom Jeremy was the leader; while Jack took two with him, Mitford another, and I the last of the remaining men. We were fortunate in having firearms for all, and the blacks by this time we had drilled into tolerably efficient marksmen, for a black is quick to learn; otherwise, we could never have spared the precious ammunition necessary for their practice. Before we started, I arranged a little surprise for our hosts of the rock, by tying all the string the expedition could muster together, and thus making a line of many yards in length. Taking a blank cartridge, and a little of the dried hay which we still carried with us, I ascended to the eastern platform, in company with Jack, who would not suffer me to go alone, and after a little manœuvring we attached the string, so that by pulling it, a heavy stone would fall, explode the cartridge, and the hay could be ignited. The hay, moreover, I placed at the edge of the rock, where it would be remote from the effects of the poisonous gas, or whatever else the extinguishing substance was; and turning round we examined the slabs where Jack had told me that Jeremy had written his messages; but instead of the words I expected to find there, we only found the blank white stones. Evidently the messages, if they had existed, had been rubbed out. We poked about, sounding the rocks with our rifle stocks, and bruising our knuckles with more delicate tests, in and around the slabs, but all to no effect; the hard unyielding rock mocked our efforts, sounding dull and solid throughout, and I began to fear that all our adventures were indeed hallucinations, caused by the strains and trials to which we had been subjected.

From about eight o'clock till five, I and one of the blacks wandered about in an easterly direction, meeting and seeing no trace of the fugitives, except indeed, in the vicinity of the pinnacle, some traces as of footsteps in corresponding circles

to those we met with yesterday to the south of the rock. The evening has been decidedly cooler, a soft breeze sprang up from the south, and is fanning our faces steadily and quietly, as we all sit round the small camp-fire, for we have all come in with similar reports; no sign or sight of the fugitives! Jack, who took the northern course, reports a discovery of bones, which he took to be those of a camel or horse, but these have been lying in the sand probably a score of years, for in this region of dry heat decomposition would not set in directly, and the few ravens or crows which circle about the rock, uttering weird cries, are probably the only scavengers of this desert.

The contrivance for igniting our fire on the platform has succeeded beyond my expectations. The cartridges exploded and fired the hay and wood, which are now crackling and burning merrily in the fresh breeze. Between the gusts it is true that the flames flicker, and except over the cliff edge seem to be affected with a ghostly blue tone; but, as the breeze is freshening, I do not fear that our enemies can frustrate our efforts at signalling our missing friends.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STRANGE MEETING.

I WRITE this no longer in the company of my fellows and by the light of a camp fire, but in solitude and—where, I know not. I am inclined to believe, though reason is opposed to the notion, that I am now within the very bowels of the earth. Yet for these same bowels to be lighted by incandescent electric lamps, and to be provided with civilised furniture and fresh air, makes my surmise so far-fetched, that I can simply chronicle the facts.

How I have the means to write with I can easily explain. As to paper, I carry that with me in my wallet; as to goose quills and ink, I am supplied with these by the power which furnishes me with bed and board free of charge; having commenced to use my pencil just now, I was startled to hear a click in the corner of my chamber, or cavern or whatever it may be called, and on going thither I saw the bottle of ink and bunch of quills which I now use.

Mother Earth seems to be well up with the times, as evidenced by a little bronze quill-cutter which came in from—I know not where—with the quills aforesaid.

Shortly after I had written my last few notes, we were all aroused by a hurling bustling noise near the platform, and looking up, I perceived the whole of our signal bonfire toppling over the cliff edge, and falling down five hundred or six hundred feet close to our camp at the base. We ran to the fallen logs, but the jar on the ground had broken the charcoal and wood into thousands of living embers, which still glowed, though only as a carpet of fire.

“You are a fine fire-maker,” said Jeremy; “to build your fire so far over the edge that it falls over at once.”

“Nothing of the sort,” said I; “those logs never fell of themselves; they have been pushed. If you remember aright, they burnt much more fiercely when they slightly overlapped the cliff, than they did on the platform, hence they would tend to balance more and more on to the rock, not off it.”

“These rascals, whoever they are, are determined that our fire shall not burn,” said Jeremy, “if they do that to-morrow night we will watch for them; but to-night, I think with you, it is madness for us to walk into the lion’s den.” Suddenly lifting his revolver, he fired it at the cliff. “Did you see nothing?” he said, as the reverberation echoed from rock to rock. “No? Well, I did! I saw a figure up there, the moonlight glinted on his helmet as he moved; I did not aim at him, only to frighten him. At any rate, he disappeared.”

At that moment a huge piece of rock fell down from the cliff, and had we not jumped aside, it must have killed us one and all, as it struck on a jagged piece of rock and bursting like a shell, scattered huge fragments of quartz around. The revolver shot could not have been answerable for that, and we came back to the camp feeling uneasy. Do what we would, these mysterious foes would not permit us to make a signal. Why? Were they afraid of others coming across this sandy desert? That appeared absurd.

This was no highway nor a spot where people would by choice be travelling. Was it, perhaps, to prevent the arrival of some person or persons they were expecting? Perhaps so.* They must have communication with the outside world for their ordinary supplies. Could this J. P. Burton or Blackie have been their messenger? That was possible. Then, why should he have been empty-handed when he joined us? Such were the questions we discussed as we lay anxiously around our watch-fire. And with these were knit others: Our anxieties for the safety of Jeremy the younger

* I find a subsequent note of Mr. Bateman’s where he states that his guess was a solution of the riddle, and that the signal-fire was an indication by the Valley Council that it would be safe for Blackie to approach.—Ed.

and his companion. Here we were at the pinnacle, where they had been flying ducks and perhaps lighting fires only the night before we arrived—for the star we had seen might very well have been a signal-fire of theirs—yet no signs of them, beyond old foot-prints, were there to meet the eye.

At last nature asserted herself and we slept; but, speaking for myself, I can say it was with one eye open, for we had posted sentinels near the rock, and had to relieve them ourselves from time to time. The morning, that is yesterday morning, as I believe it to be, opened gloomily; instead of the clear blue sky we had been accustomed to, there were dark ill-looking clouds, which sullenly floated up above. They were rain-clouds apparently, but not one drop of their contents reached the ground, for they were at a great elevation, and the hot-air cushion below them received and retained their moisture. The wind, that is the ground wind, had fallen, though clouds still moved sulkily from south to north, showing that the breeze had gone aloft.

In consequence, the day was cool and still, for the sand and rock of the desert soon radiate back the burning heat of the sun, and the clouds had only come up a couple of hours before dawn. I climbed up to have a look-out from the platform, accompanied by Jack and Jeremy. We had a small pair of race-glasses with us, with which Jeremy was wont to sweep the horizon, but before he could use them he called out—

“See the answers to our demands!”

Looking at the tablets, I saw that they carried inscriptions in the same charcoal writing.

“JEREMY BATEMAN, IF HE BE YOUR SON, IS LOST INDEED; HE HAS BEEN PUNISHED WITH DEATH FOR MUTINY AGAINST THE COUNCIL. THE ORE OFF THE SOUTHERN SIDE OF THE ROCK CRUSHED A CITIZEN. GIVE UP THE OFFENDER.”

Dead! Was the lost one found only to be lost again?

We stared at one another. Evidently this Council was terribly in earnest. The cry that we had heard from the abyss, when the ore fell, was then, as we had at first divined, that of a human being. Yet how were we to know that a rock falling down the abyss would kill any one, and how

could we be held responsible for the accident by any code of law or morality?

Jeremy, hastily brushing off the inscription, wrote with a piece of charred stick which had alone remained of the bonfire on the platform—

“IF MY SON IS DEAD, LOOK YOU TO IT; I WILL HAVE A LIFE FOR A LIFE. WE WILL AVENGE THE CRIME, IF WE HAVE TO BRING AN ARMY ACROSS THE DESERT.”

His nostrils were dilated, and his cheeks flushed; his eyes glittered ominously.

“Oh, that we had the gunpowder our mutinous guide stole!” said he. “I would blow this rock in, and we would find out who these demons are.”

“And perish as we stood,” said I. “There is more power in these men than we think. Brag as they do, they carry out their intentions, for although, I cheated them the other day, it was more by luck than judgment.”

Taking the glasses from his unresisting hand, I swept the plains around, and, looking to the south, discovered what I had not before seen, a black speck on the horizon. I passed the glasses to Jack to test the accuracy of my own discovery, and an exclamation from him at once assured me that he had also made out the speck.

Jeremy, who became interested, though only in a secondary degree, since he had read the terrible news of his son's death, said, as he looked through the glasses—

“We must have gone over that ground yesterday. There was no one there then; and, what is more, we never saw the circle of rocks, so it cannot be those. No, it must be a man, and apparently on foot, for on horseback we should have noticed him. This may be a lie after all, this report of my son's death; we will go to meet the man, for it may be he.”

While Jeremy took Jack and Wirri-wirri with him, I skirted the rock, to see if by chance there was any means of climbing it from one side or the other, without passing along that deadly causeway, with its traps and tricks; but, as I had gathered from above, the rock rose almost perpendicularly on all sides; and, from my position, the sloping path along

which I had clambered looked no more than a ribbon-like track, along the rocky walls. I had made up my mind to make a circuit of the rock, taking in that portion of it which we had not yet examined from the foot, namely, the north-western, and, clambering along in the shadow of the cliff, I attempted with my eyes to fathom the deep abysses or fissures, similar to those on the southern side, over which Mitford and I had crossed; just as I was about to turn one of the jutting cliffs, I thought I heard voices from the other side, and being naturally somewhat wary and having received an extra dose of caution from our recent experiences, I crept along under cover of the overhanging rock, until I could peep round the cliff. The voices sounded nearer. They were coming my way. Where was I to hide? For I might gain valuable information if I could only get into some crack or crevice. I looked around, but there was no friendly rock to shelter me, only the fearful abyss, whose lip rising many feet above the ground opened its mouth. My determination was made. The risk was great, but I would run up thither and hide myself by hanging on to some projecting rock in its lip: accordingly, I scrambled up, and without daring to look down, I let myself gently over the edge, feet foremost, and, pitching my elbows on to the ledge in front, managed by digging a toe of each boot into a crevice to keep myself suspended 'twixt Heaven and Inferno.

I waited some few seconds without hearing any fresh sounds, but very soon had the pleasure of congratulating myself upon my retreat, as a body of half-a-dozen men dressed as I had seen those on the rock the day before, came round the cliff, bearing with them the body of another, and a few tools. A burial, thought I. Why then, they have more than one graveyard, these inhabitants of the valley. But one of them, who seemed to be the leader, carefully measured with a tape the ground from one corner of the arc to the other, and, striking spades in, the others laid down their burdens and had soon excavated for a few inches' depth, the sand over an area of some three or four square yards. I noticed that they had uncovered some stakes buried in

the ground, and they then commenced to attach cords to these. Instinctively I thought of the wretched carcase we had met with at the Circle of Rocks. Was this another of those terrible executions? I had not long to wait, for, by those terrible executions, I could see that the man they carried was not dead, and that, despite his resistance, he was being fast made tight to the stakes in the ground. The men seemed to perform their duties with no sense of the enormity of their crime; they acted like machines; on the other hand, they did not deride or otherwise illtreat the victim. By this time I was getting weary of holding on to the lip of the abyss where I hung concealed; so I was delighted to see that they were restoring the sand around to its level condition, though not covering in the body. Next they placed a glass case down, almost within, yet just without, reach of the bound man, and stuck a tablet at his head. I was fast weakening, and must either have disclosed myself, or adopted the unpleasant alternative of dropping down into this gate of Hell, when, fortunately for me, I saw the retreating backs of the soldiers. I determined to risk their looking back, for I was in the shadow and out of the line of their view, and was not likely to be seen. So, hastily drawing up my feet, I rested my knees on the rock and took a deep inspiration, for I was cramped, and my muscles over-strained by their long efforts. I could then watch how they were clothed. They seemed to be dressed in brass chain-armor, polished to a most surprising degree. Every part of the body except the feet and hands and head, was protected, and as they had well-fitting boots on their feet, and helmets on their heads, their hands and faces were literally the only unprotected parts of their frame. As one turned round to take a last look before he left the body, the flash of his polished armor was reflected upon my face, and I, fearing to be seen, kept as still and close in my shadow as a mouse; the man had, however, fortunately not noticed the white flash; perhaps his own eyes were dazzled by some reflection from his armoured arms or legs; at any rate he turned again and disappeared round the corner. To make doubly sure, I

waited where I was for half an hour, then crept cautiously down the cliff-side and went across the sands to the pinioned man. When I reached him he had his face turned away from the glass-case, which I saw contained a loaf of bread, and a jug of water, just like those we had seen at the circle of cliffs; a woman's bonnet was tied to a stake within range of his eyes, while at his head a milk-white tablet announced that he was thus punished for mutiny against the Council.

My footfall upon the ground made no impression upon the poor fellow. He either did not or would not hear my step, so I took a pace round his head. But I was down on my knees in a moment, and (I regret to chronicle such weakness), kissing the man as though he had been my own son, instead of being Cousin Jeremy's. In the meantime my fingers were untying, and my knife was cutting the bonds which bound him, and removing the gag which blocked his mouth.

It seemed like an instant from the time I caught sight of him to the moment when he was seated leaning back upon me, awfully worn and thin, pale and haggard, but still the Jeremy we were in search of. He could not walk, he was far too weak, and I could not leave him, or these inhuman monsters might return and dispatch him. What was to be done? It was plain I must carry him, but though I had carried Mitford easily, it was a different matter to bear the boy away when each footstep sunk into the shifting sand.

Suddenly, without a moment's warning, I heard a rustling and whistling, as though bullets were flying through the air, and turned round to face my pursuers. But instead I saw a far more terrible sight!

CHAPTER XVIII.

FATHER AND SON.

YES, instead, I saw a far more terrible sight. The wind it was that was whistling; down away in the north-west, the clouds were black as night, the horizon was being blotted out, the cool morning had suddenly changed to a fierce baking day, the gentle south breeze had given place to the northern sirocco. I had never seen a storm in the desert before, nor do I wish to repeat the dose I had yesterday, but I have read of sand storms and I knew, as though I had witnessed hundreds, that the darkness was the advance-guard of a sand storm. I had still half a mile to carry the poor boy before I could get to the lee of the rock, and this storm was coming up at a tremendous pace. Already I could feel the sudden gusts tearing off sheets of sand and cutting my face as one does glass with a sand-blast. Saved! but to be lost again! For we could not stand against the storm I was sure. Still I struggled on and on, though the wind screamed about me; it seemed as though the demons of the air had been bottling up all their wrath during weeks of calm and were revelling in the release of their accumulated strength.

The sky was getting dimmer and dimmer, the rock looked farther and farther away, and the daylight was fading as at evening. Just then I sent out such a cooee-e-e as must have been carried the best part of a mile. If I were to save Jeremy I must have help; I could not leave him; I would sooner die than return to his father with such a story. How could I brook my own son to be served so? Staggering blindly onward, and buffeted here and there, through the gathering gloom, I saw a red glare ahead of me and again sent out that cooee. In another moment a man's form loomed up.

He held a smouldering torch in his hand, but who he was I could not tell from sight, for the gloom was now terrible. The sand was hurling along over our heads in huge sheets or waves. The noise of the whistling wind, whistling and screeching through the sand grains, as I have heard it whistle and screech through the shrouds of a ship in the Atlantic, prevented me from catching the sound of the man's voice. At last, unable to hold the boy any longer, I caught the man by the shoulder, and he, turning towards me, felt the form of Jeremy close beside him and stooping picked him up. But the burden was too great for him, even poor thin Jeremy, and I could feel him put the boy down again. I caught his hands and guided them to the boy's head, then I took his feet and we set out once more. Whether it was friend or foe I cared not; here, at any rate, was a chance of life, for Jeremy and myself, which did not exist a minute before.

A momentary break in the canopy of black allowed me to look at my compass, and at the face of my helper. It was Mitford, who had faced the storm and come to help in the very teeth of death. Again and again the bursts of wind flew over us, and the shocks of driven sand on our backs almost took away our breath. My clothes were torn, my boots were blistering me with their contents of sand; I suppose we could not have long endured this, for the heat accompanying the wind was so great, that we perspired at every pore, and consequently we had a cake of sand over us. It seemed to me ages before we struck right into a dead-tree stump, which I remembered to be near the edge of the verdure on this side of the rock, and within a few minutes we were cowering under the lee of a jutting cliff, listening anxiously for a lull in the storm.

In the meanwhile we tended young Jeremy who appeared to have fainted; doubtless the excitement, his suspense and the terrible heat had proved too strong for him. "He must have some water," cried I, "if we are to bring him to, and I have no water keg with me. Will you wait here while I fetch it, and cooee at intervals?" but before I could shout this out to

Mitford, he had darted off and left me alone with the boy. I shouted as loudly as I could, making myself hoarse as I did so, and presently had the pleasure of seeing Mitford—for the darkness had lessened—feeling his way back very much exhausted and buffeted, but carrying the precious drop of water and a spirit flask. Very soon after we had poured some of the spirit and water down the boy's throat, he opened his eyes, but it seemed hours that we waited, chafing his hands and limbs, and feeding his flickering spirit. The conditions for his recovery were the most unfavourable, for the heavy showers of sand would often break over the rock and cover us all with a thin sheet. So, while we tried to give him as much air as possible, we had to shield his mouth, nose, and eyes from being choked up. I pulled out my watch and found that it was noon; this storm had been raging for four hours, what had become of the party who set out to rescue the man, if it were a man, whom we had seen on the desert towards the south? Had they survived it? for they must have been exposed to all its most terrible strength, and, if they halted, would be almost infallibly covered in with a pall of sand.

Lower and lower fell the gusts, less and less spiteful became the sand showers, until almost as quickly as it had begun the storm ended, clearing away rapidly towards the north-west, and showing the bright sunshine and blue sky. We ventured forth, dreading what we should find; but were agreeably surprised to see horses and men all under the shelter of the eastern platform of rock, huddled together and expecting fresh outbursts.

The blacks and our two men were guarding the horses; but the green plain of grass had almost disappeared. The pool was reduced in depth, and the ground was deep in sand, out of which the trees and shrubs stood up evidently peering through the ground some inches lower than they had been before. Many of the trees had been tossed about, and their branches and foliage broken. But there was no time to be lost in lamenting the ruin before us, for human lives were at stake, away on the plain, far to the south. Ordering

one of the men and a black to look after Jeremy junior, whom we had left near the pool of water, and saddling a couple of horses we, that is Mitford and I, rode forth with Wangewata, who was ever ready to accompany the Holder of the Stick. Over the south of the desert the black cloud was fast disappearing, like a ship hull-down on the horizon, and a long and dreary ride had we, ever dreading to come across the remains of our friends suffocated in sand drifts. It scarcely seemed possible that Cousin Jeremy and my son could have escaped death, for the waves of sand which we found here showed too evidently how furiously the wind had swept it into drifts. We kept a bee line from the rock to the point where we calculated we had seen the speck in the morning, and when we had made about ten miles we looked at one another with the sickness of despair, for they could hardly have gone further than this, and yet we had seen no sign. Here we halted, after carefully surveying the plain on all sides, then taking large sweeps on each side of our line, at last heard Wangewata's shrill cry of discovery. Out of a mound of sand was stuck up the muzzle of a shot-gun. My heart sank within me; but not for long, for I heard a human voice speaking through the barrel, and taking any risk there might be, I spoke down and heard Jack's voice in answer, that all were well, though almost suffocated. We dug hastily downwards, for we had of course provided ourselves with spades, and before many spadefulls of sand had given way to our vigorous blows, we saw the wondrous sight of a man's hand push through the sand and wave above it. What a cheer we gave, how we grubbed away with our hands for fear of hurting the buried men. Wangewata worked as never I had seen a black work before, shovelling away the sand which we grubbed up. We did not even then uncover any heads, only a species of tent made of their coats and cloaks, kept up by their weapons. But when they felt our hands on the other side of this tent, with a great effort they plucked off their coverings and thrust forth their heads. Jeremy, Jack—my boy Jack—and a third white, in whom I recognised one of the men who had mutinied and deserted us. He it was who had thought of this expedient,

when they found the sand piling up round them; the expedient of making as it were a tent of their coats spread over their heads and connecting the air above with their mouths through the muzzle of Jack's breech-loading fowling-piece. It was a desperate expedient indeed, but it had served its purpose. This we learnt when we had pulled them out of their living grave, which we found no such light task as we could have wished.

I suppose I rather went mad over my poor boy's most miraculous discovery, for I danced about him and shook his hand again and again, before I thought of the glad news which I could give Cousin Jeremy. When he had heard it, for the second time since I have known him, he broke down, tears coursed down his cheeks and his hard face relaxed with the intense relief from weeks, nay months, of anxiety. I turned away, so that the proud man might not be hurt by others seeing his emotion, and asked after Wirri-wirri. But I learnt that the black had fled at the first gust and though called for had disappeared in the gloom. Evidently he had succumbed. And the horses? they were suffocated long before; for their riders had sheltered behind them, and the poor beasts had speedily succumbed. This was a great loss to us, and all for the sake of one mutineer, who, now that the risk was over, looked sheepish and uncertain whether to go or stay.

I drew Jeremy's attention to him.

"Yes," said Jeremy, "he has been mutinous, but he has suffered much and has redeemed his mutiny, by coming to us with valuable news; and, moreover, this is my son's birthday, so to speak, and I could not celebrate it with severity."

"I quite concur," said I; "I should like to hear his news."

"Why, that Blackie—but first give me a drink of water—thanks—is pushing on alone. Some two days since he told this man that the direction to march in was due west, and the next morning both he and Watson had disappeared, leaving the man to his own devices, without horse or rifle, or anything but the clothes he stands up in. Honour amongst thieves is not a phrase in Blackie's creed, that is evident. The poor

fellow made due west for some time, until seeing our fire last night and the night before, he made in this direction, fearing to travel except at night, lest Blackie, whom he fears and hates, might detect and kill him. So he has wandered about and at last is here. What I don't understand is which course Blackie has taken, and how he is going to arrive here through the storm we have seen. Treloar says that they marched along due west for a long way among green oases and trees, then struck due north and came across frequent water-pools, but did not meet much fodder for the baggage mules, which were very weak when he last saw them. He tells me, also, that Blackie is Burton, that the letters he pretended to find were, as he boasted, written by himself, and that he sent Jeremy up here, though for what reason Treloar does not know. He used to tell the two men that he was going to introduce them to a country where they could find gold used, instead of iron, and live in ease and plenty with little labour. He is evidently connected with the Valley Council, for he frequently spoke to the men about the Council and said he was their messenger, and would make things all right for them, though, had they been alone, they would doubtless have died. They don't, or rather Treloar does not seem to have been much better off himself, although he had the benefit of Blackie's guidance."

"Curse him!" said Treloar, "if I ever live to see him again, he will not be able to boast, if I lose my own life for it."

The man's face, seamed and furrowed by hardship and the intense anxieties of the last two days, assumed a look of the fiercest hatred. In the meantime Wangewata and Mitford had dug a deep hole in the sand-mound to extricate the saddles and other belongings of the rescued men. So we all set to and helped them, for we did not know how useful the accoutrements and saddles might not be. Having achieved this, we cut some steaks from the poor beasts, for we could not afford to be sentimental, and we shovelled back the sand over their dead bodies, and then set out back to the Rock.

"See," said I to Mitford, "that semaphore is not visible from here."

"Perhaps it is not in view from this point," said he. I explained to Jeremy that he ought to see a great horizontal mass of rock at the top of the pinnacle, stretched out as it were like a danger signal. He had not noticed it himself, but, as the evening was wearing on we might easily be deceived as to its position, and that reminded us that we must push on so as to get to camp by nightfall.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE END OF THE MUTINY.

WHEN we got back, there was no fire burning at the foot of the cliff, and as our provender was still sufficient to sup upon without a fire, I suggested to Jeremy that the men should not light one, but that we should encamp in quiet. It struck me that it would be advantageous to throw the garrison of this pinnacle off their guard. Accordingly, in the strictest silence, we ate our supper, no conversation above a whisper being permissible. Jeremy had gone to the side of his son and waited on him hand and foot, anticipating his every demand for food, which, in the form of brandy, he gave him in frequent doses.

The evening was too dark when we arrived for the son to see his father, and I know not how he disclosed himself; the meeting between the two was too sacred for the intrusion of any of us; but Jeremy coming to me later on in my watch, for I had offered to take a watch until 10. p.m., whispered: "Tom, he knows me, and has placed his hand in mine. Thank God!" and he gulped down a tear. "Tom, I owe him to you. Mitford has told me all. How can I ever repay it?"

"Don't try to," whispered I back; "you have already done so. Had my own boy been alone, he could not have been living now. We are quits."

"No, no," said he, "that cannot be. The adventure was mine: I was bound to defend every life to my utmost. Besides, the suggestion was Treloar's."

"Never mind, Jeremy, now. We cannot argue the point in whispers; I know you always like to point your periods with a big, big D, and you are at a disadvantage under such conditions as these. Sh—do you hear anything?"

We listened attentively.

"Yes, away on the plain I hear a clink clink as of horses moving, but a long way off."

"That is Burton, depend upon it! He is approaching his brother pirates from the east, after having given his mate the slip."

"Where are the rest of our horses," said Jeremy; "let us take care they don't escape or discover us. He little thinks he is falling into the toils he has himself laid, as Mitford would say."

A flame of light shone up from the platform so suddenly that I said, under my breath, "Say nothing, don't stir, let us be taken for statues or tree stumps, or anything rather than sound an alarm." For the blaze of light shone far and near, and though we were in the shade of trees, we might have been easily distinguished by some glinting metal, had we moved. Another second and the flame died down, or rather, up, just as I had seen our bonfires expire. After a few seconds' interval, another flash and another succeeded. Evidently these were signals to the newcomers, whoever they were. For in the clear night air the sounds of voices up above came to our ears, while the clinking of the animals coming from the westward roused us to action. Quickly and quietly arousing the whole of the men and bidding them look to their arms, I asked Mitford to attend to Jeremy's son.

The clergyman, seeing me buckling on, not only my cartridge belt, but also my, or rather his revolver, as well as the long knife, whose proper purpose was to cut up our leathery meat, turned pale and walked towards the young man, asking me whether there was nothing whereby this attack could be prevented?

"Only," answered I, "if we were to be content to lay ourselves down and die. That thief and would-be murderer has all our lives in his hands, having all our stores with him."

I left him with Jeremy and went back to the group, rather feeling my way by instinct than by sight, for the moon had not yet risen, and the starlight was insufficient in

this the shadow of the Rock for us to distinguish one another. However, though we could not be seen, we could ourselves see, some distance away on the plain, baggage mules, doubtless those which we had lost. Now, how were we to know that this was so? A glint of metal showed up on the platform. Were the soldiers preparing to descend to the plain? If so, our only remedy was to surprise both parties from behind rocks or trees. Accordingly, we posted ourselves behind trees or rocks which commanded the plain, as well as the path down from the platform; all being commanded to keep perfect silence until the first shot which Jeremy would fire, and then to make as much noise as they liked. Silence! Why, my heart with the excitement of the moment beat so loudly, that I quite expected that it would sound an alarm. Nearer and nearer came the train. Then at last, we heard in Burton's unmistakable tones—

“Well, here you are Watson; see, now, didn't I say that we should reach the place to-night, bar accidents; that storm was like to have been an accident, I guess. They must have had it pretty roughly here.”

How near they were! We could make out the outlines of the mules as they stepped along, and the two great forms of the mutinous couple, who had left us thus high and dry, careless of contracts and promises, careless of the lives they left to rot out as they went on their mutinous path.

I heard a grating in the rock behind me; one of the golden-helmeted soldiers was coming down. What was to be done? If he and his party joined the group, we should be overwhelmed. As he came abreast of me I stepped out, and throwing my arm round his neck, and placing a hand over his mouth, I forced him to the ground, and threatened him with the muzzle of my revolver. But my plan of quiet surprise was not destined to be imitated, for at the tree next to mine was Treloar, who at that moment caught sight of the forms of his two late companions. I saw the flash and heard the report of his revolver, for he had been entrusted with one, and then I knew that the ambuscade was exploded, for in the next moment I heard a rending oath and a loud cry

above the rattle of metal, and then a general *mêlée*. Our natives thereupon made such good use of their lungs that they materially aided the surprise with which we had evidently taken the party a low and aloft. When the *mêlée* commenced, my prisoner struggled the more; but I held him firmly down; while doing this, a timely glint showed me the spear with which he was trying to pierce me; but it was cumbersome, and long in the handle, so I made short work of tearing it from him, and hurling it to a distance. Fortunately I found that he had over one of his shoulders a coil of rope, perhaps intended to help in drawing up the baggage. Evidently this train had been long expected. Perhaps the garrison was becoming short of provisions. However it was, the discovery of the rope was most opportune, for it allowed me to bind the prisoner tightly, and leave him amongst the trees, with my handkerchief in his mouth, harmless and gagged. Then I was free to run off and assist the others, who were engaged in the *mêlée*. Out in the open I could see one man on the ground and another over him. I saw the glint of earrings in the upper man's ears, and knew he was Blackie, who thus adorned himself. I hurled myself upon him in time to save a frightened black from having his weasand cut, and Blackie and I rolled on the ground together. I had him round the waist, with his arms down to his sides, to render him powerless, and I called forth all my old recollections of games of strength and skill, tried in vain to keep him on the ground until some one should help me to bind him. The man was so enormously strong, that, notwithstanding my own weight—for I am no light feather—he struggled to his feet and commenced to climb the cliff; this would never do, I knew. *He* must not escape; so, rapidly letting him go, I pulled out my revolver and aimed at him as he sprang forward. Three barrels, one after the other, I flashed at him; but I, who am a tolerably good shot with this weapon, had the mortification of finding that I had got Mitford's, not my own, and that I had sighted it too high, for the man was still scrambling upwards. I was about to follow, when Jack's arms were flung around me.

"That is madness, father," he said. "He can hide and see you coming up. Watch here that little patch of white rock through the trees. He will have to pass it on his way up, I know; that is on the pathway to the platform."

I waited long without seeing him pass, so leaving Jack to cover the rock with his fowling-piece, I sought the plain at the foot of the hill, where the deathly silence told me the contest was over. Here I found the prostrate black with a nasty knife-wound in his arm, precursor, doubtless, of the intended throat-cut, which he would have had but for my timely arrival. Close by him two men lay; one was the great Queenslander, Watson, whose mutinies were over, unless, as Jeremy said—for Cousin Jeremy stood by—he could manage to cope with that arch-mutineer the devil; and by his side lay one of our own men, who had rushed forward in his endeavour to hit Blackie. It was Treloar, his late companion, who was dead at the hands of his own brother-in-arms, his chosen fellow-mutineer. No, not dead, but dying fast! For though we carried him back to the camp, and Mitford promptly and neatly bandaged up the gaping wound, which was almost in the same part of the chest where Jim, my trusty Jim, had been wounded by Blackie, a few weeks ago, the flickering life expired before morning. The last words which Mitford could distinguish, as he was attempting to give him "ghostly consolation" were: "Died game and true, didn't I, boss?" Mitford was shocked to find that the dying man had so little heeded his ministrations; but in the poor fellow's mind was running the thought that, if he had mutinied, he had tried hard to atone for the crime, and had given up his life; more he could not do. Cousin Jeremy for the rest of that night sat by the side of his son, who fitfully slept, while we took it in turns to get forty winks; sleeping, so to speak, with both eyes open, alive and alert to any movement. Our prisoner next morning turned out to be a fine young fellow of some five- or six-and-twenty, strong, of a somewhat effeminate type of face, more foreign than English, and clad in the bright chain-armor I had noticed that the men wore, whom I had seen burying poor

Jeremy alive. His helmet, which was extremely brilliant in the sunlight, lay near him, and on close examination it turned out to be bronze, overlaid with gold; not merely gilt, but welded on after the fashion of old silver plate. What a mine of wealth must these people have, who use bronze and gold for common objects! But the absence of iron surprised us. Even the javelin I had thrown away was of bronze, not a bit of iron or steel in its composition. We questioned the young man, again and again, upon his nationality and other points; but he answered never a word: he either did not or would not understand our language. When we offered him a piece of horse-flesh to eat, he greedily devoured it, evincing a greed which at the time seemed to me curious, for though to us who had been content to live on leather, as it were, for weeks, a piece of fresh meat was a delicacy, how was it to one who looked in such good condition as this man? After he had eaten he became stimulated and flushed, as though he had drunk wine or alcohol; but we had no time to bestow upon such questions as the dietary of this garrison, for Cousin Jeremy approaching me said he wished to have a few words with me apart. We were, for security, safely ensconced in the little wood at the foot of the pinnacle, and had posted a sentinel both upon the plain and near the rocky pathway to prevent surprises, so we walked away a little to the left of our party, and, sitting upon a rock, Cousin Jeremy told me the following extraordinary story.

CHAPTER XX.

JEREMY'S (JUNIOR) STORY.

JEREMY (BENTHAM) BATEMAN left Sydney University for our run on the 28th day of March (which, if you will turn up a calendar for 1887, you will find was a Monday. I have not your facilities as I write, for Mother Earth does not appear to reckon time like we do, and all is night down here). Arriving at the railway terminus, he called for his saddle and bridle at the hotel and then bought a horse to carry him up country. The price which he paid was, for a bush horse, high, namely twelve pounds; but he was always an extravagant young dog, and rather thought of presenting it to our eldest girl as an Easter egg. The man of whom he bought it was no other than Mr. ex-guide Blackie, or rather Burton, for that was the name the man assumed. His description tells one with sufficient clearness who it was. Blackie had another horse and was coming up country, so they rode together. On the way, which took them four days, Blackie often spoke of a mysterious spot where a high-spirited, adventurous youngster like Jeremy could live a life of ease coupled with adventure, and the boy rather naturally swallowed the bait. Blackie would not divulge the whereabouts of this unknown country, but, finding that the bait of gold had for the wealthy young heir no great attraction, put forward a lure which, from gay young Paris down to date, has proved all-attractive with youths. There were, it appeared, an unnumbered bevy of pretty girls and lovely women in this paradise on earth. Their wooing involved just that amount of peril and adventure likely to captivate a boy in his romantic teens; it was a quaint system of ancient chivalry, worked out with modern details, of which Blackie

spoke, in which the youths fought each other with spears for the first proposal for the hand of the belle whom they admired. This insidious, though improbable, story captivated Jeremy's fancy, and before he reached Mawson's station, after passing through Carnegie, his mind was in a flutter of excitement, and he had decided, if he were unsuccessful as a suitor for Agnes's hand, to throw in his lot with this Arcadian people. Not a word or thought for his father you see, not a care for the father's ambitions, or a regret for the father's grief; perhaps the two had been too little to one another as father and son, and too much as guardian and ward. I felt honoured that this young man had at least preferred my eldest daughter to the visionary belles of Arcadia, though I am rather uncertain whether I should have realised the compliment, if he had carried out his intentions; but his stay at Mawson's changed all. Blackie evidently made inquiries which led him to believe that the young man would elude his toils if he came on to us; at any rate, he appears to have engaged himself at Mawson's, and was taken on at once by Blake, whose bad temper alienated most of his men. Blackie probably foresaw the search party, or that he could make a large sum in directing the relatives where to seek for the boy; doubtless he worked upon Blake and got that unfortunate man to press his visitor to stay a day or two. However it was, Jeremy, whose duties never oppressed him, was easily persuaded to dally, and being a Don Juan in appearance and manner, doubtless proved himself a lively and acceptable companion for sweet Annette Blake. We had known her only a few months ago as Annette, the belle of Gundagoroo station, a penniless orphan, through the bankruptcy and suicide of a spendthrift father. Blake who had been a fine man to look at, though, like my friend Burroughes, cursed with an alcoholic tooth, had stepped in opportunely, and got her married to him before she very well knew what she was about. Perhaps the poor thing thought that with tact and patience she could tame her rough St. Bernard with ease, but the man's temper was so violent that he was, it appears (though I did not know it), already disagreeing with

his girl-wife; and Blackie, who doubtless saw this, and had been smitten with Annette's charms himself, determined to bring out the worst features of Blake's jealous violent nature, and on one occasion and another, as Jeremy now sees, he managed, by calling off Blake's attention to some matter awaiting his instructions, to throw the good-looking lad and the harassed wife a good deal together. The husband, who was seeking to cut off his nose to spite his face, seems to have aided and abetted this design; for he played the most dangerous tricks, and went so far as to leave the homestead and sleep alone in his own frame house. God knows he was terribly punished for his meanness and temper, nor can one be surprised at his discovery on that last afternoon of his life. That discovery was, Annette playing love-songs on the station piano, which, when I remember it last, was so vilely out of tune that that fact alone would, one might think, take the romance out of any guilty couple. But this sight would not, of course, have inflamed the wretched man; that which did was the position of Jeremy's arm round her waist. Now, on the shaky music-stool which the Mawsons have (I know it myself, once it landed me on the floor), it may be necessary if one *must* sit upon it, to be supported by some extrinsic means; but a discreet young man would not let these means be his own arm encircling the waist of another man's wife, even if his intentions might be platonic in the extreme. Jeremy admits that the girl was pretty and seemed very miserably wedded to Blake; he also admits that he liked her very much, and consoled and sympathised with her. They were but children both, and little knew, how could they, the danger they were fast approaching. She told Jeremy in her naive way as the song left off (he says it was Tosti's "For Ever and For Ever"), that she had never enjoyed three days so much as the last, and she should quite envy the kangaroos for their drive on the next day, for she would have to be alone. Jeremy laughingly asked her whether she thought the kangaroos were to be envied if they met their death through the fascination of his rifle? And she said nothing, but blushed. Then he leaned down and

promised that he would not go and hunt kangaroos, but would stay with her.

At that moment they started round at Blake's voice, thick with anger, as he foamed at the mouth uttering inarticulate sounds, like a bull about to gore a foe. Why he did not rush upon the young man and strangle him as he stood I know not; he was just the sort of man I should have expected to do it. Perhaps, throughout his wrath, the sense of his own connivance and his own folly kept him back, and he felt that he was gazing at handiwork for which, if indeed it were not all his own, he was in the main responsible. Annette Blake fainted, which perhaps was the best thing she could do, for the man commenced a tirade of coarse abuse against her and Jeremy which awed the young man by its very filth and violence. He swore he would have a divorce, and would make the young man or his father pay heavily, and that he would thrust her out with the clothes in which she came to him and nothing more. Jeremy waited quietly standing by Annette Blake until the infuriated husband had exhausted himself, then, as she recovered herself, he said stoutly that neither he nor Annette had done anything to be ashamed of, and that if Blake did not want them to be together, why had he thrust them upon one another? Annette however implored him to go away. Probably she saw the evil glitter in her husband's eyes, which by instinct she construed to mean murder, and as she still implored him if he respected her and her good name, the young man felt himself forced to go, though he felt ill at ease at having to leave the young girl to her jealous husband's mercy.

The subsequent events up to his departure were correctly narrated by Blackie, who was doubtless the Mephisto who pulled the puppet-strings. (Now I am not going to defend Jeremy's character, he behaved more than imprudently, and if he were not guilty of great wrong he acted very much like it; but I would say that the older man, for he was thirty-five years of age, deserved all the result of his criminal jealousy up to this point.)

Jeremy rode away as Blackie described, and passed the

black encampment, where he met with no one but a few gins and lubras; the men were apparently foraging about. At another time he would have ridden back at once to tell Blake of this, for he knew that it meant loss of sheep, cattle, and perhaps horses; but he was too mad with the big manager, too mad not only with himself but with his words. His own words at parting when he threatened the manager were idle threats, he says, for his first intention was to ride off to me and ask me for advice; would to God he had carried out his first thoughts! Many lives would have been spared, much anxiety and suffering have been saved. But on second thoughts he felt that perhaps the blacks would attack the homestead; he knew there was much ill-blood between Blake and the savages, and that Blake made nothing of taking a human life for a lost sheep or bullock, so he determined to wait till dark and then make his way back past the savage encampment towards the homestead, and watch, at any rate, for that night. Had he been a little wiser he would have known that a set attack would not have been undertaken by blacks with their women and children so near, as of late years they have grown wary, and in any attacks they make they start as it were on the war-path from a camp far away from the scene of their intended action. However, when he got back to the homestead all was still, and lights were not visible anywhere. The night was dark and he could not see any object distinctly; but after a time he saw a light in the manager's house and heard the door open quickly and saw a white form flying away to the homestead. He tied up his horse and ran to the person, whom he found to be Annette Blake in her dressing-gown.

She cried out to him in a distracted tone that she had killed her husband, "See, there is the blood!" she said as she frantically touched his hand, and he had great trouble to soothe her.

He then learned that her husband had taken all their belongings to the smaller house, and had himself lain down in the outer room while she went to sleep in the inner room. *Went to sleep, poor child!—no sleep for her, the man had*

beaten her as though she had been a dog, and every limb ached; but her heart ached more—her heart reproached her with enormities which she had never committed, but which her infuriated husband imputed to her to still his own conscience. Tossing from side to side, she lit a light and came out to make peace with her husband, for though she had at first rebelled against the unjust and cruel punishment she had received, her mind was now set upon asking his forgiveness for her want of duty. She came out and saw him on the bed lying, as she thought, sound asleep; but a second glance showed her the spear impaling him to the bed, accurately fixed with deadly intent through his heart. Her own heart for a moment stood still, she caught hold of the bed to steady herself, but fell down unable to stand in the presence of this terrible crime. For she, remembering Jeremy's last words, and knowing nothing of the blacks, at once thought that *he* was the assassin. As she lay on the ground the candle rolled away and left her in darkness, a darkness grim and horrible to her. A drop fell on her hand. This maddened her, and hastily leaving the house, she fled as Jeremy had seen her. He comforted and reassured her, told her where he had been, and leaving her by his horse went back to the homestead to see if her words were really true. There he found not the dead body of the manager alone, but Blackie his attendant evil spirit standing by with a candle.

"A bad business," said Blackie; "I'm afraid it's a swinging matter for her."

"Whom do you mean?" said Jeremy.

"Why, the bit of a girl that he's married to."

Jeremy was startled and told the man her story; but Blackie threw discredit upon it, saying: "Women are curious things," and that her first words when she said she had killed her husband were true, or if not true would hang her.

Of course Jeremy said he would never tell what he knew, but Blackie humbly submitted that the law (rascal that he was, what cared he for the law?) must be obeyed, and that if master Jeremy didn't peach he was afraid he would have

to do so. Then he suggested that the only way he saw out of it was for Jeremy to carry off the girl up country to the spot he had spoken of, and he talked the young man over and gave him direction after direction until at last Jeremy promised to carry out this insane policy.

Now for the motive of this arch fiend in thus exhorting the young man to escape thus to the valley: It appears that he had a letter from Blackie to give to the Council recommending him to their care. Yet what was Blackie to get out of that? Young Jeremy's suspicions, if he had any, were dissipated at the answer which his own thoughts naturally gave to this question, and he complied.

I have not yet discovered all the scoundrel's motives, though I guess that Annette stood for one.

Blackie, who was no more on the plain looking for dingoes than I am now, was particularly active in getting into the store and fetching out many little things of which Jeremy might stand in need, so that before morning the boy had set off walking by the side of Annette who was seated on his horse. She was awed and frightened at the very thought, which Blackie had found time to instil in her by covert remarks and insinuations, that both she and her companion would be held guilty of the manager's death. So the boy made gradually northward and westward, always travelling at night to avoid being seen and questioned. By the directions which Blackie gave him he soon reached and forded the Darling river unnoticed, and kept along an arid country until he struck the oasis where we met with his notice to Blackie. The man had arranged that he should leave there a notice to show which way he intended to make for the Rock, which he told him was the entrance to the land of plenty, the Happy Valley. Up to this time both the fugitives had been to each other as strangers; neither in fact could divest himself or herself of the idea that the hands of the other were dyed with blood, and the thought made them both intensely miserable, for each felt it a duty to assist the other to escape. Had it not been so tragical, this double mistake would have furnished a plot for a comedy of errors; but it

was not until they had started through the desert on their quest for the Rock—when, in fact, death stared them in the face—that they really understood that they had both been tricked into believing ill of one another. Jeremy, whose high-spirit carried him through a great deal was fast breaking up, much to his companion's consternation, who being supplied by him with the best of their stores, and riding on their now weakening horse, was little the worse for her long travel.

(The young man evidently sacrificed his food and comfort for her, and I must at this point break off in the narrative, to apologise to him, wherever he may be now, for the injustice I did him in an earlier note. As starvation may tame the lion into a lamb, so privation and pure love for the safety and welfare of his girl companion turned Jeremy from a selfish heedless egoist to a considerate, self-sacrificing, honourable friend, whose nobility of manner I scarcely believe Jack could have equalled.)

They too arrived at the Circle of Rocks, but by this time Jeremy was dragging his feet wearily along—almost as wearily as the poor horse had before he fell a few miles back—and his cheeks were looking gaunt and pale. Water they were fortunate enough to find in plenty, Blackie having in fact told them where to look for it; but water will not fatten when, as Jeremy did, a man makes pretence of eating so as to cheat his companion into eating too. It was not until their horse fell down and died, that her eyes were opened to the fact that he had been thus starving himself. If this had not happened, he says he must have shot the poor beast, for they were literally with only two biscuits in their possession, and they reckoned they had another twenty or thirty miles to travel. He says that, regardless of consequences, he cut and tore away at the poor dead brute and ate a meal, the first one for many days. She, his companion, then realised what he had suffered for her, and fell to sobbing over their terrible plight.

CHAPTER XXI.

JEREMY'S (JUNIOR) STORY CONTINUED.

BUT in a short time Annette collected her stray wits and set to work devising plans for their safety.

She it was, who with her own fingers cut the strips of steak from the horse, and would not permit him at first to carry one, for his surfeit of meat had done him more harm than good and brought on at first a terrible weakness and thirst. She it was who toiled over the plain with his gun and belt and the whole burden of their provisions on her back, cheering his fainting efforts, and at times going miles to fetch him drops of water and thus help him along. She it was, who when they reached the Rock at last, devised methods of entrapping birds and ducks, and when they thus had plenty she allowed others to escape with those messages attached, one of which we had chanced to read. She it was, who thought of the bonfire on the rock and took the materials there and lit it over and over again, nor cared for blue flame nor mysterious groan, so that she could light a beacon to aid and save young Jeremy. The loving, clinging girl budded into the shrewd supporting woman, and just when her signals seen by us, and thought to be a star, were on the point of bringing their reward; that is on the very eve of the day we reached the rock she disappeared.

Jeremy, weak as he was, climbed over the rocky platform and called her name and wandered about distractedly to find her, but could not discover a trace. Then at last he thought of the letter he had to the Valley Council, and having been told that this was the entrance to the valley, he set his wits to work to discover a way into the Rock. Dragging one limb after the other he went round the Rock, saw the western platform, but could not make anything of it. Then he

traced the footpath up towards the platform and noticed how it branched away to the west, but on following it he found himself stopped by the great stone door we had seen and by accident opened. On the placard he wrote in sheer despair—for he could think of nothing else—that J. P. Burton had directed him there and that he had a letter to the Council, and had lost his companion. Wandering up and down disconsolately, when he came across it next about midday he noticed that his own writing had disappeared and instead he was directed to mount to the eastern platform and wait, for his companion was safe. He seems to have regarded in his weakened pre-occupied state these manifestations of mystery as quite natural, and accordingly obeyed his instructions. He had not long been on the platform before he felt himself fainting, and awoke to find himself borne along at a great rate in the dark. The air was cool and fresh, and had revived him, but he thinking that this was death, comforted himself with the thought, for his vitality was down to zero. In a few minutes the speed of his conveyance slackened, and he opened his eyes to find that he had come out into sunlight; a delicious sunlight, bathing a lovely landscape; tropical flowers, trees and fruits flourished; bungalows appeared, and the curious thought struck him that *this* was Heaven. The idea was increased rather than dissipated by the armoured forms of helmeted men whom he saw, at the side of the conveyance. By the side of the railway line, on which the car stood, he noticed large whitened sheds where he distantly heard the din of wheels and machinery. But he was not allowed much time for observation or reflection, for he was conducted by the helmeted band without a word to a large building, over which the words "Council house" were written. He thrust his hand into his breast and felt for and found the precious letter of introduction. He was about to meet this Council, and, though his knees were tottering with weakness, he braced himself up for the interview. The walls of the building were of white quartz; double walls between which ran cool arcades or cloisters, in which were walking men and

women, dressed in loose fitting garments. When Jeremy was seen passing through with his guards, the people manifested some interest in him, and they stood in lines on either side, while he was conducted through into a vestibule. Here the first object which caught his eye was a motto of gold letters, on white quartz, hung by golden chains from the dome above: "Expect justice not mercy." The silence and magnificence of the place alike awed him, but the faces of the guard and the strollers in the vestibule wore a look of complete apathy and indifference. They appeared to take but little interest in anything; their actions were more mechanical and automatic than the actions consequent upon healthy active volitions. In fact one and all looked inexpressibly bored.

While he was detained in the vestibule, Jeremy had the opportunity of examining it. The floor was inlaid mosaic, in which the motto hanging overhead was printed in large letters, so that whether a man looked up or down he could not fail so see it. The vestibule was a large room, cool and pleasant, with seats on either side, in which reclined at their ease guards like those we had ourselves seen. They said little to one another, and what little was said was so low in tone that it could hardly be distinguished. This he noticed, but suddenly a great curtain over which the words, Council Chamber, were written, was pulled aside by some hidden cord, and he was led forth into a room, whose splendour absolutely dazzled his eyes. The wall, floors and ceiling were composed of massive blocks of polished white quartz, through which ran veins of the most artistic colouring. Here a vein of antimony showed up in a glistening streak of black or silver; there a few gems of pyrites glittered, and in another spot great splashes or spider-web-like mazes of gold, virgin gold, pure, rich and deep in tone.

The vast blocks which supported the roof rested upon pillars of clustered form of the same material, which, however, to Jeremy's fastidious eyes, did not lend itself well to the delicate moulding of the perpendicular style adopted. The windows were of glass, mostly of a magnificent green-

gold, relieved in geometrical patterns by opalescent panes, forming a pleasant contrast. Its roof was surmounted by a glass skylight upon which the noon sun poured down, though shaded with some tiffany added to the brilliancy of the spectacle. Not satisfied with this flood of light, the Council rejoiced in a crown of hundreds of incandescent lamps, under the rim of the cupola, which, as it were, carried the sunlight into every hole and corner of the great room.

But the occupants of the Council interested Jeremy the most. They were of the same class as those whom he had seen without, parading in the cool colonnades, and amongst them were many soldiers. A woman occupied the central seat, facing the doorway through which he had come. His guards led him to a spot on which, in large golden letters were written the words: "The accused;" beyond this there was nothing to prevent his walking forward. At a sign from the president, the guards left him standing there, or rather swaying, for he was weak with fatigue and illness.

Then he heard a whispering voice, but could not discern its words, so he said in his ordinary tones: "I pray you to speak up if you wish me to hear; I am weak and ailing and cannot stand long."

At his voice the councillors, one and all, plunged their hands into their ears as though he had shouted at them, and one of them, a woman of startling beauty, came forward and brought a seat on which he could sit. At a further whisper, the woman stood by his side and whispered to him: "Do not stir; answer me only in the lowest tones, I will interpret your shouts." He would have insisted upon her taking his seat, but she by an imperious gesture bade him be silent, and the interview proceeded. He was examined at length, his letter read, and discussed, and his fate settled before he knew or could gather a word of what was going on. Then the fair interpreter at his side said to him in the soft whisper they all used—

"Your letter is believed to be genuine, and you may stay here on signing the convention."

"What convention?" asked he. It was brought to him, a

book of skins upon which were written a number of laws to which he was compelled to bind himself. One only caught his eye, the purport of which was the notice which Mitford and I had ourselves seen on the rock, as to the three offences against the Valley Council. This startled him so much that he asked before he did so to be at liberty to read the document through at leisure, and though a frown and hiss passed over the assembly, the lady interpreter at his side appeared to plead for him, and by a sign obtained leave for him to read it through until the next day. So he had a copy handed to him written on a species of papyrus, and was conducted back through the vestibule by his guards. To one he said, at first out loud, but then remembering the effect of ordinary speech, moderating his voice to a whisper: "I shall die if I don't have something to eat."

The man smiled a cheerless smile and said: "Nothing can be given to a stranger. It is a law of the council newly-made" (I suppose that since Jeremy was here the law has been repealed, for I have lived very well whilst I have been here, if indeed "here" has anything to do with Jeremy's Valley).

"How long am I a stranger?" said Jeremy. "Until you sign the convention," answered the soldier. "Ah," said he, "that won't be long, my friend." He was quickly carried, for he was very weak, into a room enclosed with stone on all sides like a prison, and with no inlet for light; but an incandescent electric lamp was burning, and he noticed that the chamber was fresh and pure. The furniture was of the simplest, and the walls were scribbled over as though other prisoners had been there before. He was shut in and sat down to digest the contents of the papyrus, although he would much rather have digested other and more substantial viands, in other and more physical forms of digestion. Long did he pore over the writing, but, poor fellow, he recollects very little of its contents, beyond that the law of which the soldier had spoken to him was there, and various other laws; such as not speaking loud or making a noise, marrying one wife or husband when the Council desired, the choice being

left to the signatory, subject to veto by the council, and many more strange and unwholesome laws. One law recently added at the end of the code gave him much alarm, namely, that for twenty-four hours after the signature by any stranger, he or she, should have no option in the selection of their mate; it being desirable, in the interests of the community, that proper marriages, with a view to the public benefit, should be arranged by the state. He threw the book down in despair; the letters were dancing before him. But again taking it up, he read how that a first offence against the laws merited reprimand; a second, the punishment of wearing a gold circlet round the wrist or ankle; and, a third offence, punishment of death—but that punishments must be carried out within twenty-four hours of decree, otherwise they did not count. Altogether, he felt in a cleft stick. He was very fond of Annette. The truth must be told; he was in love with her over head and ears; the starvation and privations he had endured for her sake had, by a natural process, endeared her to him, and she, by her reciprocated tenderness, had clenched the matter. Yet if he signed this convention, how was he to know that she would not be separated from him for ever? Somebody might claim him. Was that likely? He so gaunt, so ragged, who would be so foolish? Yet supposing she were also being compelled to sign? If she were not here, what did the writing on the rock mean? And if she were compelled to sign, any one might claim her, she so young and withal so pretty; though not of the delicate complexion of the stately girls and matrons he had seen near and in the Council Chamber, yet she had beauty in her tanned brown face. (But there, he was in love with her and I'm not, nor was Jeremy, my cousin, when he was telling me the story I am now relating.) While the boy was debating what he should do, the door of his prison opened and his interpreter at the council came in. She was beautifully dressed in flowing robes, which by their very simplicity showed off the perfect complexion of her face and arms. Her hair was long and coiled up in black twists upon her head, after the Grecian style. Her face

wore more interest than he had noticed in any others of this mysterious whispering folk, but still there was a calm calculation in it, an apathetic look which surprised him in a girl so young and lovely. She had come, she said, to explain the laws of the place to him, and he, exhausted as he was, readily took lessons from her as she commented on one after the other. Each of the curious, and to his nature abhorrent, restrictions on liberty of choice and action, were by her explained, always in the soft whispering voice so persuasive and so pleasant to the ears of a sick man, to be of such a nature in actual operation that they soon lost the unpleasant features they had appeared to possess. At last, when the question of the recent law came before him, she was asked whether Annette Blake was in the land of the living, and she answered "Yes." Had she signed the convention? Yes, and was a stranger no longer. When, then? Since he was brought in, and now they were fêting her outside. Why? Because, to-morrow's president of the council had claimed her as his wife. For the first time the eyes of his beautiful monitress took a sparkle. There was some jealousy then in this creature. The flint of rejected addresses had struck a spark out of this cold stone. When Jeremy heard this he was distracted for a time, but, on hearing his reasons, his adviser told him there was a way out of the difficulty. Let him depend on her; she would counsel the girl to refuse to marry the president at the twenty-third hour, and he could himself claim her if he passed through the ordeal of his own twenty-four hours. She would herself claim him, and had no doubt the council would ratify her choice, but he need not disclaim her until the day was over, and then he would have only committed a first offence like Annette, and they could marry and live happily.

It looked such plain sailing that the young man, then and there, signified he would sign the convention, and she hastening away, said that she, being for the time the summoner of the council, would call the meeting early in the morning, so that he might himself forestall Annette if she did not believe him. Hungry and thirsty he lay on his

couch, a plain bed-frame of wood with a canvas stretched across it, and tossed from side to side. How long he waited he did not know—night and day in his cell were the same to him—but after a dreary age the door opened, and by the light of day that streamed in, he could see the guard awaiting him. The sun was still low in the eastern heavens; Himetoa, his brunette monitress, had not deceived him, and guarded as on the previous day he was led within the vestibule of the chamber. More interest seemed to be roused amongst the bystanders, especially the women, and many of them came and looked upon him, but some of them whispered together and laughed, and once he heard the word Himetoa, evidently she had given out her design to frustrate others. He waited long in the deathly silence of the hall. Oh, how faint and sick he felt. How he longed for one of the bananas which grew in huge branches on the trees outside the chamber, how he ached for a drop of the glistening water which trickled with rippling music down the side of the hill-street. At last the curtains were raised and he was ordered by his guards within. His heart beat fast. Supposing some hitch came in his desperate plan. How then? A smothered cry aroused him, there in front stood Annette, by the accused's stone, with her hand to the pen with which she had just signed the sacred book of laws, resting upon a desk in front of her.

"Annette," he cried, springing forward.

"Sh!" she whispered.

"I have not signed. I incur no punishment yet," said he.

"You have not signed," said she, "how is this? You told me he had,"—and she turned to the girl at her side, the lovely Himetoa.

"Annette, my soul," he whispered, "it does not matter. Himetoa has arranged all. I will tell you if she has not," and there and then Jeremy told her, in whispers, his arrangements, forgetting that what was a whisper to him carried his voice throughout the chamber. But none of the council either smiled or said a word, only the president, no longer

the woman of yesterday, but a man of great stature and powerful, though heavy, face frowned at Jeremy, and he, fancying that his own reluctance to sign was the cause of this displeasure, hastened forward and took the pen from her hands, pressing them as he did so. Turning to Himetoa, he whispered: "Tell them I sign," and she nodding, he signed his name as large as life, just below Annette's. She had signed herself Bateman too, for she considered herself tied to him by risks of death and starvation, if not by clerical forms and services. At once Himetoa, as Jeremy made the last dash, stepped forward and whispered, touching him on the arm as she spoke. The president whispered again, and Himetoa answered, whereupon he, coming from his magisterial seat towards Annette, himself touched her, and facing round to the council, whispered some question. All present held up their hands, and Himetoa turning to Jeremy, said—

"It is all right; I have claimed you, and Annette has been claimed by the president. You have both to say that you agree to this."

"Say yes, Annette," said Jeremy, and they both whispered: "Yes, we do."

CHAPTER XXII.

YOUNG JEREMY BREAKS THE VALLEY LAWS.

THE hands of the council fell, and Jeremy and Annette were led outside. At once they were led by Himetoa to a house close by, richly decorated and surrounded with beautiful creepers and tropical flowers. There Jeremy was shown to a quiet room, where he found a suit of armour and an ordinary robe awaiting him, but he cared for neither; he was too weak and ill to change his garments, all that he wanted was food. So he soon came out to the central room where a great table was spread with bread and fruits of all sorts, chiefly tropical; and, without waiting for liberty, he helped himself to the luxurious articles; here he was soon joined by Annette and their hostess, who had arrayed the simple girl in the purest white with gold braiding.

"I liked you better in your riding-habit, though it was worn and travel-stained," said Jeremy.

"Sh," said Annette, "whisper, or you will be punished."

So they whispered together, and with Himetoa, who appeared greatly interested in their plans and projects. She told them how they might live; either Jeremy might serve as a soldier, and wear armour, or a civilian and earn his food and living in the mines or other state labour. A house would soon be built for them, as co-operation was one of the leading principles of "the Valley," and to-morrow they would be at liberty to marry. The morrow came, and they had both to attend the council to ratify or break the bond of the day before.

So they attended early, and Himetoa went within to announce to them what time they might approach. But though they waited long they had no summons, and Jeremy, noticing that the shadows cast by the sun were fast approaching a point he remembered they had reached the

day before, when he had been summoned within the chamber, hastily pushed through with Annette on his arm and stood inside the Council Chamber.

Himetoa was by their side in a moment, saying—

“How could you do this? You have broken the law which provides that no one shall enter without a summons.”

The president of the day then whispered towards them, and Himetoa translated.

“He is reprimanding you both for this entry.”

“Tell him,” said Jeremy, “the fault is mine alone.”

The answer was received with a short smile, and the president of yesterday stood up and commenced an harangue in which Himetoa seemed to interrupt him often. But for the fact that they spoke in whispers and hardly changed the aspect of their faces, they were apparently engaged in a wrangle. Annette, whose ears were sharper than Jeremy's, overheard, and said to Jeremy—

“They are wrangling in their lethargic fashion whether you have not committed a double offence. The president says you have done this by leading, and Himetoa says that I have committed it by allowing you to proceed.”

“We have no time to lose,” said Jeremy. “Let us both refuse to be married to the persons who claim us.” Accordingly they whispered out their disclaimers, much to the council's affected astonishment; and another wordy warfare arose between Himetoa and the man who had claimed Annette. But they were interrupted by another person, who whispered, so Annette explained—

“They have not given an hour's notice of their disclaimers. They are bad,” and the whole council approved.

“I care not for hour's notices,” whispered Jeremy defiantly. “Of that we were told nothing. We refuse to be married against our wills.”

“An offence against the laws of the state,” said the president. “Even if only the first offence, you ought to be severely reprimanded. In my mind it is a second offence, if not a third one; but even choosing the first alternative, I must reprimand you and warn you that the state will not

allow its laws to be contravened”—so Annette explained to Jeremy, and herself whispered—

“I say the same as my chosen husband here.”

“No, no,” said yesterday's president, “that you cannot do. You are merely following in his steps, this is not your offence.” Jeremy's ears were getting sharper, and he could distinctly hear this sentence.

But the president of the day rising up, said—

“The offence is yours, Annette Bateman, you have broken the laws of the Valley for the first time, take care lest you do so again. The punishment is more severe.”

But here two others of the council interposed and claimed the hands of the strangers; a man and a woman. Jeremy exclaimed against this, but was sternly told that by another law offenders could be claimed in marriage by those with better records. Then he saw how he had been tricked and, turning round, he reproached Himetoa in no guarded language or quiet tone for her deceit and the fraud she had practised upon him, the fraud of telling him some and not all. The president was up in arms: “Thou art adjudged punished for a second. Place the gold circlet upon him!” said he “take care that you offend not again.” But Jeremy, beside himself with despair, broke loose from Annette's enfolding arms, and turning to the council, howled aloud at them. The councillors writhed at his voice, as though in terrible pains, but he, caring for nought, caught Annette by her arm and sprang through the curtain. Here however the soldiers stopped him, and though he struggled, his puny strength was as nothing to theirs, and he was conveyed back again and stood before the triumphant, though suffering president.

“Thou art judged guilty of death for a third offence, being mutiny against the Council;” and the president pompously subsided into his chair.

The soldiers seized poor Jeremy and dragged him away; although they did not show any unnecessary roughness or ferocity, they were perfectly callous to the sufferings he evinced. The last he saw of Annette was a face streaming with tears, and the last voice he remembered hearing

was her voice imploring the Council for his life. He then remembers being conveyed with infinite speed through the black tunnel (whence but a few hours previously he had emerged upon this fair land, "where only man is vile") and coming suddenly to a dazzling light was seized, bound and gagged and then conveyed to the spot where I had, by accident, seen him. The moment for him to be placed there seemed to have been most fittingly chosen, as the oncoming sand-storm would, but for my having chanced to be there, have buried him within a few minutes.

* * * * *

Here endeth young Jeremy's story, which, I must say, notwithstanding its agreement in part with our own observations, I was unable to believe *in toto*, and set down great part of it to a fevered imagination, and a starved brain and body. One thing was certain, Annette Blake had disappeared, but whether these inhabitants of the rock were accountable for this or not we could not tell. Of course Cousin Jeremy had promised his son that he would strive his utmost to find out the whereabouts of poor Annette, who had with her womanly wit and loving care kept the flickering spark of life within the young man, when he would but for her have lain down to die in the desert. But it was one thing to make a promise, another to keep it. How were we to set about redeeming our promise? Certainly if we could we must rescue the girl, and the fact that we had regained our stores placed us for a time in comparative ease and comfort. Besides our provisions, we had an almost inexhaustible supply of ammunition; of the firearms which the mutineers had with fatal confidence left amongst the baggage, we had in fact recovered all but one revolver and a cartridge-belt, and those were on Blackie's person. If therefore it were necessary to blast a portion of the rock away we had plenty of gunpowder with which to do it. On the other hand, we could not afford to delay long, for a great portion of the grassy plain had been smothered by the sand-storm, and while we might have abundance of provisions for ourselves, we certainly had none to spare for our beasts of burden.

We inquired of Jeremy junior, as I must call him, how he

had been brought from the rock, thinking that where there was egress there was also ingress; but he could only tell us that he was carried, as it seemed to him, upwards in a species of lift and then borne straight out on the plain, for he felt none of the jolting that would have been a natural consequence of being transported down the rocky side of the cliff from the platform. If this were true, then the doorway opened on to the plain and on a level with it and could be easily assaulted. Our first thought was, however, to ascend to the eastern platform to see if the tablets there held any communication for us. So we went up in force, fully armed and prepared to meet any ambuscade, carefully examining the pathway as we went to discover how Blackie had disappeared the night before. However, beyond a few drops of blood from the wound where I had evidently shot him, as he stumbled forward, there was no clue to his whereabouts. The wood certainly did not afford him shelter, and if he had managed to elude Jack's vigilance, it could have only been either by outstaying Jack's patience in the shadow of the rock, or finding an entrance in the pinnacle at some other spot. If there were one it might be used for the purpose of cutting off our retreat from the platform, so we planted one of our number as a sentinel commanding the pathway up and down, while Cousin Jeremy, Jack and I, ascended to the signal platform. There was the charred and blackened bonfire, the remains of the previous night's signals, but it was dry, and had evidently not been extinguished by water. For all that there was a smell of mineral oil about it, and striking my finger along some of the logs, I noticed a greasy feeling of fat or oil. The wood contained little if any such oil: then these inhabitants had used some for the great flare they made, and yet their extinguishing process was so perfect, that even this inflammable oil had been put out in an instant.

"Before we leave the rock," Jack said, "we must try and learn the secret of this extincteur; it will realise for each of us a fortune amongst theatre goers."

"It may extinguish life as well as flame," I remarked,

"in which case your theatre goers would not be so much delighted as your undertakers."

"Very true," said Jeremy; "but instead of distressing ourselves over such abstruse questions, let us consider the present and our own interests. The tablets are bare and await a communication.

"Demand the restoration of Annette Blake for whom we hold the soldier in hostage," said I.

"All right," said Jeremy, and he wrote that unless the girl was given up within one hour we would blast the rock and hold the soldier as hostage to abide events.

"We had better descend now, otherwise our tablets will not be answered," remarked Jeremy, and we accordingly left the platform and soon found ourselves at the foot of the Rock. There we held a council of war, and settled all matters in readiness for the refusal by the garrison of our just requests. Some of us were to make a feint along the upper pathway, round to the western platform, taking ropes and logs of wood to prevent surprise and tricks being played upon them and hatchets to attack the bronze statue and break it up; and while half of us were doing this, I, with Jack, would reconnoitre around in the shadow of the rock where I had been yesterday, to prevent a flank movement, and at the same time to discover the whereabouts of the doorway from which Jeremy the younger had been carried.

Adopting the same precautions as before, when the hour had expired, we ascended to the platform and there read the following answer to our demands:—

Inhabitants of this rock only leave it to die. Annette Bateman does not wish to die, so leaves not the rock. If the soldier is given up, you will not be molested and may leave in safety. Otherwise you die.

Hastily rubbing off the inscription, Jeremy wrote: "War to the knife."

He was infuriated at the arrogance displayed. The calm assertion of their will over ours was too much for the man's

pride. So we descended and carried out our respective duties. Mitford and one of the blacks waited by Jeremy's son, with Nina, my dog to keep them company, while Jack and I crept along under the shadow of the southern end of the pinnacle, and up above Jeremy, with the rest of our force, climbed along the narrow pathway, though without any other intention than of feinting an attack. The scheme succeeded much better than I had allowed myself to anticipate. We watched them pass the stone doorway leaving a great log to prevent the door shutting, and cross the chasm by means of two other pieces of tree, fastened with loose ropes to the opposite sides for fear of the chasm widening; we saw them stretching ropes along the sloping bank to enable them to walk in safety, and knew that it was time to make our own survey. Cautiously Jack and I crept round, as I had the other day. Past the western platform and past the huge abyss on the lip of which I had hung so long but yesterday. Our ears were open to the slightest sound, and as I peered round the last corner where I had seen the melancholy procession of the day before disappear, I thought I caught the whispers of men's voices. I could not see without being seen, and moments were precious, so motioning Jack back, I advanced my head boldly round and caught sight of a body of soldiers coming towards us. But they saw me at the same moment, and turned tail. They evidently thought we were in force below as well as aloft. I gave chase, firing my revolver as I ran, a signal to Jeremy that the ruse had succeeded: doubtless he hastened down at once; but I hurried on, for I could see the soldiers fast disappearing into a crevice of the rock. They were many, and we were only two, for Jack was close behind me, but they hurried through the narrow crevice, huddling together like sheep, and I arrived just as a great stone was closing the door: hastily thrusting in my revolver, I prevented the massive rock from sliding to its place, but at the same moment felt myself forced aside by Jack who had seen the points of spears issuing out of the crack. I still held on to the revolver nevertheless, and cooed aloud for Jeremy and his party, hoping that they would come up before our

strength gave out. At that moment I heard rushing feet from the opposite direction and turning, saw Wirri-wirri, whom we thought had been overtaken and killed by the sand-storm, flying over the plain, yelling aloud with pleasure as he ran; but his approach was somewhat unfortunate, for it distracted both Jack and myself, and the moment of distraction was fatal, the door swung open, a dozen spears were thrust out, and though I fell down and thus escaped the spears, a couple of the soldiers ran out and dragged me within, while they kept off poor Jack, who could not fire for fear of hitting me. The door swung to again and I was within the rock, but as a prisoner. The darkness was intense, especially after the fierce sunlight without, and though I could feel myself borne along and apparently lowered on a platform a considerable distance, I do not know how far I came, or in what direction, for I was placed in this room in the pitch dark, and the incandescent lamp which lights my writing was only lit after all my captors had left. I am astonished at the gentle treatment I receive from these men.

I have little to write of my life here in the bowels of the earth. Day and night are the same to me. My meals are regularly pushed in, and I certainly have not been starved like young Jeremy was, for of tasty dishes there are no end, though I should say that very little meat enters into their composition. But the fruits and bread, sweet and flavoured with bananas, are most appetising, particularly after my long experience of leathery mutton and leathery horse.

I have few cares here except to get out of prison. My one anxiety is lest I may be married without being consulted, to some pressing young damsel, or what might be worse, to some aged squaw.

Himetoa now might be irresistible if Cousin Jeremy were in my place, I doubt not; but somehow, old-fashioned as I may be, I have a prejudice against pluralities in wives. In one point I may console myself, for I am rough and shaggy; grizzled on head and face, and so I am far more likely to escape the pressing attentions of Himetoa and her companions than was young, slim and handsome Jeremy.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN AWAKENING.

HAVE I been born again? Have I been transmigrated into some other being, inhabiting some other sphere? I could hardly have changed my lot and my conditions of life more. However, let me, if I can, control my wayward pen and be at least chronological. I had written so long on the last occasion that I slept soundly for many hours. My watch was at twelve when I composed myself to sleep, which I took to be midnight by Sydney time, and when I awoke it pointed to eleven. Perhaps the soundness of my sleep may have been increased by an opiate in my supper; at any rate, I had been removed from the cell in which I last wrote and—conveyed into a different region before I awoke. Instead of incandescent electricity illumining the four walls of a limited chamber, the glorious light of unmistakable sunshine was bathing a lovely champaign, stretched before my eyes as I leaned on my elbows. My couch looked like that which I had slept upon, and the furniture of my room was still simple. But the walls were of the most delicate figured quartz, such as, according to young Jeremy's description, the Council Chamber possesses; the floor was inlaid in mosaic, with a small matting of varied colours in the centre, while curious fabrics of coarse texture, but artistic tone, draped the open windows, which, opened out after the French fashion on to a verandah or colonnade of cool stone. Around the pillars clusters of Cape jessamine, and Jackman's clematis, Stephanotis, and other tropical creepers, entwined their tendrils, flowers and foliage. But far above and beyond all the attractions of the foreground was the lovely vista of mountain and valley, blue shadows and vivid greens, glinting streams and white houses, that stretched out before me. Never in my life, except in Ceylon, have I seen such profusion and colouring

of foliage and flowers. Though I am no artist, and was consumedly hungry, I could have feasted for hours upon that splendid landscape. Again, observing the foreground, I saw that the house in which I stood was surrounded by such profusion, such wealth of colour, that it almost dazzled me; strange fruits and flowers grew at every turn; custard apples which would have put Rio de Janeiro market-women to the blush, bananas which must have made every Fijian break the tenth commandment; cocoanuts whose massive clusters hung down in huge green boles from feathery plumes of leaves. Then there were oranges, mangoes, lemons, limes, rice fields, sugar plantations; all showing the greatest care and cultivation. But along the pink-toned roads or by the white houses with their green jalousies, I saw little if any life. It was mid-day and, doubtless as in other tropical countries, the inhabitants kept within doors. Yet the heat was not unpleasant, just of that temperature which, as it were, soothes and envelopes one's physical and mental forces in a delicious seductive embrace. Here at any rate the millennium had come before it had neared the rest of the world.

But it is a practical world we live in, and self-preservation and number one are far and away of more importance than lovely views. I confess, then, to an unworthy prosaic precaution of feeling for my arms. Being an old campaigner, I had "planted" the various accoutrements I had worn about my person. My cartridge-belt was up one sleeve, my revolver buckled on under my shirt, and my knife, compass, and watch in the respective legs of my jack-boots, though, as may be expected, these unusual additions to my toilet did not add to my comfort.

I had just satisfied myself of the success of my scheme, when a door swung open at the far end of the room, and a woman entered.

How very awkward, thought I, if it had been a couple of minutes ago. At least she might have knocked. She stood opposite bowing to me, to which I of course responded. She whispered! Confound it, thought I, this is another of young

Jeremy's truths. How can I tell what she is saying? My own voice hoarse with crying after sheep and dogs on the station or cooeing on our march, is not under such control as I could wish. So I replied as much under my breath as possible that I could not hear. So she came nearer to me, and said in slightly louder tones—

"I am glad to find that you are well. You are my guest. I knocked for admission, but you did not answer, and I feared that the journey hither was too much for you."

"Too much for me! What journey? Madam," I said, "I am at a loss to know the meaning of anything I see or have experienced since first I was captured by your soldiers, as I assume they are?"

"You were brought here by command of the president of yesterday," said my visitor, who was a fine woman, some five-and-thirty years, with a large square meditative forehead and delicate complexion. She looked strong in build and graceful, but her eyes spoilt her face; they were small and insignificant.

"And whence was I brought, how was I brought, and who is the president of yesterday?" I asked.

"You were brought from your chamber in the rock, some twenty miles off by the electric line through the rock tunnel, and as I am the president of to-day you are my guest. The president of yesterday was Annette Blake or Bateman, whom you know."

"Am I then to be shifted on from day to day as the president changes?" asked I.

"That is as you please. For the present you are welcome here. You are the guest of the nation through me. I am honoured by your presence. My purpose in coming just now was to introduce myself and to tell you that a meal awaits you."

"Madam, I am much obliged, I will attend at once."

She left the room with stately mien; and I had the opportunity of noticing her garments. A robe, something after the fashion of the old Roman toga, was thrown around her figure and draped over her shoulder; below this she

appeared to wear a tightly fitting jersey; but very little of this showed, as her arms were free; the robe fell to and covered her feet, which were protected with coarse canvas shoes, apparently cool and comfortable; for she walked with an easy step which I have noticed amongst the shoeless savages and in countries where the shapely foot is allowed free play, as in the Highlands. Her hair was surmounted by a small white cap like a forage cap, which I have since found to be only one form of a sort of *multum in parvo* headdress, as this Phrygian-like cap by a simple manipulation became at will an indoor cap, or a wide sun-hat, or again a closely fitting rain-hood. It is worn by men and women alike, and is of a species of waterproofing material, as indeed much of the clothing here is, so that people may walk about in rain or sunshine without fear of spoiling their garments.

Hastily making my toilet, as well as I could, before a gilt looking-glass and over a quartz hand-basin, into which water ran from bronze ornaments, I followed my hostess through the curtained doorway. The blaze of light which met me here, from ceiling and walls, reminded me of Jeremy's own observations, and looking up I perceived a strong supply of electric lights under an open skylight; the table was covered with a coarse white cloth, which looked strangely out of keeping with the refinement shown in the metal and glass-ware which ornamented it, all of the chastest and most intricate designs. Evidently the industrial arts were not in their infancy in this valley, though in some respects the tapestry appeared coarse and heavy. My hostess was seated at the table with members of her family, boys and girls, whom she introduced to me with a wave of her hand. Turning to her servants, who were waiting upon her, she bestowed upon them a much more elaborate notice, much of which, however, I failed to catch.

She noticed a look of astonishment upon my face, and said: "These whom you see as servants to-day, may be, if their turn comes, in the council to-morrow; every one here has to take in turn the position of servant as well as master,

some being fitted for one form of service, others for another and so on."

"Then you are all equal here," said I.

"All in turn are equal. It is impossible that all should be equal at the same moment, but the state regulates the time during which each shall be master or servant, and the regulations are kept."

"But," said I, "there must be many inconveniences which arise; how, for instance, could you leave your family under such conditions?"

"My husband would look after them in my absence. At present he is working in the mines."

"I beg your pardon," said I; "did I hear you aright? The husband of the presidentess working in a mine?"

"Yes, there is nothing in that; the balance of power is maintained by such means; when my husband is at the head of the council I shall very likely be in the state-laundry."

I smiled, for it appeared to my old-world notions absurd; but she pressed upon me the dishes upon the table, recommending some and praising others. I tasted them and found that they were mostly vegetables, or fruits cooked in various forms, or served up in their natural lusciousness. Here I found fresh lettuces, or what seemed like them; there, beans and peas of various descriptions; again, toasted bread of the banana tree.

I was pleased with the great variety; who would not be? but I must say I noticed the absence of any meat. I felt, however, it would be impolite to refer to this; probably the midday meal was as it were a light refection. Noticing, I suppose, a slight smile round my lips as she was praising one dish, she gravely said—

"You appear to think that I show bad taste in praising my own table. But as the meal has come in from the public kitchens, you may rest assured I have no interest in praising or blaming."

"I had no idea of that," said I; "pray, do you get what you want from them, at any time?"

"At the usual meal hours we do," replied she; "at other

times of course we don't want food. At least we get what there is available according, in fact, to the chief cook's menu."

"Oh, is there one who settles what the state should eat?" asked I.

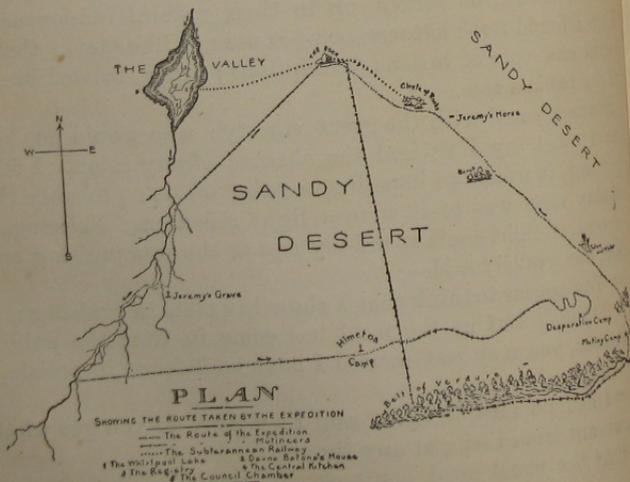
"Yes, one who changes frequently. Our physicians take it in turn to be cooks, but as most of us know something of physic, we can all take turns."

"Why, your physicians? What has physic to do with cookery?"

"Oh, a great deal; how can you ask? We do not want to be troubled with diseases, and so study how best to avoid them, by eating proper foods."

"Then, is there one dinner of which every one in the valley partakes?"

"Precisely. They all receive according to their numbers their dinners, or other meals, through the tunnels that communicate with the cooking place. It is over there in the shadow of the hill amongst the trees. You cannot see it from here. They have placed it there so as to get a better supply of water to drive the electrical fires."



CHAPTER XXIV.

SOCIO-VEGETARIANISM.

"MAY I ask whether you are socialists?" I said to my handsome hostess.

"How is that?" she said.

"I mean, do you believe in the state being all and the individual nothing?"

"Of course, like other countries," she replied.

"Pardon me, I am from a country where individual effort comes first and the benefit of the community afterwards."

"Dear me. You must be very much behind the time. Something like those brown men who run on their hands and knees."

"Well, we don't generally consider ourselves much behind the times in Australia, you know," said I apologetically; "and we do plume ourselves that we are much beyond the brown men; savages, we call them."

"Ah, you mean that you do not eat each other," she said, with a face of disgust at her own words.

"Yes, I mean that," said I, amused at an enterprising Australian being confounded with a black; "and of course other differences."

"You are fairer skinned than they are," said she; "is that what you mean? but you are very yellow."

"Thank you," said I; "perhaps I am, but I am tanned by the sun, and besides, I am a man; now our ladies are as fair as—well as some of you are."

"I should like to see that," said she; "Annette Bateman is not. She is as yellow as you are."

"Well, you see, she has ridden through the scorching desert. See her in a few weeks time, after she has got home, and you would see her as fair as this table-cloth, with a blush on each cheek like that rose."

"Home," said my hostess, "what is home?"

"The place where one lives, one's house."

"Oh yes, I see; but what is your house to-day is not to-morrow, you know."

"Oh, isn't it?" said I with a laugh—I was fast getting into the way of holding quite animated conversation in whispers—"If I die, that's true, it goes to whom I give it, but in other senses it's mine."

"I am perplexed," said the hostess; "what can you mean? If the state wish it, I must turn out of their house and live elsewhere; is not that my duty?"

"If you lived in a state house in my country," said I—thinking of our workhouses and benevolent asylums—"you would count it your pleasure as well as your duty, but you would grumble all the same. But this house, is it not yours or your husband's?"

"Mine, or my husband's? Of course not," replied she, astonished at the folly of the question. "The state finds houses for its people, and expects them to leave for others when it pleases. How can you have a house of your own? You cannot build it on air. The land is the state's, do you not see?"

"I understand you perfectly," said I; "but where does this state property end? Have you anything you possess? I mean that belongs to you alone, or you and your husband alone?"

"I never thought of it. I suppose I have not."

"Your husband? remarked I.

"Oh, of course, we are husband and wife, and we cannot have more than one husband or wife, but the council can separate us for ever if it pleases."

"And does it please?"

"Not often. Why should it?"

"Oh, I asked only for information."

"If the marriage is likely to prove unhappy for the state, as by making public scandal, or bringing up weak children, of course the state steps in. But, as a rule, our physicians say who is to be married and who not, and the council takes their advice."

"Your children, then," said I, "surely are your own?"

"What a ridiculous idea!" said she. "Of course not, they are the state's. I and my husband educate them, but the state supports them, and, if it does not think we manage them properly, it takes them away and gives them to others. One of my children, who was very wilful, was taken away only a short time ago."

"And you—how do you like that?"

"I, what should I say?" said she, with a shrug of her shoulders; "it is the state's business, not mine."

"And your children, do they not care?"

"They cannot afford to care. They have to do their duties, they know, as well as others, and when they come to maturity they are all under the same laws as we are."

"What is maturity with them?"

"With girls, sixteen; with boys, eighteen years old."

"And then for a third offence against the laws, are they punished with death?"

"Please don't use that word so often," she said with a wry face. "Talk of 'being taken off' or 'put away.' Certainly they are put away. Why should they be spared? They are old enough to know. Every child knows the code of our laws by heart early in life, very often before he reaches twelve."

"But these poor children of yours?"

"They are not poor, we have no poor; all are equally wealthy and all have equally to work."

"Supposing they do not?"

"If they are lazy, then they commit an offence against the laws, and, if repeated after they come of age, they have to wear the gold circlet of shame."

"Are they still supported by the state?"

"Yes, until they are thirty, and then, if they do not work, they are said to commit a third offence, and are laid on the platform of gas."

"Oh, is that on the great rock?"

"Yes, where you were. I hear you got amongst them. That is a 'putting away' penalty; but, as you could not be

punished within twenty-four hours, you are free for a month."

"Oh, is that one of the laws? Then what happens at the end of the month?"

"Why, of course, you are got rid of."

"Dear me, how generous? Why do they give this respite of a month?"

"Because in that time the man or woman may do pretty well what he or she likes, and the state becomes a loser, so sentences are carried out, as a rule, very promptly to insure speedy punishment."

"And in my case, shall I be taken at the end of the month and suffocated?"

"I cannot see why you should escape," said my hostess.

She could not have spoken of my death more coolly, if she had said that I should have to go on a shopping expedition with her at the end of this fatal month.

"But I had not signed the convention or whatever it is," protested I.

"That does not matter, you knew of the law. It is written up as large as life," replied she.

"I beg your pardon," said I; "I did not see it until after I had got to the platform and was running back for my life."

"If that is so, I will move in the chamber to-day, that you shall be released from the month's respite, but, of course, you will then have to go back to the strangers' room and sign the convention, or starve."

Here was a dilemma indeed.

"And if I come as a stranger," said I; "I shall be open to this marriage law, I suppose?"

"Of course," replied my hostess; "but I will arrange for a friend of mine, a very nice girl, to take you on as husband."

"Thank you for your good wishes; but I have a wife already and am an old man."

"Ah, but you are a sensible one, I'm sure," she replied, with the first ghost of a smile; "I can see you're educated, that is, for a stranger; you must see that, as you can never

leave the valley alive, it does not matter whether you have one or one hundred wives outside; besides, you are not a very old man." She looked at me so earnestly that I felt devoutly grateful that she, at any rate, had a husband. Then a cold perspiration came over me, for I remembered that she was the president of the day. I suppose she could move in the council to divorce herself from her husband, and would be surely able to get the motion seconded and passed. Then, alas, for me! I thought of telling her I snored, I smoked, I was accustomed to put my feet on the fender, and occasionally to rap out a big D. I thought of everything I *could* think of, but did not express myself; for, on the other hand, I thought that as it was, I was a pariah, an outcast, who could do and say what he liked for a month and then—well, at any rate, time gained was time, perhaps life, saved. So I determined to cast my vote for remaining as I was, and told my hostess so.

She seemed a trifle disappointed, but said nothing.

To change the conversation, I remarked—

"I notice no animals nor birds about; how is that?"

"Well, it is too hot just now to see the birds which we keep to clear off locusts and grubs; but animals, by which I understand you mean the lower forms of man, we have not."

"No, no; I mean cows, sheep, horses, pigs, cats, dogs, and so on."

She looked blankly at me; then, apparently gaining some notion of what I meant, she said—

"You surely mean what I mean; the lower forms of men, who crawl on hands and knees."

"No, no," said I—forgetting that Darwinism might have permeated the Valley and developed itself in rank outgrowth—"I will draw as well as I can."

I took out my pencil and note-book, and drew some of the animals I designated, though I must say I should, at another time, have laughed at the sketches. I am not a good limner at the best of times, and certainly not of animals. But, by dint of much trouble, I managed to draw likenesses (remote) of the animals I mentioned.

"Oh, yes," she said; "you do mean the same as I do," and she looked again at the drawings. "No, we have none of these. Why should we? We wish to elevate, not degrade, our race."

"But this is no degeneration," said I; "these are distinct animals, they do not become men nor men become these. This one is used for riding and drawing loads, this gives us meat and the clothes I wear, this gives us meat to eat and milk to drink; here again, the cat, as we call it, catches mice for us; the dog follows us about and watches our houses against robbers."

She looked so mystified that I explained again.

"But," she urged; "we have no distances here to travel which electricity cannot cover infinitely better for us. As for loads, we have electricity also; do you see that road away there, the cars you see are loaded with provisions, sugar, and so on, and move by electricity. Your horse, as you call him, does not feed on the air, I suppose, nor is he to be manufactured by tumbling water. Very well, we don't want him. Then as to your meat, that is horrible! It is as bad as the savages who eat one another, every bit as bad."

"Oh, well," said I, "I'm afraid I'm very prejudiced; but I see a lot of difference between eating a sheep and eating a man."

"Well, one goes on his arms and knees, and the other on his feet, that is the difference; and your brown men I have seen crawling about on their hands and knees. No, no, that is too terrible. Why, if any one eats a bit of bird even, he is got rid of, for it is considered that he has committed all three offences at once, and he is sent to the lethal platform without delay."

"Then you are what is called vegetarians?" I asked.

"I don't know what that is; of course we live on what grows out of the soil, not what walks about it or flies above it."

"How about fish?" said I.

"I don't know what that is," said she,

So again I drew a fish. But she could make nothing of it; evidently the purling streams in the valley had none in them, which was curious, for they surely drained down to the sea by some means or other.

"But, why are you so set against eating sheep or cows?" said I. "Do you not know that the vegetables and animals come so close to one another that at one point they are, as it were, interchangeable, and what one day we call animal, is to-morrow called a vegetable."

"But do you mean to say that any of these things you have drawn ever grew out of the ground, green or coloured?"

"No, but they are linked backwards with others, which are so like other links amongst the vegetables and flowers that they look alike. Do you know," continued I, "that there are fish like that flower over there, and that they are so like the flower to look at, that they go by the same name, Anemone?"

"These are extreme cases," said she; "freaks of Nature, like some of our trees which grow out arms and legs like a man; but that does not make them any more a man. What do these animals you have drawn feed on? Men and women?"

I laughed, "No, not these; there are some that do, but we don't as a rule eat them. They feed on vegetables like you do, fruits, grass, grains and so on. Animals that feed on others we don't generally eat."

"Generally! do you ever?" she asked with anxiety.

"Well, dogs are eaten by some nations, and when one is hungry, a cat or a dog is, I'm told, good eating. Conger eels and other fish feed on fish, and sometimes on the dead bodies of men and women."

But my hostess hastily left the table; she had heard enough; I was sorry, for I felt I had tried her nerves too far, but the children and servants did not seem to evince any regret that she had gone, nor look at me with any less friendly looks.

The name of this lady is Dauna Batona, and as I now learn, her husband is called Batona, Dauna. It appears that the

doctrine of equality of sex which prevails prevents the husband from fixing his name on the wife, and, as both have but one name, each prefixes to his or her name, that of the other. Instead of Mr. and Mrs. Batona, it is Mr. Dauna and Mrs. Batona. I suppose that in view of the divorce authority which the council appears to possess, there is considerable advantage in this, as the prefix alone has to be dropped or changed, as the case may be, the main name always being the same. None of the children have their parents' names. If they are required to be identified they are spoken of as Phoebe born of Dauna Batona, or if the husband be divorced, then Phoebe born of Batona. The husband and wife in fact appear to have less to do with the naming of their own children than those of others, for the state, to prevent confusion, keeps a book of names, and as each child is born, a name is given to it, and it is registered as No. so-and-so in the state books, of such and such a name. Having unfortunately stopped the free flow of my hostess's talk, and being at liberty, I thought I would wander about and gain all the information I could, to enable me to rescue Annette, and to escape myself from this peculiar people; so I left the house after first asking where Annette and Himetoa lived. The first I wished to see, the latter to avoid, for I knew not what powerful association the name of Bateman might exercise over the peerless young woman who had been cheated of her lawful husband by nephew Jeremy's perversity.

CHAPTER XXV.

ANNETTE BLAKE.

I FOUND Annette's house without much difficulty, a pretty though small villa, with the usual colonnade around it. She tells me that a family has, notwithstanding her protests, been dispossessed for her, until a house further down the valley could be erected. This is anticipating, however. The roadway is very lovely. There are no shops, no factories in this part of the town, the whole of the houses are surrounded, almost buried in tropical foliage, and little brooklets ripple along by the side of the roads to irrigate the country and the gardens. There appears a large supply of water always to be had, for the turning on of a tap, anywhere throughout the valley; at the corners of the roadways large hydrants keep the roads moist and cool by automatic action, and, until I discovered this, I was more than once astonished at the light spray which flew all over me from the stand-pipe. A train of waggons was winding down through the overhanging bowers of palms and tropical foliage, each of which was guided and directed by a neatly clad inhabitant. There was no sign of discontent upon the faces of any, but, on the other hand, none of them, or the passers-by, for there were mere walking about as the afternoon drew on, looked really happy. There seemed to be that lackadaisical look of *ennui* in their faces which I had noticed in Blackie's in a lesser degree. By the way, reminded of Blackie, I determined to ask Annette what she knew of that gentleman, for I might meet him at any moment, and the meeting might be awkward—well, for both of us—I felt for my revolver as I thought of this, and stood aside to let the electric waggons pass noiselessly by. They were laden with sugar-cane, mealies, rice, lentils and fruits of all sorts going, I suppose, to the state kitchens, I had

heard of, and curiously I watched to see how they would run when on the level ground. They maintained one even course throughout, the driver having the car completely under his control.

Turning round, I entered Annette's house, over which her name was written in large golden letters. They seem to use gold here as one would black paint at home. It must be very common.

There was no bell visible. I suppose that would disturb the sensitive feelings of the poor valleyites, and I was about to make up my mind to announce my arrival with a ahem, when I heard voices within, not in whispers, but in ordinary, nay, raised tones. One was Annette's, I could hear, for I had known her when a girl, and another belonged to that precious ex-guide of ours. What they were saying I could not tell, but I stood by in case my aid might be required. Then I heard his step departing, and soon after Annette came out in tears.

The poor child had resumed her travel-stained dress, I suppose; at any rate she was not clad in the white robe with golden trimming spoken of by young Jeremy. When she saw me she cried out—

"Mr. Bateman, is it you?"

"Well, my dear, I don't quite know; I fancy it's Alice in the looking-glass." She smiled through her tears. "Oh, Mr. Bateman did you hear what that man said?"

"Not being a heavesdropper, my lord, I scorns the haction."

My frivolity served its purpose. It carried her out of her present associations, and brought back some of the old Annette's colour to her cheeks, which were certainly sallow; while her eyes, which had been dull and heavy with crying, brightened.

"Oh, Mr. Bateman!" she said, stretching out her hands to me; "you bring some of the odour of that blessed outer world into this horrible artificial place. Bless you for it."

Could this girl be a murderess? I asked myself. This pure-faced little thing, whose eyes looked so honest. Well, I

am no student of Lavater, since last fall, a storekeeper, with blue eyes and fair hair, embezzled about £100 of mine.

"There, there, my dear," said I; "don't cry, and you and I will put our heads together to—well, we won't talk out loud for fear that man down the road, the other side of the valley about a mile away, hears us."

"Come in here," said she.

I hesitated. "How about your visitor?" asked I.

She blushed at the question. "He went away by another entrance, I saw him for the first time to-day."

Her blush spoke volumes, and, as I thought, in her favour.

"Now," said I, when we had got inside, "I'm rather sorry, to tell you the truth, that our friend Blackie has gone—"

"Blackie! his name is Maurana," she said.

"Well, Maurana and Blackie and Burton are one and the same person," said I.

She started forward. "Is that Burton?" said she. "Oh! The devil!"

"That is true," said I; "though forcible. He is the arch-fiend come down in human form in this nineteenth century of ours, as the parson says; and you and I have to make up our minds to outwit him. Unfortunately good people have to be wise also. Bad people are so by nature, it would often seem." "I was president yesterday," she said; "I could have punished him for his treachery."

"Why, how do you guess that?"

"He told me himself," said she; "he said that Jerry," here she blushed—"I mean Mr. Jeremy—had been deceived by this Burton intentionally, that he had intended coming here to fetch me off, and that he might still arrive, and, having great authority, might claim me for his services. So he asked me to marry him before Burton could claim me. Oh, what a terrible fate," and she clasped her hands before her face.

"Not a bit of it, Annette," said I, in my most fatherly tone; "the very fact that he tried strategy, shows that he has lost favour here; now is our chance. My cousin and his men will not be idle outside, you may be sure. And we can work

inside here and shape our course to meet their views. My cousin's son is still alive, and likely to be so, now that his father has found him, and a parson who is a bit of a doctor is nursing him. We have a whole month here, during which I am permitted to do what I please, except leave the place. Now that is just what I do intend to do, and I intend to take you with me, my dear." My words were braver than my thoughts were clear. I certainly had no plan in my mind.

"How in the world does that happen," said she. "Have you not signed the convention?"

"Not a bit," said I; and I explained what Dauna Batona had told me.

"But," she said with alarm, "in a month they will kill you; you who have hazarded your life for me; and I might have saved you only a few hours ago! For I had the power to make a new law without the consent of the council."

"Never mind about the month, my dear. Plenty of accidents may happen within a month. Tom Bateman won't die so easily as they think. But, come tell me how it is you were president of this twopenny constitution the day after you became a member?"

"Well, you see it goes in rotation, and the alphabet had just been commenced. They had got to 'Bar' the day before, the man who pretended that he wanted to marry me was Barbarin, and as I signed Annette Bateman—" again she blushed furiously—"I came in for the next turn."

"Now," said I, "it seems to me that you can claim the next vacancy, or at any rate in a week or two, for you are Annette Blake still, and as such ought to have a turn; as Annette Bateman your turn was a mistake. I will see whether I cannot work it this very day."

"And you?" she said.

"I can never have a turn," said I gravely; "I will sign no ridiculous convention. I am an Englishman, and in the colony of South Australia, whose laws I obey, none other. Don't fancy I am blaming you for having done what you did. There was nothing else for you to do. Life is para-

mount. Now disabuse yourself of any fears for me; I will take care of myself, and I hope of you also."

She plucked up spirit, and I, though fearing that I was "a silly," as folk say, for my pains, told her of young Jeremy's rescue from death and starvation and his possible recovery.

"Mr. Bateman," she said, "before you go any further, tell me one thing: do you think me guilty of this terrible crime which has been laid to my door, or not?"

I rubbed my chin as well as I could through its thick beard, for I was face to face with a dilemma. My old suspicions, which Burroughes had pooh-poohed, had grown part of me by continual passive affirmation, and though the sight of her pure eyes and kindly face would have shaken a firmer rock than the foundation for my doubts, yet I am not one to change his opinions of a sudden. I suppose that the doubtful value of "consistency," as John Austin says, is a leading factor in my mental constitution.

"Oh," she cried in despair! "I see you do, how then can you speak of rescuing one whom you think guilty of such an awful crime? I will have none of such help. Mr. Bateman, I would rather live and die here in this gilded cage, but," and the gentle woman overcame the injured pride and she burst into tears; "not without Jeremy, I could not; no I could not."

Again I must be an egotist and talk of myself. Now I am not one of those curious persons who like to be snubbed, nor do I fall down and worship any one who makes me feel small; I cannot think that nature has had the moulding of such. Yet Annette's dual character of injured innocence and girlish failure to maintain her dignity softened even my hard heart, and I may safely say that from that moment I have felt less and less doubt. Probably in a day or two—just for decency's sake, one must not turn round upon oneself too rapidly—I shall feel that I have done her a cruel injustice to have coupled her name, whether in thought or word, with such an offence, and perhaps I may develop into her champion before all the world. I said something to dry up her tears, and then we fell to discussing the best measures to

take to effect an escape; of one thing I was certain, that it would be necessary for a time to put the council and the inhabitants off their guard. We were to pretend to fall in with their ways with ease and grace, and above all Annette was to avoid the semblance of an offence against the laws of the place; for she had already offended once, and had, to use a pool term, lost one life of her three.

"My offence was, I find, speaking out loud, for Barbarin did not really want to marry me;" said the girl; "it is not permitted to punish me again for that offence for some months, or years, I forget which, so I need not repress my lungs."

"I'm glad of that," said I, "and as I may do anything with impunity for a month, so at least I hear, when you and I are together we need not talk as though we both had bad colds. Have you found out why these people regulate the tone of voice as well as other matters of a private nature by state laws?"

"I find that they are so extremely sensitive to sounds that, unless they prepare themselves with cotton-wool, or in some other way stop the sound striking their ears, they absolutely suffer great pain in the head. After Jeremy—I mean Mr. Jeremy—had shouted aloud his defiance to the council, they were one and all taken very ill, and the meeting was adjourned for the day without further work."

"That's a wrinkle for me," said I. "I wish Blackie were equally affected, his life should be a torture, this paradise to him a hell. I would shout, until I got hoarse myself, into his very ears. By the way, how many lives has he got?"

"I think he has committed no offence as yet," said she.

"I rather think he has, though he may not have taken the council into his confidence," replied I. "Well now, I am going to make some inquiries about him and other things. Refer to me as the P. E. O., private enquiry officer, and you will find out a good deal I dare say in a day or two. I will study the laws of the place, I will find out what Mr. Blackie can be arraigned for and what chances there are of escape. In the meantime, how are you going to live?"

"I don't know," said she. "Here, I suppose. I have nothing to trouble about, my dinners and meals come in from the state kitchens. But it is very likely that in a few days I shall have to go to the laundry, or this very kitchen, for it appears to be a custom here to send ex-presidents and ex-councillors to humble pursuits soon after they have held office, in order to prevent their giving themselves airs on their past glories."

"By the way," said I, "how are the councillors elected?"

"I believe they are not elected at all. They are taken by numbers, I understand; each person, as you know, at birth receives a number; well, when that person comes to eighteen years of age, he or she is put into a rota and is regularly called upon to assume the duties of the council."

"At least there is impartiality about these proceedings. But why do they not adopt the simple alphabetical system, as they do for presidents?"

"I suppose," said the young lady, "that they fear to have too many of one family in the council at one and the same time."

"And family councils are likely to be too strong, I suppose," said I with a laugh. "Well, there is more sense in this nursery government than I thought. Now for discovery! By the way, who is the authority upon the laws of the place? I am staying with Dauna Batona, you know. Shall I first exhaust her store of knowledge?"

"I fancy you will find Barbarin one of the best informed men, but I really cannot tell you where he is. I fancy he is working in the mine, or at the waterworks, where they are building a new dam."

"And you?" I said, "how is it with you? can I leave you safely? Will that man return and plague you?"

"I don't think he will," she said with rising colour; "I sent him away with a bee in his bonnet. I didn't know who he was then, but I resented his familiarity and affected care for my welfare, although he was courtesy itself. Now that is a paradox, as you will say," she added with a light laugh; "but

you must leave us women to utter Irishisms, and you men to understand them."

So I went in search of Barbarin, but very few knew where he had gone or was to be found. Ex-presidents were certainly not of much account in this valley of topsy-turvydom. At last one person, a very patriarch, with the skin of a three year old infant, recommended me to find out his number at the State Registry, and accordingly, following his directions, I went to a building standing near the centre of the valley, some way from the council house, which was at the southern end. My walk between great hedges of rare tropical and sub-tropical trees, shrubs and plants, all glorious with rainbow-hued flowers and luscious fruits, was such a revelation as I shall not easily forget. So engrossed was I with my examination of this millennium of vegetation that I generally forgot the spray of the automatic dust-layers, but was not sorry for the cool shower which I occasionally received. Late in the afternoon I arrived at the registry, and found a porter at the entrance, while a soldier walked up and down as sentry.

"I fear I am too late for office hours," said I, to the porter, "but I am a stranger and shall be glad to know what time to call to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" said he, "office hours! I know not what you mean. The registry is open day and night for the transaction of its business, and you can of course have what you want at once. Stay, are you not Tommé Bateman?"

I must say that my Christian name sounded somewhat boyish when thus valley-ised; and my memory rushed back to days fifty years ago, when the awkward name of Tommy had cost me many a fight with my schoolboy contemporaries.

"Thomas, otherwise Tom Bateman, of Canbelego Station, New South Wales," said I, "but not Tommé, if you please, an' you love me."

He did not smile at my quiet jest, only said: "Ah, you won't be registered, we don't register temporary subjects like you."

At any rate this was a courteous way of softening down

the asperities of my fated death in a month's time, for which I mentally thanked the gentle porter.

"By the way," he said, "you talk of New South Wales; is it possible that that country is, as I hear, still content to be a colony? Our maps show it as about three or four times larger than the irregular little scrap of country, leagues and leagues distant, which rules it. Is that so?"

I had to explain the autonomy of the colony and its relationship to the mother country.

"Autonomy you call it," said he; "now I have a pretty good Greek education, but I never heard of the word autonomy used to designate such barbaric methods of government. Perhaps the etymology of the word is not to be found in *αὐτὸς νομός*."

Greek! Did the gentle porters of public offices read Greek and discuss comparative philology?

"Well, but come," said I; "the inhabitants, that is the male inhabitants, that is most of them who are over twenty-one, are represented in parliament, or the council, as you would call it."

"But, how about those under twenty-one, who are yet sensible, and the females and the others of the male inhabitants who are not in the council?"

"Pardon me, they do not go into the council in rotation, as here, but elect out of their number a person to speak and make laws for them."

"What, every day?" asked he, so astonished, that my respect for his contemporary reading fell exceedingly.

"No, not every day, but once every three years."

"And is it then true, as I have read, that this person so elected sits in the council for all these years and the other unfortunate persons have no part in government?"

I then went into a lengthy explanation of the system of colonial and local government, which, though he clearly understood, evidently puzzled him.

"And then all your laws and judgments can be upset by what you call the mother-country, ever so many miles away?" asked he when I had finished.

"Well, and you call yourselves civilized, do you? I should say you were in the dark ages."

"But you have forgotten," said I, "that the mother-country has spent moneys and sent out her children to these colonies."

"For whom then do governments exist: to fatten upon, or to serve the people? However," he added, "you came here on some errand; tell me what it is?"

"Oh, I wanted to know what Barbarin's number was, that was all. I wanted to find where he is now."

"Ah, perhaps you will kindly step inside, they will gladly tell you."

Passing through a curtained doorway, I stood within a large room, around the walls of which were a number of books; large books, like the great dividend warrant books of the Bank of England. Several lay open on counters in which clerks, male and female, were writing.

"Here," said the porter, "is the person to ask. Himetoa, this stranger, Tommé Bateman, requires information."

CHAPTER XXVI.

HIMETOA.

HIMETOA! Then my unlucky star had led me right into the very net I had been planning to escape; at any rate, I would have a look at this siren. I looked; and was surprised to find myself opposite to a young woman of some two or three and twenty, of great personal beauty; hair luxuriant, skin beautifully blushed, lips cherry red, full and moist, and high, well developed nostrils, bespeaking some aristocratic blood in her veins. Her hair was neatly tied up in a bunch at the back of her head, and there retained by a small tiara, which looked very much like iron, and rusty iron too. But of course that must be a mistake of mine, my eyes must be dazzled with the strong electric glow of light which pervaded the room from hundreds of clustered incandescent lamps. Doubtless when my eyes got accustomed to the dazzle I should see in the tiara some wonderful gems. Her robe she had discarded for the present, and was clad in a loose fitting "*Chiton*" (I cannot describe it otherwise), falling to her feet, which left her lovely arms free. She wore little jewellery except a small brooch or clasp of the same iron-like jewel or metal at her throat. She was a dazzling beauty, certainly. Her teeth were of the whitest and evenest, her breath of the sweetest; but—and I regret to introduce a but—her face lacked the fire or force which it should have had, for her eyes were small and insignificant. She had been correctly described by young Jeremy; she was a beautiful woman, with totally inadequate eyes, which were dull, cold and retreating. Were I a young man, I thought, her figure, her complexion, nay her face up to the lower eyelid, would have fascinated me; but one look above that line and I should have decided that she was a Circe, not a woman of flesh and blood, but a siren who would callously allure a lover to his fate.

"At your service, Bateman," said she; "what can I do for you?"

It was curious this being addressed in my plain surname by a young girl I had not seen before, but I remembered that the nomenclature of the place was singular. I explained my quest.

"Oh, you need not look up the registers long for that, Barbarin is my husband; the marriage was confirmed by the council to-day, and of course the registers had first to be looked up, to see whose son he was and whether the marriage was in the interests of the state. Valedina, bring the one hundredth register here, will you?"

A young girl, some two or three years her junior, approached with the register in her hands. It was a big book and the girl looked slight and not over-strong for such work, but she waved me aside and I noticed that her muscles were well developed, and that she and the other women here owe the grace of their form and figure to the fact that their muscles well balance their weight.

"Look up, will you, my husband's number; you were upon it only yesterday, you know."

Valedina flushed painfully, but did as she was bidden, turning over the leaves until her finger rested on the page where the name Barbarin was written, with the number 5367 against it. The entry was made in A.D. 1860, so that he was twenty-seven years old.

"Now, can you tell me where he is at present?" asked I of Himetoa.

"No, I don't know, I haven't even seen him since the marriage was confirmed; perhaps the state has ordered him to the mine for a month."

"Yes," said Valedina, "that is so."

"Humph," thought I, "this is a curious state of things; the wife doesn't know where her husband is, but the young woman who flushes at his name does." Aloud I merely said: "Many thanks for your courtesy, if you can add to it by telling me where I can find the mines, I shall be glad."

"Oh, they're very easily found. You know the tunnel;

well, at present, if you get in the electric car, you will be taken there in a few minutes. It is under the pinnacle or close by, that the mine is being opened up now."

My heart beat fast; under the pinnacle; then I could get there within a few feet of my comrades.

"And should I find Dauna there too," said I, "Batona Dauna."

"Perhaps; if he is at the mines. I will look up his number. Ah, here it is, 5294; yes, he is there too. He has just been in the council under his registered number and went off there a few days ago I've no doubt," and she bowed to me with a smile as though she would dismiss me.

"Pardon," I said, "perhaps Valedina here can spare me just a moment to satisfy some natural curiosity I have as to one other name. You see I am privileged to be a bore during my month."

Himetoa smiled a very dainty smile, and I was handed over to Valedina, whom I found shy and furiously blushing.

"Maurana," I said, "do you know the name?"

She looked up and whispered (all this conversation had to be carried on *sotto-voce*), "Oh yes, he is the state messenger for the present."

"Ah, indeed, and is he a general favourite too?"

"He is much respected, I believe; he is free from offence and has always, until the last two occasions, done very well for the state," replied the girl.

"Ah, yes! until the last two occasions! was he then sent down to the colony of New South Wales for any purpose?"

"Certainly; he was, at the time, a member of the council that sent him. We had been troubled by a few inquisitive strangers from the west trying to get into the valley, and he was despatched for—I think they call them noise-guns and gunpowder to frighten off any others."

"Have you then none such in the valley?" said I.

"No; we once had guns I have heard say," replied the girl; "but they used, when fired, to make the whole valley ill for a week, and so a law was passed one day, when a lady-friend of mine was president, making her maiden speech, to

destroy the whole lot, and I believe we managed until lately to get on very well without them. I understand that Maurana had an immense number of these engines with him, and he displayed two at the council the other day. But he says that you and your friends outside the Rock attacked him and prevented him bringing them in. I am not sorry, I know I should have fainted at their noise. Have you ever heard one explode?" she asked naively.

"Occasionally, just once or twice," I replied with a smile.

"And were you *very* ill afterwards?" she asked.

"Not very," I said, fairly bursting with suppressed laughter.

"Ah," she returned, "you wore cotton-wool in your ears, or held your hands up so," and she clasped her pretty hands over her equally pretty ears.

But this statement added the extra tension to the strain on my gravity and I exploded. A moment afterwards I could have bitten my tongue out; for all the clerks and others in the large hall, male and female, clapped their hands to their ears with a look of actual physical pain. My explosion was certainly not alarming, as laughter goes, it was not very loud; but amongst people who, I find, never indulge in the pleasure of anything more pronounced than a *whistling* smile, I have no doubt that it sounded like thunder.

Valedina turned to me with a reproachful look—

"Bateman, you should not do that without first letting us know; I am aware that you are enjoying the privileges accorded to you for one month" (how delicately they all put it); "but you do not look like one who would abuse his position."

I explained that nothing was farther from my thoughts; I apologised to one and all; but some received my apologies with incredulous little shrugs, others with smiles. They evidently thought I was making fun of them.

"To return to what you were talking of," said I; "did Maurana have large sums given him to pay for these guns, or how else was he to get them?"

"Oh, of course; he took away with him many months ago a great deal of the gold which he tells us you value very highly in New South Wales. But he says that guns are dear to buy now, and that the iron of which they are made is worth ten times their weight of gold."

"Ah, indeed!" said I, for I began to see what the rascal had been doing. One thing I did *not* understand, if he had embezzled this gold, what had become of it, and why had he returned? Perhaps he intended to make another pretended expedition and then disappear altogether. Then why had he got poor young Jeremy and Annette up here? For the girl's sake?—and to offer her her liberty by running away with him? Was this his scheme? Well, perhaps it was not so far-fetched as it seemed, and might have succeeded, but for my arrival upon the scene.

"Has he ever failed before?" said I.

"No; but he had a very near escape last time, for he had to get us some new tools for our rock-digging and our other public works, besides paper and other things for the use of the valley, and he told us that he only just managed to get the baggage into the rock in time. It was in consequence of that amongst other things that he advised our getting the guns to fight any other such persons who should attack the rock."

"And what became of these persons who attacked him?" I said.

"They tried to get into the rock, but were one after the other suffocated upon the platforms. I don't know what suffocation is, but I understand that it means an end of one's being." She shuddered as she spoke.

Evidently these people were of so peaceful a character that one and all shrank from even speaking of death. But the rascal! the arch-fiend! Was it true that the people had attacked him? Had he not, perhaps, guided them up here on a quest and enticed them one after the other to the platform of death, then possessed himself of their goods and told this plausible story?

"Is it an offence to lie in this country?" said I.

"Do you mean, to state facts which are not true, or to keep back the truth?"

"Both," I replied.

"Well, to state untrue facts is certainly an offence; but not to state facts which one ought to is only an offence when twice repeated within a week to the same person."

"Why this distinction?"

"Because it is thought that no one can be held to be responsible when another tells an untruth to him or her, for how can he or she know it to be untrue? but if one asks another questions and that other only tells part, it is almost as much the fault of the questioner for not getting hold of the whole truth, as of the other for keeping it back; yet, if it happen twice within a short time between the same persons, there is evidently an intention to deceive, and the person so deceived is too foolish to be punished."

"And supposing that any one kept property of the state for his own use, what would that be?"

"How could he?" said the girl.

"How could he not? Supposing I were an inhabitant here and took away some of these books or some of the gold from the mines?"

"Oh, of course, if the matter were serious, and frustrated the state or its laws, it would be mutiny."

"You mean an offence."

"No, more than that; it is three offences in one. The state argues that the person who can do that, has, to start with, broken the spirit of the convention which all have to sign when they come to be eighteen years of age; secondly, that it is an offence against the person himself or herself, and that punishment must be exacted for stultifying one's own self; and thirdly, that by so doing a man is defying the essence of nature, which rules everything, and has forbidden any infringement of Nature's laws."

"Oh," I said, "very well then, I think I've got Mr. Blackie on the hop."

"Mr. Blackie; what is that?" asked Valedina.

"Oh, nothing," I said, covering up my *lapsus lingue* with

a lie; but I could commit peccadilloes by the score, for had I not carte-blanche? "And how is the attempt to put an end to another punished?" I continued.

"In the same way. What does it matter? If an accident supervenes to prevent the full completion of the act, why should the mutineer have the benefit? But you can learn all this from our laws!"

"Very well," returned I; "but that is just what I want, where are they to be found?"

"Oh, you had better go to the Council Chamber, they may have changed some of them to-day."

"I am with Batona," I said; "she can surely tell me this evening. Now I must not keep you any longer from your work, I see half-a-dozen persons waiting to speak to you."

"Oh, they are persons coming to register births or—something else. Good-bye; you must call upon me—Valedina, No. 6038—any one will tell you where I live, and I shall be glad to give you further information, though I fear," and she added this with mournful look, "it will not be long of use to you."

"Never mind," said I; "in my country, the day before they execute—I mean put an end to—a man, they let him feast on all the good things of the land, so you must cram me with information. A feast of knowledge may console me in a future world, you know," and I walked away laughing. It seemed to me pretty clear what I had to do, and with such an unwarlike people I felt I could have but little trouble in doing it. Why, I could surely rout their whole army with a good shout.

I came back to Batona's hospitable roof this evening with a sense of satisfaction. I have I think distinguished myself in picking up information to-day at any rate, and am not sure whether I shall go to Barbarin to-morrow as I intended, particularly as I have learnt from Dauna Batona that I am right in my contention, that is, that Annette can be president again; in about a fortnight's time, it is true, but that will be sufficient time for me to elaborate my plans, and as a president's body is sacred, I fancy that the day of her escape

and mine can be just nicely timed without unnecessary bloodshed. In the meantime I must try to get rid of Maurana, *alias* Blackie, Burton, mutineer, or what you will. He has lost favour through this failure in his errand (not generally known as his depredatory scheme against us), and I can see that he is regarded with suspicion. To fan the spark of suspicion into the flame of conviction is my absolute duty, for if I do not accomplish this he will endeavour by force or fraud to take away Annette, and perhaps leave me *hors de combat*.

I have been looking through the laws of the valley to-day to see if I could work them to my purpose, but I am no lawyer, and have made myself thoroughly confused with them. What Jeremy Bentham (the philosopher, not young Jeremy) would call conflicting analogies abound. It appears to be a rule that when a law repeals another the repealed law has to be erased; now there are dozens of laws which have not so been dealt with, consequently they stand in the code side by side with their opposites. There is, for instance, an early law forbidding all advocacy or representation of any accused person before the Court of the Council; then there comes another permitting it in all cases, except for third offences, *i.e.* where the punishment is that of the death penalty; then one forbidding it in all cases except these very excepted ones; then another law forbidding it altogether. Now, as all these laws stand together, I take it one might claim to shape one's case according to one or the other. True, they are many of them simply records of decisions in cases before the council, but for all that they are the laws of the place. I find that beyond one or two constitutional rules, the laws limiting punishments to three, and the marriage law, which is dealt with as a part of the state or public law, most of the so-called laws are nothing more than decisions in cases, for as the council is both legislative and judicial, it stands to reason that its decided cases have in theory the force of Acts of Parliament. Some of the laws, evidently made by new presidents, as their maiden acts, are most curious. One, over which I have been laughing immoder-

ately, runs that no persons should wear their hair in the same fashion as the president. Evidently this president was a woman, who did not feel that imitation was the sincerest flattery, and wished to be unique. I cannot, however, claim for my sex any special wisdom, for I find amongst maiden laws one, evidently this time of a male president, prescribing that "Mosenin should be prosecuted for slander of the president, and that it should be thereafter an offence against the state to call the president short in stature or a whipper-snapper." Doubtless Mosenin had played a practical joke upon the worthy president, and derided him for his pigmy size, and consequently for ever after the other inhabitants must magnify the legislator and deceive themselves.

CHAPTER XXVII.

COMPARISONS ARE ODIOUS.

BATONA, who lent me the copy of the laws which I have been studying, was present in the room while I laughed, and her suffering at my explosion of mirth called me to my senses. I explained the reason.

"Well," said she, "we are gradually educating ourselves to care less and less for the individual and more and more for the state. You will notice that there are very few such personal laws of recent years. Do you in your country manage to steer clear of personalities in your council?"

I blushed; here was a flank movement with a vengeance. How about the bear-garden scenes in the legislatures of New South Wales, the other colonies, and even the mother country?

I had to admit that we were *occasionally* personal in our remarks to one another, but did not legislate or decide cases upon these motives.

"Do you mean to say that the legislature never make laws which are especially favourable to its own members or its class?" asked she.

"Ahem! Well, yes, sometimes; but not in noticeable cases."

"But you have no women in your councils, are not *their* cases noticeable? Perhaps there are very few of them, though?"

"On the contrary, we reckon there are more women than men; some say as many as eleven women to nine men, others again about one hundred and nine women to every hundred men. No, their cases are noticeable enough, but they don't often complain."

"Then they don't deserve to be in the councils, at least, so

I should say, but my husband takes a different view; he thinks the state ought to care for persons who don't care for themselves," said Batona. "But just fancy more women than men in the country, and no women in the council; are they lazy, perhaps, or weak like Annette Bateman—I mean Blake."

Then I went into a full account of the social, political and physical status of women at home, and Batona to all expressed great surprise, saying that she had never seen anything of this in the State library.

"Books?" said I, "how do you get books?"

"Our messenger gets them for us; we print them afterwards in large characters so as to read them easily. You ought to see the State library and printing-place before you go. Maurana finds, so he says, great difficulty now in procuring new books, for the barbarian countries, in one of which you used to live (and she bowed to me pleasantly), have given over making books."

Given over making books? Great goodness! it might be well if we did though for a time. Of making books there is no end in very deed.

So this was Blackie's story, was it; this his excuse for not bringing up books? Evidently his system of robbery had been going on a long time, his robbery of the state gold, and robbing poor travellers to hide the offence. Travellers in the desert are certainly not likely to carry with them a library of the newest literature. Another nail in Mr. Blackie's coffin! Surely, though he must have been very foolish to tell such lies with the chance of some one like myself coming to turn the tables. Perhaps he felt secure in the knowledge of the cordon round the Valley, and how unlikely it was that any strangers would live to tell tales against him. Then, how about young Jeremy and Annette Blake? So far as the former was concerned his calculations were right, and as to the latter—well, he perhaps reckoned upon her being the same pretty baby in mind that she was in face, and that the glitter of gold and fine clothing would buy her to him. He must be wise enough now though, if as

I suppose he does, he knows that I am here, to feel that his fate lies trembling in the balance. Or perhaps he thinks to get me out of the way? I must take care, for I remember his tricks with our horses and with Wirri-wirri. Ah! Wirri-wirri! Yes, of course! Blackie was sensitive to the sight of blood or death like all these Valleyites, though in a less degree than they, probably through mixing with us barbarians and adopting a diet of which flesh formed a part; so he left the poor black to die alone in the way Cousin Jeremy had found him. Then his attempted murder of Jim, my trusty servant; evidently he was hard pushed and it was not until he found his own life in danger that he used his weapon. I was silent while revolving these thoughts in my mind. Then I turned to Batona and said—

“Well, Batona, how is it if Black—I mean Maurana—has been so unfortunate that you are so well versed in literature of a tolerably modern character?”

“Maurana has only been our messenger for a few years. He succeeded Barbarin.”

“Ho, ho, indeed! Why what had Barbarin done?”

“He committed an offence by eating what you call meat, on one occasion, when he was crossing the desert. He was starving and killed some of what you call horses and fed on them.”

“A very sensible thing too, I should say. Then was he reprimanded for that?”

“Ah, we shall not agree! You ought to be kinder than to make me feel so ill as you did at noon. It is a horrible thing to eat your fellow. Yes, he was convicted of a second offence. He had been reprimanded before for having introduced a book upon the subject of flesh eating by one of your barbarian physicians, in which the horrible practice was encouraged.”

“Who accused him of that?” asked I.

“Why I think it was Maurana. I know it was Maurana on the second occasion, as Barbarin in a quiet moment told Maurana, who was a great friend of his.”

So then the schemer stuck at nothing. He schemed to

depose the messenger, and he schemed to fill the place himself, and finally schemed for gold and beauty.

“You say they were great friends. Are they so no longer?”

“I believe not; Barbarin was very displeased and, but for the fact that he could only commit one more offence, would have quarrelled with Maurana long ago.”

The very thing then. I would win Barbarin over. Perhaps too, he hankered after the fleshpots still, and if I could only work on this knowledge, he might grow desperate and help our escape.

“But,” I remonstrated, “do you mean that the state punished Barbarin for saving his own life?”

“Of course; what was his life compared with the sanctity of our laws?”

“Then you exist for the benefit of the state, not the state for your benefit?” urged I.

“Not at all,” answered Batona; “the state represents our general good, and the individual must sink his importance in the general good. That is reason.”

“Then you attach great importance to this vegetarian law of yours?”

“Vegetarian? oh, yes, I remember, great importance? Why, it is one of the fundamental laws of our constitution. Our physicians tell us that our teeth alone show that we are intended to eat only fruit, grain and vegetables. We have four incisor teeth, as I see you have; those little pointed teeth on each side of your front rows, which were intended clearly for cracking nuts.”

“Cocoa-nuts?” asked I mischievously.

“I don’t know, I never gave it a thought, I suppose—”

“Brazils?” urged I.

“Well, not either perhaps.”

“Do you grow so many nuts,” said I, “which you could crack?”

“I hardly know any. It gives me pain. It makes such a noise.”

“And yet you have one-eighth of your teeth simply for a

purpose for which you cannot use them once in a hundred or a thousand times that you eat?"

"At any rate," returned Batona; "it is a part of our constitution; social constitution, I mean."

"May I ask when it was founded?"

"Early in the eighteenth century, I believe. We were a handful then, but later on we had a large accession, and as our early rules began to be broken by the strangers, we made more and more stringent laws, until we weeded out all newcomers. We have been in existence over one hundred and fifty years."

"And you have registered yourselves ever since?"

"No, unfortunately; that was only commenced fifty years ago. When we got many there was great difficulty to tell who was related to whom; how many offences each had committed, and so on. Hence the register."

"Well," said I, "at any rate your registration office is a seat of learning; the very porter knows the classics."

"Of course we are equally educated; besides, he is not a porter always, there are twenty clerks and others employed there and they take it in rotation to be the head, and so on, down to the porter's post. Thus there is no jealousy. Sometimes one or other of us outside has to take the place of one or other of them, if they are wanted as president or member of the council. Thus we manage to check their work and prevent any favouritism."

"Are you suspicious of one another, then?" asked I.

"We do not trust each other more than is desirable," said Batona: which means, thought I, as far as you can see and no further.

"Your friend the porter will be president, I dare say, in a day or two; his name is, I think you said Berwegin?" she said.

"So I suppose, but I could not pronounce it as he did. Do you not find, however, great disadvantages from having no fixed officers?"

"Why should we? Every person in the community having a say in its welfare is desirous of working for its

benefit. Besides, when one fixed officer passes away, see how impossible it would be to fill his or her place. Now it does not matter at all. It is just as though one had been called to the council, some one else takes the place and all goes on smoothly."

"But you must have offices for transaction of the business of the place?" said I, "there are many matters, are there not, which cannot possibly be done in council?"

"Oh, each member of the council is responsible for the time being for the proper working of one or other of the public departments, and has to procure the necessary clerks. It is very simple. The head of the dams and weirs department sends down for half-a-dozen workers, who become his clerks up at the offices for the week, and so on."

"Men, I suppose," I interjected.

"No, not at all; women as well. Women work at the dams and weirs in all proper works; they are physically almost as strong as men, but of course if they are married and have children, they are allowed a short rest in order that they and their child may not be injured."

"I have noticed that the women are very strong," said I; "how is that to be accounted for?"

"I don't know how else it could be. From our childhood we are all expected to take exercise and work for the state, either in one way or the other; even the children have to keep parts of the public garden in order."

"And do they never play?" said I, thinking of little Rover at home; "run about, skip, hop, jump and enjoy themselves?"

"Of course the state sees that they take all the necessary exercise and develop their bodies as well as their minds in such directions."

"And are they all treated alike?" asked I.

"How else could the state manage its affairs? They are part of a system, of course."

"Then some give in? The weakly ones?"

"There are very few weakly ones; our marriage laws

prevent that. But of course some do not take to the system like others. Then they pass away; what you call die, you know," she added with a shudder.

Poor little things, thought I, Tennyson could not have applied to these Valleyites a happier motto than he did to Nature:—

"So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life."

"And why do you all shudder when you speak of death?" asked I; "is it such a terrible thing to die that you must cloak it in various forms, and call it passing away; call killing or execution putting an end to a person, and so on?"

Batona's face was pale. "I would rather you would not ask me," said she; "it is a painful subject for any of us to think of, we do not like giving pain to persons, physical pain is terrible and death (she shuddered again) is often accompanied by such."

"But if you believe in a future state," said I—then I added, as she looked blank—"another life beyond this; what is called the life of one's soul."

"Soul? Another life? I do not understand!" Batona said, astonished.

"Why, Valedina, a remarkably pretty young person I met at the Registry-Office, talked of the Essence of Nature. What you call Essence of Nature, I call God; and in my country we, or many of us, believe that, if we behave ourselves on this earth, God will grant us a future life free from sorrow and grief, from toil and care."

"I have heard—nay, I have read of this," said Batona, with a supreme smile of contempt curling her lip, as though I had spoken of some ignorant idolatry. "But I never believed that any person could be so greedy, so terribly grasping as to wish to have another life after he has passed away. Would you eat two meals running, after the first has satisfied you, now would you?"

"Excuse me for the interruption, but there is the point,"

said I. "We are not satisfied with our life—it is gross and earthy, it is money-grubbing and sensual. Our minds aim for a life where they may be untrammelled by our senses, where in fact *they* may have a meal as well as the bodies in which they live."

"It is the fault of your mode of living. You are so barbarous in your methods. Perhaps you would take the first step to our improvements, if you left off eating each other. Ugh!" she made, a wry face.

"Pardon me, we don't do that," I said; rather annoyed at her systematically coupling myself with cannibalism.

"I see little difference; but I will not say it in future; for you are polite and do what I wish. I will say eating animals, mutton you call it?"

"Well, we have some amongst us who believe that eating animals is responsible for all diseases; but they are few and are laughed at. For we have a much more dangerous food which we drink: alcohol we call it—spirit, beer, wine. It has various names. In moderate quantities it does little harm; I use it myself, and enjoy it. But in large quantities it poisons."

"Very well then, you never use it in large quantities."

"Unfortunately, there are many who do so, particularly in our large towns; and their bodies get weakened and their minds enfeebled. Then when the poison works within them they know not what they do and run 'amuck.'"

"Amuk! Amuk! You mean like the savages to the south of Asia. Do you come from there then?" said she, with interest. "I thought they were black."

"The Malays are *black*,"* I said, with some dignity; "and *are* savages in comparison with my countrymen, who are in complexion fairer than I am, and very much more learned and wise."

"How can that be, if they poison themselves?"

"It is not the wise and learned who do this," said I.

"But they permit others to do so," urged Batona; "and

* Mr. Bateman was evidently thinking of the Papuans, who *are* black. Malays are light brown.—Ed.

that is as bad. The state is responsible for the welfare of all its community."

"Why, you said just now," I remarked, "that women who did not look after themselves were justly punished by being neglected. How about those persons who take too much wine or beer?"

She was a little confused at this. Then, with some sophistry, she said—

"I distinguish the two cases. In the case of taking these poisons, the persons must be doing the state and the rest of the community much harm; while the women who neglect their own state interests only hurt themselves."

"But has not the state a right to the women's opinions and help?" I asked mischievously.

She did not, or would not, see that the two cases were in many respects alike; and, it now being some time past sundown, as she was showing signs of weariness, I retired to my room, and have been writing since.

* * * * *

I noticed before turning in last night that there were very few safeguards, if one wanted to protect oneself from intrusion. The windows of my room were not even provided with latches, unless a flimsy piece of metal whereby to stay the wind from shifting them about could be called so. Evidently if they were shut the ventilation would be bad. The doorway was covered with a heavy curtain, as I have before remarked, and this was provided with eyelets to fasten over brass hooks on either side, and thus prevent drafts; but any one could slit it up with the greatest of ease. I did not want, on the one hand, to be too easy a prey for Blackie, nor on the other to be stifled. However, I thought of a dodge which would have delighted Jack, and I chuckled as I carried it out. Putting the pillow which lay at the top of my frame-bed lengthways, with a black bundle of my waistcoat at its head, I threw over all a coarse blanket which I found, making such a very presentable imitation of a sleeping man that I laughed, this time a really honest laugh; for there were no sensitive ears to injure. I myself

lay down on the floor beneath the bedstead, and as I found another blanket, and the night was warm, I, who am well accustomed to sleep on the hard ground when camping out, either at the far end of my run or travelling up country, made myself thoroughly at home. I first divested myself of the incubus of my weapons under my garments, and attached them to my person in the conventional fashion ready for emergency. I had no sooner done this than I noticed that the electric light of the whole house was turned off at the main, and as I sank back I saw that the countless lights of the valley were, with few exceptions, and these few were the official buildings, turned out. Evidently the Paternal Government of the Valley blew out the candle before it turned in to sleep itself.

How long I slept I know not. One thing I know, however, that I slept well, for I remember I dreamt that I was hunting kangaroos at home, and one rushed right into the homestead, where my wife was seated before a basketful of stockings, as often I have seen her dear self of a sunny afternoon, for she clings to old Scotch habits, and believes in darning toes and heels herself, as the head of the household. I had caught the kangaroo as it flourished a pair of my stockings upon its front paws, I remember, when suddenly I was raised from behind and jammed against the wall. Then I woke up to find that part of my dream was true. I was jammed against the wall, for there was a something in the bed overhead pressing down the strands of webbing upon me. What could it be? I must say that for an instant of time I felt an eerie feeling. Then I remembered where I was, and that, as there were no animals in this region, the something must be a human being, and my life must be that something's object. It is wonderful how quickly one's senses collect together when life is at stake.

So when I realised that there was some one tossing about the blankets above me, I gently drew my revolver and got it round so that it would point up to where my assailant would probably show his face. In a second or two the blanket was gone, and I stared up right into the face of—
Blackie!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN AMATEUR ADVOCATE.

Of course I knew it was the arch-mutineer, but I gave him little time to think. He was so taken aback to find me looking up at him through the webbing, that he forgot for a moment what he had come about.

But I did not; though cramped for room, with his knees pressing into my chest, I let drive a bullet, which I fancy must have hit him in a tender part, for he gave a wild scream, jumped off, and was gone. I rolled out, and sprang to the windows, but he had disappeared. The moonlight was streaming through in such a way that he could have seen me and had a splendid mark, while he might have rested safely in shadow.

The house was alarmed, and of course the neighbours from far and near also; but I had time to "plant" all my weapons carefully before any one appeared. Neighbours flocked in, and lights were brought, hand electric-lamps, which, instead of enabling me to see, were so powerful that for some moments they blinded me. I heard a deal of whispering, and when at last my eyes were accustomed to the light, I saw that the pillow had a knife stuck through it in such a position, that had I been lying there with my back to the wall, my days would have been considerably shortened.

I pointed to the handle of the knife, I pointed to the disarranged clothes, and explained what I had done, and what had happened; but I omitted to mention the firearms. They, innocent folk, seeing me unarmed, naturally assumed that the assassin had shot the weapon after he found himself cheated with the bolster. I let them think on. I showed them I was not wounded, and Batona became almost

hysterical with joy. I learned afterwards that until the murderer is found, the person who is head of the house where it is committed or nearest to the place of the crime, is held responsible, and after the interval of one month, if the murderer is not produced, is executed. Evidently life was dear to Batona, although she was so apathetic, so callous with regard to the punishment of individuals.

Of course I was assailed with a hubbub of whispers. Did I recognise the man? Could I tell what he shrieked? Was I not deafened? and so on. But I had my reasons for not wishing to let Mr. Blackie think I knew that he had attempted the crime, and accordingly expressed myself very much in doubt as to the identity of the person. Of course I knew so few people. Who could have had an intention to kill me? They looked at Batona for an answer. She had to find one, for it appears that she has three months to find the culprit, as the murder was only attempted, not effected, and certainly her joy at seeing me safe and well is somewhat dashed by the knowledge of the duties which the state still expects of her.

Now, how do I know that it is Blackie? Because of three things. I don't believe any one else here has a revolver, and I saw the moonlight glint on his as he jumped off the couch. Secondly, the knife is one of those that I bought myself at Carnegie for the expedition; and thirdly, the voice was the voice of Blackie, and the face, as well as I could see, that of Blackie too. A thorough search was made in the neighbourhood for the rascal, and a telephone message being sent to the electric lighting station, the lights of all houses were turned on, much to the astonishment of the inhabitants. The valley glowed with light, but still the fugitive remained hidden, and it would have been very extraordinary indeed if he had not managed to escape where the foliage was so thick, and the eyesight of the searchers so poor. For it is a curious matter of comment that the Valleyites, though they have educated their ears to such great sensitiveness, as to be able to hear the rustle of a fly's wings without a microphone, have lost a great deal of the long-sightedness

which I suppose their ancestors, in common with the rest of the world, once possessed. Unless the light be very great, they cannot see clearly, and they guide themselves more by their sense of hearing. Some soldiers had by this time come up to ascertain the meaning of the report, which they had heard some distance off, and I, going out into the verandah with a lamp, caught sight of a tell-tale red drop upon the white stone. Another and another showed that my bullet had been truer than I could have expected, and gave a clue to the direction in which the fugitive had flown. For a long time the soldiers and others could not distinguish the spots, they saw a dark mark, but there was no colour to them in it. At last, when a large number of the hand lamps had lit up my verandah as though with daylight, I noticed first one and then another start back, overcome with his or her feelings.

"Gracious goodness," said I to Batona, "are they terrified at the sight of a drop of blood?"

Her face was screwed up with agony; dark rings came under her eyes, as though she had passed a sleepless night. Even the word had offended her sensitiveness.

"Let no one stoop down," she cried, in a tone of command; "dismiss the neighbours, or all will be sick."

It was true; some of the citizens and citizenesses, whose curiosity had prompted them to look, were deathly pale, and looked like a row of "bad sailors" on a channel passage. Nay, the very soldiers, at least those of them who had examined the spots on the verandah, looked decidedly bilious. As soon as the neighbours had gone, Batona, who was president until the morrow's morning sitting, ordered the soldiers to remain in attendance, and guard my room against any subsequent attacks, and though I thanked her for her care, I didn't anticipate that they would be worth much in actual danger, and hinted so.

"It is not," said she, "that these men are wanting in strength and courage. See their muscles; they alone would show you what power they have. They would defend you with their lives, but they would not, if they could help, shed

a drop of another's — You know what I mean," and she shuddered again.

Did one ever live in a land of such inconsistency? Soldiers who were strong as Vulcans, yet turned sick, like schoolgirls, at the sight of blood.

At any rate, the soldiers had to obey orders, and accordingly walked sentinel near my windows, while one or two stayed within the central living room, on to which my doorway opened. So I comforted myself, and slept in my proper place on the bed, a deep refreshing sleep after having thanked Him who has the lives of kings in His keeping, for the safety of my humble self. When I awoke the sun was mounting high up in the heavens and the soldiers were gone. I rose hastily, for I had much to do, and found Batona in the living-room awaiting me.

"I have contrived a perfect safeguard for you," she said. "While you have been asleep I have had a system of electric conductors, placed in such positions that no one can, if you but turn a knob in your room, approach your windows from the outside without being struck and paralysed. We are bound to look after our guests' lives, and though you have come safely through, you are perhaps likely to be threatened once more. An escort of soldiers will also await you, and attend you wherever you go."

This, I thought, would be extremely inconvenient, though, indeed, I could not refuse the escort, for it would have been of no avail for me to be so discourteous. Batona had taken alarm. Perhaps in striking me, the assassin had aimed a blow at her, my hostess, and she was bound to look after her own safety as well as mine.

I walked with her to the Council Chamber, where I saw the curious sight of this the stately educated woman, giving place as president to a man of small stature and mean appearance. He was evidently one of the few who had survived from the imported corrupt stocks, some bushranger or other criminal, perhaps, who had found here a shelter from justice, or an escapee from New Caledonia. His complexion was tolerably clear; though, like I had noticed with Blackie,

inclined to be spotty, as though the change in his diet had only converted part of his frame into the healthy-looking firm muscles which others displayed.

Perhaps this was the originator of the law against "calling the president a whipper-snapper," which I had noticed. Any way, he would have been a fitting person, one would think, to whom to apply such a term, and the signet which he bound on his forehead, the mark of the snake crushing the kangaroo, looked absurdly out of place upon his low criminal brow. I forget his name, but it was midway between Batona and Berwegin, so that it was doubtless in alphabetical order, Beaton, or something of the sort. When Batona had with the usual ceremonies installed the president and administered to him the oath to observe the constitution, she came and stood by me near the doorway, for being an ex-president she was permitted for two days to do so. Apparently it was intended that she should be humbled by hearing her own acts pulled to pieces by her successor.

"What does the sign of the Kangaroo and Snake mean?" I asked Batona.

"It signifies the crushing of the strong by cunning which takes place in barbarian governments; it was adopted, I believe, when the Valley was first constituted into a separate state, and has been used ever since."

I told her of our first discoveries of its power over the savages.

"Yes," she said; "occasionally we have had to punish some of the brown tribes which inhabit the lands bordering on the desert, for we have had our caravans at times attacked and the messengers killed. Of course we had to take revenge, and punishment has always reached them, though we have had occasionally to send a long way."

We were interrupted by the throwing open of the curtains, and the entry of soldiers with Valedina, the beautiful girl whom I had conversed with yesterday at the registry. Himetoa stepped forward and, without preface or introduction of any sort, accused Valedina of having committed two offences against the state. As the poor girl had already

lost a life, so to speak, her accusation, if proved, would mean that she would be punished with death. And yet the council, president, and even my hostess Batona, looked on with unmoved faces, while Himetoa was coldly repeating the evidence of these offences. But poor Valedina was sick with fright; she was evidently completely speechless, and it looked very much as though, if no one interfered on her behalf, she would be mercilessly condemned.

The president intervened once with a suggestion that they would not perhaps take further evidence, if the girl would consent to be his wife. Evidently Himetoa would have been pleased if the girl had accepted this alternative, for a ghost of a smile stole over her face; but neither the accused herself nor the council would hear of it. For it appeared that past councils had successively settled that the present president should not marry and so perpetuate his type, and the poor wretch had to obey the laws, for he too had but one life to spare. I felt none the less respect for Valedina, in that her face showed the disgust she evidently felt for the spotted dwarf's offer; but I could see that so far as he was concerned her fate was sealed, and as the council refused the compromise, Himetoa proceeded with her evidence.

When she had done, it appeared that she and Valedina occupied the same rooms as clerks at the registry, and that they had been talking together the night before, when Himetoa, who had exasperated Valedina to an almost hysterical pitch, by recounting her conquest of Barbarin, himself an old admirer of Valedina, distinctly heard Valedina cry out that she wished she were dead. And a very natural observation for the sweet young girl to have made under the circumstances, I should have thought!

Now it seemed that she had thus committed a double offence. She had spoken aloud unjustifiably, and she had contemplated death. The woman who spoke against her, with her beautiful face and arms, her delicately rounded form and ripe lips, argued with the force (*sotto-voce*) and astuteness of an old Bailey lawyer, and twisted and turned the laws about to suit her purpose. She was evidently in

her cold way, jealous of this lovely girl, this bud of womanhood, and with the most deliberate and callous forethought was trying to get her out of her way.

As Annette Blake had, according to Himetoa's design, refused Barbarin, that stalwart young man became the prey of any single woman who could first, as it were, pop the question to him; of course, Himetoa, refused by young Jeremy, was in the same plight herself, but she had taken good care that Valedina should not be present; although I venture to say that if the younger girl had been present, she is far too modest to have striven for Barbarin's hand.

The fact of the matter is that Valedina is an anachronism, so far as the Valley is concerned; a sport back to the Puritan maidens or the Huguenots, who, I dare say, were her seventeenth century ancestresses, and unlike the maidens and matrons of the valley—

"She never told her love,
But let affection, like a worm i'the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek."

However, Valedina had naturally resented the trick which had been played Barbarin and herself, for Himetoa had promised Barbarin that if he fell in with her generous (?) designs in the interests of the two strangers, he should not suffer. He fell into the trap and Himetoa snapped him up, and though Barbarin was mad with rage, he had only one life to spare, and could not break the laws by setting Himetoa at defiance.

By continually harping on one string, the wily woman had at last got the younger girl to turn upon her, and now her triumph was complete. Valedina would be put out of the way.

"One moment, please," said I, and stepped forward just as the president delivered the usual formula, asking the accused if she could say aught why sentence should not be passed upon her, and I had a few words with Valedina which opened my eyes. So I turned to the president and said: "By your leave, Valedina will give you good reasons for not being punished."

"We can't hear you," said the little president. "The law permits of no advocacy."

"What!" said I, "not even when the accused is unable to reply for herself?"

"That is her look-out," said he. "It is as fair for one as for another."

"Then the innocent, if they are stupid or confused, may suffer, and the guilty, if ready-witted, get off?" urged I.

"If it so occurs, of course. We get the truth now, we cannot count upon getting it from advocates," said the spiteful little fellow.

"Wait a bit," I murmured. "Let me read you a law upon the subject," and I read the law which allowed advocacy in death cases.

The council were evidently staggered—they had forgotten its existence, and the little president looked discomposed; but Himetoa whispered—

"That, Mr. President, only applies, if there be no other law contradictory, and provided that you do not select the contradictory law to prevail."

"I hold that the contradictory law prevails. Ah! here it is," said the little man, turning it up in his code.

"Very well, then," I said; "I claim to be advocate under quite a different law, that a man during his month of respite may do anything he chooses short of murder, and a few other capital offences."

They all looked surprised; too surprised, in fact, to wince at the last few words of my sentence, and Himetoa and the president frowned; but I had the upper-hand now, and they knew it. So by dint of a very few simple questions, I got out of Himetoa the trick which she had played. She was not at all ashamed of it, nor did she know whither the questions were tending. Then I managed to get her to admit that she felt annoyed at the interest Valedina displayed for her husband, Barbarin, and in fact she showed pretty clearly that she had worked upon the girl's feelings. Before I could give any one time to think, I turned sharply to the president and asked if law 354 (I had carefully noted

it) did not make the instigator of an offence guilty of it, and the president had to admit that that was so. The rest was easy, and before many minutes had elapsed Himetoa had departed covered with shame, and with two offences upon her register, hitherto free from blemish. Valedina was blushing and thanking me for her life, so she said, and Batona was congratulating me upon my success; while I had made one deadly enemy whom I might fear more than the assassin Blackie.

There was no doubting Himetoa's feelings towards me; as she passed out of the doorway between the silent rows of soldiers, her eyes, generally lethargic and sunken, flashed fire. I had certainly struck the flint to some result this time. Now in this I felt much astonished, for the woman had surely calculated her chances, and knew the dangerous game she was playing too well. But Batona whispered, as we ourselves left, that now Barbarin could, if he wished, have a divorce from his wife, because she was now upon an equal basis with himself. Before, she having so to speak, three lives, and he only one, in the "pool" game of life they were playing, was the only one of the two able to sue for a divorce. Now through the successful issue of the action they had changed places.

Batona left Valedina and myself at the entrance to the Council House, and returned to the melancholy duty of listening to her own decisions being reversed; for, though the books of the law teemed with decisions, the council always decided every case upon its own merits, even in parallel cases, except indeed where general principles of state procedure were concerned. One fact, which I learnt from Batona's own lips this morning, has put me in some feather; it appears that some member of yesterday's council raised the point whether the month's respite had not better be repealed, as it was extremely inconvenient, and the law was ultimately passed that the month should in future cases be curtailed by one half, so that even though we do not catch Blackie to-day, I shall have longer to live than he, and can perfect my arrangements without fear. I really

feel somewhat uneasy about Himetoa, and if I could I should be only too glad to persuade Maurana or Blackie to run off with her, at any rate, when Barbarin has got his divorce, for we must do all things decently and in order.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SIGHT-SEEING EXTRAORDINARY.

"WHERE are you going, Valedina?" said I.

"I don't know," said the girl somewhat confused. Curious child, she hardly seemed to realise that she had escaped from the jaws of death.

"Very well, then, come with me. I'm old enough to be your father, so Barbarin won't be jealous, and you shall take me to the gold mines I have heard about."

She turned round and whispered to one of the escort who accompanied me, then said—

"See, I am ready. I have told one of the men to get the necessary ear-stops and teeth-guards for us."

"What in the name of fortune for?" asked I.

"Did you not say the gold mines? Well, the noise of the picks and shovels and the boring is terrible, besides the great stamping machinery at the entrance of the tunnel, though it is cased in, is like thunder."

"Well, I must say that quartz crushing is not exactly what you may call melodious, but I shouldn't feel very bad after it."

"What a wonderful man you are," she said, looking at me with some wonder.

Within a few minutes the soldier came back with a number of curious-looking spring pads, to fit over the ears, with tapes and strings attached. He also held under one arm a number of curved oval pieces of thin wood, whose use I soon found was to be placed in the teeth and touched to another piece similarly held in the teeth of another. By these means a continuous sounding-board was, as it were, created, and with ear-pads on, any one speaking in ordinary tones could, after a little practice, be distinctly heard and understood through the vibrations of the listener's teeth and the bones connecting the jaw with the ear. I distinctly

heard the click click on my tympanum of the words as they came from Valedina's pretty lips. Fortunately the sound-boards are about ten inches long and I am an old Benedict, or I fear to say what the consequences of communicating thus with the charming girl would have been; for, to have such charming blue eyes, beautiful skin, arched eyebrows, and dainty mouth within a few inches of one's own lips would have been a strong temptation to St. Anthony himself to administer the kiss of peace.

In a few minutes we had all—Valedina, guards, and myself—settled ourselves within the electric cars which ran from the valley into the dark tunnel of rock, stretching away under the desert to the pinnacle, and again right through to the Circle of Rocks, as I now learn. It was a vast undertaking to have made this tunnel, for it is forty miles long, and for a people who have had no blasting-powder and could not suffer its explosion, even if they had it, one finds it almost miraculous that they have accomplished their task. However, it appears that they commenced the tunnel years and years ago, I might almost say centuries ago, with the limited idea of working the gold in the reef, but as they followed the vein and it led them further in towards the great rock, they determined to make a communication there; when they had made some five miles they came across a deep ravine, which they found had been gradually eaten out by rivers, in days when the whole of the plateau was evidently much more elevated, and huge Niagaras and Amazons flowed with mighty tides through these tracts. They tunnelled under the little stream which now flows there, and coming up on the other side found themselves in a curious limestone region, where the percolation of water had worn great caves like the celebrated Jenolan, or Fish River Caves, in New South Wales. They found that many of these extended in the direction they were working, and in their utilitarian spirit took advantage of them to carry on their path to the Rock. Finally, about the commencement of the nineteenth century, they completed this task, and gained the pinnacle.

This they found a mountain of rich golden quartz, and

not wishing to excite the cupidity of passers-by, they attacked the exterior and removed all the larger signs of "colour" they could; eventually, however, being forced to adopt the flimsy tricks we had seen, to prevent their mine being discovered. Later on they projected and carried out the tunnel to the Circle of Rocks, where they are accustomed to carry executions into force. By the mere chance that they saw the sand-storm coming upon them, they had not taken Jeremy there; so one of the soldiers said with complete nonchalance. Had they done so, we should never have found him, that is certain; and I—well I should not have been a prisoner within the valley.

When electricity, some few years ago, came into vogue in the old world, they heard of it, and sent out a skilled mechanic, who found out many secrets of dynamos, and on his return they utilised, through the electric agency, the marvellous force of falling water, which they have dammed up, to quarry their gold, to do their mining and crushing, to light their houses, and in a hundred other ways to aid and assist them.

Hydraulics they thoroughly understand. Pipes of copper convey the fluid along the tunnel to the pinnacle. We travelled at a great rate, rushing now on one gradient now on another as we dipped here and there.

Only one train could possibly travel at a time, we found, and thus they avoid accidents. But there is little inconvenience under this arrangement, as on our way to the Rock we covered the twenty miles in about the same number of minutes, and pulled up at a siding on the far-end as gently as though we had been moving at snail's pace. The ventilation was perfect; the air was cool and fresh, caused I found out by the huge crevasses in the Rock, being used as up-draughts for the air which was pumped in at the valley entrance, and carried by large pipes along the tunnel. What with the noiseless way in which we moved over the ground, the strong light in the carriages and the fresh air, it was impossible to divest myself of the idea that the tunnel was not twenty miles, not even one mile, but only a few hundred yards in length. When we arrived at the terminus

we saw a busy though silent sight; large trucks of quartz stood ready to be taken back through the tunnel, while hydraulic lifts were noiselessly moving up or down with loads of the precious mineral.

All the persons here wore the ear-pads I have referred to, and orders were given by signs; electric lights were blazing apparently from every corner of walls or roof, and I never remember to have seen so cleanly and beautiful a mine.

We soon found out where Barbarin was working, and proceeded up for an enormous distance in one of the lifts, to a "drive" where we alighted, and with hand-electric lamps made towards a strong light. Here we found half-a-dozen men ear-padded as below, pulling about masses of quartz and directing electric drilling-machines of great power.

I then found that the principles of physics were so thoroughly understood, that blasting-powder was dispensed with; great wedges of wood were driven into the drill-holes, and then thoroughly and constantly saturated with water. These swelling gradually cracked off the face of the rock, which was easily pulled down with levers. One of these miners was Barbarin, the ex-president of a few days, conspiring with the heat of his labours. Here was equality indeed! As he turned and recognised Valedina, he came towards her, and through their sounding-boards they engaged in a long conversation, in which I saw them constantly referring to me by their looks; and though the man had looked at first unfriendly, he now came forward, and grasping me by both hands, almost pinched my knuckles into jelly. I am generally reckoned amongst my friends to have a strong grip, but the muscular force which he displayed left me a baby in his hands. Putting his teeth-guard to mine, he told me that he owed Valedina to me, and that he should never forget it. He would at once prosecute a divorcee from Himetoa whom he had hardly seen, and had no doubt he would get it, as she was in disgrace for conspiring against Valedina. He told me a great deal more, and would have made me quite vain had I let him. But I was anxious now about regaining my liberty.

Here I was on the very rock where my comrades were, I doubt not, though unfortunately they were one side and I the other of its stone doorways; without evincing any suspicious excess of desire, I expressed a wish to see the mechanism by which the platforms were filled with carbonic acid gas, and the various rocks were twisted and turned this way and that. So Barbarin signing to one of the other miners left them to work on undisturbed, while we all ascended further in the lift. On our way I noticed various branches where tunnels had been made, and through one caught the glimpse of the blue sky, so I knew I was above the level of the plain.

Within a few seconds we stood still, and upon alighting I found that we were in a short tunnel, which led out circuitously to the outside of the rock. "That," said Barbarin, for he had his ear-pads off, "was the way which Maurana retreated when you attacked him the other day."

I could not put him right before this infernal escort of soldiers which dogged my footsteps, so I let it be until I should be with him alone.

"That is the handle which works the great signal on the top of the pinnacle, the signal to an approaching messenger from any direction of danger or the contrary." He pointed to a lever. "See," said he, "this little model shows the four points of the compass, that large rock which you saw can be twisted round by simply turning this lever round so." He turned the lever as he spoke. "You shall go out soon and watch it swing this way and that. Truly the silent force of water is marvellous."

"Is that hydraulic too?" asked I.

"Certainly; all the mechanisms upon the rock are hydraulic, except, of course, the carbonic acid which we discharge upon the platforms. Even that, however, is pumped out by hydraulic rams."

"Where, then, do you make or find the gas?" asked I. "I guessed it was carbonic acid gas when I first saw it putting out our fires, for I saw the blue flame of the carbonic oxide burning away above the gas for a few seconds."

"Yes, that is so; but as a rule if there is no breeze, you would not notice any blue flame; the extinguishing is almost instantaneous. So it is with people whom we put an end to. Well, we make the gas by subjecting limestone to a great heat in a huge gold retort. The gas is given off and pumped into caves in the rock, whence we use it as we want it. This knob, now, turns on the water which pulled away the support of the bridge where you almost fell. This works the bronze figure, this again depresses the pathway at an angle, so as to render it impassible. You were too quick for us that day. I don't know who was working the mechanism. The water, you see," he continued, with infinite coolness, "passes along in these pipes."

"Are they not frail? Why not make them of iron, for these are of copper, are they not?"

"Well, they are of alloy—copper and gold. They are extremely strong, and resist an enormous pressure. Iron we cannot spare. We have only just enough to keep our dynamos and 'stamps' working properly, and even some of those have soft bearings. Had we enough for these pipes, we should have enough for guns, though we should all have to pad our ears when we worked them. By the way, how unfortunate it was that your party attacked Maurana, and prevented him bringing in the guns and gunpowder, as you call it."

"I don't look at it in the same light as you do," I said.

"Of course not"—and he smiled.

"Ah! I have something to say to you which will interest you upon the same subject, and may prevent your making similar losses in future."

"Indeed! Well, fire away!" he said.

"Not here and now," said I, "for I want to see everything. Come to Batona's house to-night, or another time; it will wait." I did not want to put any one upon suspicion or inquiry, although I was burning to get this man on my side against Blackie.

"Well, here we are back again; a few feet up in the lift and we shall be on the platform."

"Which?" asked I, with some eagerness.

"The western; to get to the eastern one must go down again and ascend on the other side of the rock. There is no direct way through."

Did he read my thoughts, I wonder? I knew that the chances of my escape in this direction were very few. How could I, even if I escaped the sloping pathway and the murderous bronze, escape by the doorway which required two people to pull at its rings. Then I thought of poor Annette, whom I had promised to rescue. No, I must not be such a poltroon as to leave her behind, though I was armed and could keep a hundred soldiers at bay.

Up again we went, and alighted at the platform, on which Mitford and I had seen the dead bodies of ill-fated persons who had, in past times, striven to gain the interior of the Rock, or had been betrayed by Blackie. However, there was nothing now to offend the eye. Large cloths covered the platform, and had I not known of the corpses there, I should never have guessed that it was anything but a place for drying the large cloths and sheets which hid the dead. These coverings had evidently been removed upon my first visit, to strike terror into our hearts, and weaken our knees.

Evidently these valley folk thought that others were like themselves, and became ill at the sight of blood or death. Looking up from the platform, I saw, far away, the range of mountains which had encompassed me for the last few days, and between us and them I could distinguish what I had not seen before—the wandering line of the huge cañon which divided off the range from the desert upon this side. There was no sign of my comrades. What had become of Cousin Jeremy and his good men? What had become of Jack? I know not. Then I feared for their safety. Had they followed some Will-of-the-wisp? At any rate they should not say that I did not do my best to assist them; accordingly, pretending to take a note of the height of the mountain and other details in which Barbarin was well versed, I managed to scribble on a leaf of my pocket-book a message to say that I was well, and planning to join them. Pretending to slip, I let fall the leaf of the pocket-book, which, crumpled as it was,

rolled down the steep sides of the precipice and fell on the sand at its foot. At least I could not see it, so I assumed that it reached the ground. At this moment Valedina, who had gone aside with Barbarin, spooning, I dare say, reappeared to say that the signal was going to be turned on. Accordingly I watched the pinnacle and saw swinging out, now to the north, now to the east, and again to every point of the compass, the huge piece of rock which I had noticed to Mitford. Now it rose on end and formed the summit of the pinnacle, now it careered round like a kitten after its own tail, now it stopped dead as though it had been as light as a feather, and had no momentum whatever. Then I watched while the pathway was made to slope, and the bronze figure threw down his spear, or plucked it back, or turned this way or that as noiselessly as though it were a model of a few inches in height, instead of a colossal mass of bronze. The spear was shot forth and again pulled back by a system of springs and cords, which were, of course, invisible, though explained to me by one of the soldiers. I wondered at the confidence thus shown me, but only for a short time, for I remembered that as I was a doomed man it mattered little what I learnt, considering that in a few weeks I should be dead.

Next I was shown the turning tablets, which I found cunningly fitted on to great blocks of stone, which moved on greased slides with a touch of the finger, or were rigid as the primeval rock. These curious people are no mean artificers in metal or other respects. Of course now it is clear to me that the groans and faces which tried to frighten us from the eastern platform were human, and did not originate in our imaginations. The number of passages and drives here and there through the rock also explain the marvellous way in which the soldiers darted out here and there, and did I not know the dread of these peculiar people to noises and bloodshed, I should wonder at their not having surprised and killed us to a man when we were attacking the Rock.

"What has become of the people who were with me?" I asked Barbarin.

"They have gone away," he replied.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE STATE A COOK.

"Gone away?" said I. Really gone away? Is it possible? Has Cousin Jeremy forsaken me? I felt a little bitter at this; but, after a few minutes, my better judgment told me that, if he had retreated, it was merely a ruse to put the garrison off their guard. Perhaps he was watching at the door where I had been captured even at that moment. Waiting for it to open. But to what end? I knew that if he managed to get inside, he would simply fall down the horrible pit down which the lift ran, or perhaps die a dog's death in the dark, pierced by a hundred spears.

"Why did the soldiers save me from death?" I asked Barbarin.

He was of tougher fibre than the others, for the ominous word did not affect him like it had the others.

"Orders had been given by the president of the day when you escaped, that you should be taken at the first opportunity, so that you might be punished by the council, and your friends warned."

"How extremely thoughtful!" said I; then, struck with an idea, I added, "and have you warned these friends of mine?"

"They have been told on the tablets of the eastern platform that you will be very shortly punished with death by the council, and that if they act as you have done they will be similarly punished. The man who was with you on the morning when you committed all three offences against the council was deemed punished, as he was last seen dead in your arms."

Well, at least Mitford should be safe, I thought, from their malignity. This evidently accounted for the disap-

pearance of Cousin Jeremy and his men. They had made for the valley, in the hope of being able to attack it and rescue me. But gaze as I would, I could not see a sign or trace of them on the plains, which stretched to the horizon; so after having various other matters explained to me—amongst others, that the stream from the rock was, in fact, the waste of the hydraulic lifts and rams—we came back within the rock, and returned to the valley, where I went over the crushing-house, and saw the whole of the apparatus working as orderly as though it had been erected on a Victorian gold-field. In many cases the people had evidently been put to great straits for iron; but, by mixing alloys cleverly, they had managed to get the maximum amount of machinery with the minimum of iron. It appeared that in one spot of the valley they had come across some feruginous soil, and, by great care, they had managed to extract the scanty grains of iron and consolidate them by degrees into ingots. Here was a reversal of the scale of metals. Iron was at the top, gold almost at the foot of the scale in comparative value. The rusty ornaments in Himetoa's hair and at her throat were, in fact, iron; and precious were they deemed, being worn as a mark of honour for any distinction in the presidential office. But now, alas!—through my agency—she has lost them, and these decorations will have to be restored to the state until some fitting recipient should present himself or herself.

We—that is, Valedina and I—visited a great number of the state institutions; the schools, the laundry, the copper mines at the far end of the valley, where they also find a quantity of silver, but deem it a useless metal; the water-works, where an enormous dam retains the rains and conserves them for various uses; the electric works, where the electricity of the whole valley is manufactured, and a huge row of water turbines revolve with so little noise or friction, while bands and wheels spin round so melodiously that I wondered to see ear-pads in use. Then we passed through the state library where books of reference on mechanics, natural philosophy, chemistry, ancient classics, geography and

kindred sciences by well-known European authors, abound. These are multiplied in huge type, and bound up in great tomes to accommodate the sight of the Valleyites. Works on history, fiction, politics, and various other examples of contemporaneous outside literature, whereby the din and worries of the outside world might disturb the serenity of the valley, are strictly tabooed. This peculiar discrimination in the selection of their books accounts for the great knowledge these Valleyites display on scientific subjects, contrasted with their crass ignorance of things passing in the world around.

But of all the valley institutions, their state kitchen is the most wonderful. It was a huge hall or series of halls opening one out of the other, enclosed in a building of quartz blocks. Cartloads of fruit and vegetables stood within the yards ready to be unpacked and taken within by the attendants who swarm, bee-like in activity and numbers, throughout the buildings. In one department the fruits and vegetables were prepared for cooking, in another mealies and rice were being pounded into flour, and bananas baked into bread. In others the flour was being kneaded into cakes or tarts. Then one came to the stoves and ovens where electricity cooked the food when the sun did not lend its aid; but the day on which we visited the place was sunny, and the electric fires were economised, while huge burning glasses concentrated heat rays on to the blackened ovens, or toasted bread and fruits. The distributing-room was, perhaps, the most marvellous to me, who have only heard of such a central kitchen as a chimerical and millennial theory of certain well-intentioned, but visionary, persons at home. It was oval and almost exactly the shape of the valley, its longer axis being from south to north. Around its walls were countless round, close-fitting doors, about twelve inches in diameter, which, when opened, showed large pipes or tunnels of the same diameter, in which were closely-fitting trucks provided at all points with wheels, and capable of being almost hermetically closed. The dinner-hour was fast approaching, and the attendants from many of the outer rooms, who had

finished their preparatory work for that day, were flocking in, each taking up his position. In the centre of the room was a lofty, circular pulpit in which sat a man of some years with a large manuscript book before him. Over the doors were numbers, and around the pulpit was a series of large tables upon which the cooks were hastily placing various dishes, all classified according to their nature upon the tables. As they were brought in, the man in the centre whispered a number, and the attendant of the pipe so numbered came forward and took up the dishes indicated by the president of the kitchen, and, quickly thrusting them into the partitions of the little truck in the numbered pipe, sealed it up, thrust it back, closed the door, and, turning a knob, allowed the pneumatic force to whisk it away to the house where it was to go. A ring, in a few seconds, announced its arrival at the far end, and before I had left, half an hour later, there were many trucklets back at the kitchen, their contents having been abstracted and served up at dinner-tables miles away, hot or cold, as the case might be. In some cases two trucklets were sent where the number of people to be served required it. But the system was the same, and the whole of the proceedings so noiselessly carried out that I could not believe that in half an hour some two thousand persons—the number of the inhabitants of the valley—had been served with their midday meal.

“Who is this president?” said I to Valedina.

“Sh!” she whispered, drawing me away, though I had spoken only in a whisper. Then, when we were out of the chamber, she said: “No one is allowed to speak in the distributing chamber, to prevent confusion. He is a physician, as it happens, of some repute and skill, and is president for the week of the kitchen; he will serve as one of the cooks next week.”

“A physician! Dear me! When Batona said that physicians were cooks, I thought she meant that they directed the method of cooking; but I never thought that they took part in it.”

“Of course. It is not sufficient to direct a person to do a

thing, you must be able to do it yourself and actually do it."

I thought how much better off we should be in some respects in the colonies, or the home-country, if teachers were only able to do what they taught, and actually did it. No more inefficient clerks, no more bad servants, no more incompetent professional men, or visionary politicians!

"But how does he know what to send to each one?" I asked.

"Well, you see, there is a *menu* for the day which includes, perhaps, the choice of two soups, two vegetables, two ragouts—vegetable, of course—and dessert, with bread, toast, and so on, and this is telephoned through in the morning to each house. Then the person in authority there orders from the *menu*, and against that number in the president's book a few signs are hastily pencilled which show what each person has selected. The arrangement of each article on separate tables prevents confusion, and renders us able in a minute to select and send off the whole of the dinner."

"I can understand the sending of dry foods, but not soups," I said.

"That is very easily arranged. The soup is made in large boilers, and is turned, boiling, into little cans of bright copper with gilt insides, upon which lids fit with what I believe you call a bayonet catch."

"Bayonet catch, oh yes, I know; it fastens firmly at once. That is very ingenious. But do accidents never occur? Do the trucks ever stick and the dinner not come to hand?"

"Sometimes, but very rarely. You see the tubes are so fitted that it is possible to tell where a truck has got fixed, in the same way that breaks are found in electric wires."

"Then, what becomes of the poor persons who have no dinner?" asked I.

"Oh, that is very simple; an extra truck is sent to the nearest house, labelled with their number, and they are told to call for it."

"And does this operation take place more than once every day?"

"Certainly, for every meal; and we have three; at rising, in the middle of the day, and at sunset."

"Then if all are busy, why are you not either at home eating your dinner or cooking it here?" I asked, for the place was deserted.

"A useful hint," said she with a smile. "You shall come and dine with me. I will telephone Batona."

I was nothing loath, for I wished to know something more of this people, and Valedina was more natural than most of the others; there seemed a kindred spirit between her and myself. *That* reminded me that I had not called upon Annette, so I asked to be put in communication with her. As she was a new arrival, one of the attendants who had not gone to the cooks' dinner-table happened to know her number, for she was always ordering strange dishes by way, I suppose, of experiment, and in a few minutes I heard her clear musical whisper in the instrument. She was quite well, had been expecting me; had not seen or heard anything of Blackie; hoped that I had received no hurt during the night, and so on.

The president here came to us to press us to take dinner with the cooks, but I pleaded a pre-engagement. However, I wanted to see the methods of the establishment and found that the cooks, scullions, presidents and others, were seated, to the extent of half their total number, while the other half waited upon them. Their diet seems to require but little mastication, and they certainly evinced few of the delights of gastronomy, which even the least epicure among us shows; the table impressed me as gloomy, for the whisperings were few and in the main a great silence reigned. Even the clatter of knives, forks, and spoons was absent; all the plates were of wood, and the spoons and forks of the same material. It seemed to be against their fashion to talk during meals; though for that matter we in the colonies are not much more sociable, making a mighty sharp and silent business of eating. Before I had left, the diners had exchanged places with the waiters. No one was exempt. The kitchen president of the week handed dish after dish to a scullion

maid, dressed in coarse though neat garb, as became her duties. It is true that she might have been his own daughter, for it appeared that though Valedina having been wrongfully accused was exempt from service for a month, she had taken her part here before she had joined the registry office, and had also been a laundress. The rota changed here once a week, as the duties of the physicians outside the kitchen being of a more permanent character than those of private people, the inconvenience of a daily change would have been felt, and in order to retain the principle involved in equalising the lot of all, the changes were made weekly.

Valedina's house—for Himetoa had been awarded a separate house from her on the score of her disgrace—stood very near the registry itself, not far from the kitchen. In fact, all the offices where clerks or servants in numbers were employed were so far as possible congregated near the kitchen.

CHAPTER XXXI.

VALEDINA'S APOLOGY.

WHEN we arrived, the other members of the establishment, presided over for the time by a matron of some years, were seated at dinner, and I was greeted with a murmur by them one and all.

"How is it?" I asked Valedina, when the meal was over, and the others had gone to walk or take a siesta for a few hours, in accordance with the sanitary regulations of the state, "How is it that you have managed to collect together so much sense and nonsense in your state, and while at one moment you force a stranger to admire your order and methods, your beauty and grace of form and courtesy, yet at the next, he finds it hard to refrain from laughing at the child-like rules you have? Take for instance your laws, prescribing punishments for offences. What can to any one be more stupid than giving, so to speak, to every person three lives, any one of which he may lose by committing offences of totally different degrees in their effect?"

"There are one or two exceptions to the rule," said she. "For instance, we view the killing or attempt to kill"—she shuddered as she spoke, but appeared to be getting more used to the words—"a human being as a capital offence in itself; and, for the rest, the simplicity of the rule is its great recommendation. The council have no difficulty in coming to a decision as to the punishment, and there cannot be the slightest possibility of favouritism. I understand that in your country a man never knows in the least what punishment may be attached to an offence, and that a great deal depends on how much iron he may be able to give to his advocate."

"Not iron, but gold; for gold is precious and rare with us, iron common and cheap. An ounce of gold is worth more than a ton of iron; that is, gold is about 4,000 times more precious, if indeed the markets are the same as they were when last I saw a newspaper; but you don't take in the *Sydney Herald* or the *Argus*, I suppose?"

She smiled. Of course she did not know what I in my poor facetiousness meant. What trouble did any one here take of markets and the like? Where there was no buying and selling there was no need for market quotations.

"Well," I resumed; "I don't know what would happen to all our advocates at home if we put your ideas into fashion there, it is just possible that they would all starve."

"Starve," she said; "oh, I see what you mean. Of course you could not take one little piece of our constitutional system and put it into a country like yours, where each has to work for himself. What a horrible scramble there must be. Do some get a great deal and some very little?"

I explained as well as I could.

"That seems to me abominable," said she; "because one is born with more wit or more money than another, is he to have the whole advantage from that accident and live in luxury, while another one starves by his side?"

"It is what we call the law of nature that the weak should go to the wall," said I; "and there are people who advocate that we should leave nature alone and let the weak go. The strong, the wise, and the best will then survive, as in fact they do here."

"Ah, but," she remonstrated, "you must know how it is that our best live, and our weak pass away; it is that the state may be enriched, that the general community may be benefited, not that one or more individuals may fatten on all others."

"Well argued," said I; "you will be glad to hear that, though there are those who do not believe in charity—"

"Charity!" said she, "I don't understand."

"It is the giving by those who have to those who have not. Generosity, you know."

"But it is their duty. They have made money out of the

others, they of course ought to give; it is no generosity, it is a payment."

"I'm afraid very few of us at home view the matter in that light; but I was going to tell you that between the two extremes, of those who think it their duty to give charity, and those who would rather let the starving starve to death—I mean until they pass away, as you would say—there are many who find great pleasure in relieving the sufferings of the poor, that is people who have nothing. These charitable persons find it their religious duty to do so. Besides, our laws are framed to help the poor and keep them from starving."

"You talk of religious duty. What is that? The etymology of religious from the Latin means bound to a thing, doesn't it?"

"I have no doubt you know better than I," said I. "Religion is that belief in a spirit or Essence of Nature, as you call it, which binds a man to do one thing, or not to do another, according as he believes he will be punished or not by the Essence of Nature. I am aware of many faults in my definition, but let them pass."

"Ah, the Essence of Nature punishes any one who contravenes its laws," replied the girl. "Some time ago, some young boys got some grapes together, they grow on the southern hillside over there, shaded a good deal from the sun," and she pointed to a distant vista of blue valley, which contrasted beautifully with the wealth of golden sunlight. "Well, they kept the juice by them and in a day or two drank it, they were terribly ill, and we found that they got insane, so four of them were locked up under guard in a distant part of the valley. They are always asking for more of the juice, I learn."

"I did not mean such punishments as that," I said, "when I spoke of the Essence of Nature punishing misdeeds"—and I smiled at the thought of the poor inebriated boys being taken for permanently insane people—"I referred rather to a punishment after this life has passed away. There are many people amongst us who believe that, whatever you do in this

life will be rewarded or punished hereafter, according as it is good or bad."

She had looked puzzled, but now her face cleared as she replied—

"Why, of course; people will praise them or blame them according as they have made good or bad laws, or committed few or many offences. That is so here. Is that what you call religious?"

How hard it was to make these intelligent people grasp our ideas of religion, and a future state. At great length I repeated to her what I had explained to Batona, and with similar result. First incredulity and then contempt; would that Mitford were here, I thought, with his doctrines and dogmas, he would be a fitting person to convert these optimistic atheists, who saw a *summum bonum* in this life, and actually pretended to be satisfied with it. So satisfied in theory that they not only looked on anything further as being unnecessary, but absolutely undesirable. When I touched upon eternal punishment, as to which I must confess to being somewhat of an infidel and heretic, her fair face paled and her lips themselves looked blue. I thought she was going to faint, and hastily got a cup of the sparkling water, which rose and fell in a snow-white basin close by, cooling to drink and refreshing to the sight.

But she waved the glass aside, and after a moment said, though with some difficulty—

"Are there monsters who believe then, that if one has committed an offence, one must be tortured for ever and ever for it?" And she covered her face with her hands. Then she went on: "We have never heard of such a thing here, we should all be stricken with such pain and grief that we might pass away at once. It is a horrible thought."

"Come, come," said I; "you who talk about tortures must not forget the way in which you put an end to your criminals. Chained to the stakes which are planted in the desert, they are starved to death, a lingering and awful punishment."

"But they have offended against the state," said she; "besides, it is not for ever."

"I cannot see that the principle is altered," I replied. "It is torture, however long it is."

"Yes, and it is not pleasant to think on," said the girl with a shudder; "but we have no person savage enough who can put an end to criminals; perhaps," she added, looking to me, "you who fear no noises and do not mind the sight of a drop of—you know what I mean—would not mind doing this, away on the top of the mountains, that is, while you are with us."

Here was a carrying of the fire into the enemy's camp with a vengeance. A proposition was actually being made to me that while I lived, that is for the three weeks and a bittock that my life was still allowed to run, I should be Lord High Executioner. I could not be angry with the beautiful girl, though had it been another, I verily believe I should have used strong language. The president, for instance, had he suggested it, would have felt the weight of my hand heavy upon him. As it was, I smiled, and replied that for my part I was not a sympathiser with capital punishment of any sort, and because I complained of slow methods of death, I did not thereby offer myself as the person to kill the poor condemned wretches.

I suppose she saw I was hurt, and hastened to apologise if she had wounded my feelings. "I feel all the more ashamed for having done so," she added, "because for a condemned man you behave so differently to what we had been led to think you would. You are gentle and polite, you talk low, and you conform to all our rules, at least"—here she smiled most charmingly—"almost all."

She was thinking of my breach of the laws of advocacy in her favour.

"If you must kill off your criminals, why do you not do it by electricity?" said I; "that would be quick and painless."

"We should never be able to use it for anything else, we could not bear the association," said she; "and the benefit we derive from the electric fluid is so great that we could not deprive ourselves of its use. Besides, we should have to see the condemned die."

"Well, but sometimes you must see death here in this valley. You do not live for ever."

"Yes, very true; but it pains us terribly. Why should we incapacitate all the inhabitants of the valley, any further than we can help?"

"But, my dear young lady," I remonstrated, "that is very selfish. For the sake of your own feelings, you condemn some other poor person, a human being like yourself, to a terrible death, such as even my strong nature shudders at. Come now, cannot you think of the poor suffering criminal?"

"Oh, and I do at times, indeed I do; but the laws upon the point are unalterable now, though we have often thought of changing them. You see the terrible nature of the punishment for mutiny against the state keeps the state intact, people do not commit third offences."

"In our country such a state of things would bring about the very evil it was intended to prevent. Years ago we had a system of laws whereby any person committing small offences might be—put an end to, and in consequence, the laws were often broken in sheer desperation. Now a different system prevails, and there are less offences, so at least we are told. In fact there are many persons who would get rid of capital punishment altogether."

"How would they punish then?" said she with curiosity.

"By immuring the persons in prisons, where they could be guarded and do no harm."

"But they would cost the state a great deal. Besides the punishment would be but small. A man who can eat and drink, and live merrily without labour, would consider himself well off."

"It would be dearer in one sense, but in another I think not. But there," I added, "capital punishment is my bugbear, and if you get me upon that subject, I shall go on like a clock till I run down."

Valedina walked back with me to the Council Chamber and took the opportunity of preferring a petition that Barbarin might be released for a day to attend before the council.

"Hallo," I said, "that is advocacy."

"It is not usually decided so," she said.

But the president was "agen us," I could see. He had not forgotten Valedina's snub of the morning, and he ruled that the petition was advocacy and could not be received. He was about to add that Valedina had committed a breach of the law by acting as advocate, when I—as though forgetful of my listeners' nerves—spoke some remark to one of the soldiers out loud. In an instant the council was writhing; even poor Valedina I had to assist out, and an adjournment was announced, as the members were too ill to go on. I naturally expected some black looks from the members who helped each other out, pale and trembling, but instead I saw more of reproach than annoyance; evidently I had only been using my prerogative and no one dared to blame me. My ruse was successful, at any rate, for I carried Valedina to Batona to be looked after, and no sentence was pronounced on the young girl. I had determined to try a similar ruse on the council in favour of Barbarin to-morrow, for it is essential for my plans that I should have internal assistance to prevent suspicion and espionage. To-night I shall doubtless sleep in peace, for Batona has been engaged during the day in perfecting the machinery for my protection. I am hoping not to be a somnambulist, for I understand that the electric current which she has had especially laid on to prevent night surprises, is strong enough to paralyse any person who walks through it, or crosses the verandah to or from my window.

Barbarin managed to run up here for a few minutes to-night. He had an hour's leave of absence and came straight here, anxious to know how we had prospered in his suit. He was much chagrined when I told him what had happened, saying that he feared that Himetoa hearing of the attempt would frustrate all future efforts by getting round the president for the time being, in some way or the other. I did not tell him what my own plans are, for fear that he would be implicated as *particeps criminis*, but I let him somewhat into my confidence as to Blackie, that is, I prepared the ground for the seed which I propose to sow

during the next few days. Though he is in somewhat a desperate condition, I can see that he will require to be handled with considerable tact and patience before he can be made to see with my eyes; and being in such a precarious position, he will fear to embark upon the dangerous expedient of attacking Blackie unless he is certain of success. I have been making another study of the laws to-day and have been classifying them. They form a very heterogeneous mass of decisions, and appear in their dryness and multiplicity to have but one redeeming point, their unconscious humour. These law-givers, in attempting to avoid the difficulties which beset and ensnare our jurists at home, have unwittingly applied remedies which in point of effect are barely distinguishable from the laws they attempt to correct. Extremes have indeed met.

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CHAPTER XXXII.

I COERCE THE COUNCIL.

TO-DAY has been so wet that at an early hour I determined to make it a day of record, and as I have not opened my journal for a week, I am in duty bound to welcome the rain which thus enforces my scribbling. The weather here has been extremely fine, such weather as I have no doubt the station is sharing, though of course it is not there so hot as here within the Tropic of Capricorn. But yesterday the clouds began to bank up across the sky as I had seen them from the Rock, and various indications were not wanting that the weather would be stormy. The few birds which inhabit the valley—all voiceless, for songsters would be too shrill for the sensitive inhabitants—flew low, a species of fog arose from the dam at evening, and my corns began to shoot. Now when at home as a boy I remember visiting a farm where the weather-prophets were legion; this and that sign was an indication of rain or dry, until I reckoned that there were fifteen distinct and separate ways of foretelling the weather, apart from the Toricelli barometer which had hung in the hall for generations. Remembering these signs, I foretold rain, nor was I wrong, and all last night and to-day the clouds have been pouring down their contents, deluging this valley, and filling it with mist and vapour. A great deal has happened during the past week—I have been everywhere I could, and altogether my time has been so well spent that I have had scarcely a moment's rest out of sleeping hours.

The morning after I last wrote up this journal, I got both Batona and Valedina, who were still slightly suffering from the effects of my *brusquerie* of the day before, to keep away from the council, as I expected a scene. I went early so as to take time by the forelock, and was present at the exchange of presidency, Berwegin, the porter from the registry,

taking the place of the dwarfed Beaton, or whatever the man's name was. He recognised me as I came in, and nodded with a smile to me. The business of the council went on for awhile, as I thought, I had better let things settle down; then I advanced and preferred my suit for Barbarin to come to the council, and so state his case; but though Berwegin expressed himself with dignity, and was free from all prejudice, he replied that a suit could not be preferred twice running before the council; a month at least must elapse. A month—by that time, I should either be free or starved to death, that was evident. This would never suit me.

"I submit to your ruling, Mr. President," said I, "subject to your adding these words—provided there be no circumstances of state urgency."

"Of course," said he, "that is understood. If you wish, I will take the opinion of the council upon the point, whether these circumstances exist or not?"

"Half a moment," said I. "Before you do so, may I state the facts of the case?"

"Certainly," he said, with an amused smile, leaning back in his presidential chair—evidently thinking that I was going to make an appeal to them upon the merits of the case. But he was mistaken, for in a very few words I said, that, much as I regretted the fact, when I got excited I was liable to burst out like I did yesterday, and though out of deference to their feelings, I would try and control my voice, I feared that if they refused me this my request, my feelings would carry me away with them. I placed great importance upon this point, much more than upon the merits of Barbarin's case, which of course was that of any one else; "for while it would be my life-long regret, that is," I added with a smile, "for about a month to come, to hurt your senses and injure your health, I feel sure that when I find that this is not a matter of state-importance you will find that my voice will grow loud and rasping. Disappointment in any whim or caprice, and of course I can have no further intention, has always been from my youth up the factor of all others that has made me cry out; as it were, I am forced

by some power mightier than I, and willy-nilly I must do it. So I pray you, not for my sake, not for Barbarin's sake, but for the sake of the state, which is much more important, for the sake of the state business, which had to be adjourned yesterday, and which may in the event of your denying my request, have to be adjourned to-day, to find that this matter—this bringing up of Barbarin to prosecute his suit, may without any stretch of procedure be considered state business of the most urgent nature. And it is in the hope that you will so find, that I now retire whilst you deliberate."

As I left I raised my voice slightly—so slightly that I could hardly detect that I had done so, and feared that I had not shown myself plainly enough; but I was soon set straight, for, being summoned again within, I found that those of the council who were near the door, where I had stood, were looking pale and anxious, and Berwegin in a few words told me that my request was considered of state urgency, and had been granted.

I rather flattered myself on having retired. I have no doubt that though they would not have so discussed the matter in my presence, they settled it upon personal grounds, and thrust the state forward as a scapegoat to bear the burden of excuse.

A paper was accordingly handed me, sealed with the signet, which for that purpose was untied from Berwegin's brow, amidst some ceremony, and I set off for Barbarin. One matter and another, however, delayed me, and I did not get to the mines until the day was half spent, and when there had much difficulty in finding Barbarin. It appeared that he had been suddenly called off his work and sent to a distant part of the mine, and though the manager for the day had of course to obey the signet, his memory was inconveniently short, and he could not possibly remember where he had sent him. Using my sounding-board to communicate with the man, I told him that I feared I should have at once to return to the council and tell them how careless he, the manager, was of the lives of his fellow-subjects, for if he forgot where he had sent Barbarin, the poor man might starve and perish

before the manager could send to him the lift whereby he could descend again. The fellow was shamming, I knew, for my curt threat awoke his slumbering memory, and he directed me how to reach the spot.

I was accompanied as ever by the guards, who had been appointed for me by way of escort, and knew that I had little to fear from this fellow, so I left him with a glance to let him know that I was not going to be trifled with, and at last found Barbarin. When I had got him down to the lower end, and we were hurrying through the tunnel back to the valley, I told him what had occurred, and he at once conjectured that Himetoa had had something to do with the matter. We had very little time to lose, for a suit for divorce must be prosecuted within forty-eight hours of discovery of the reasons therefor, and the evening was drawing on, probably we should find the council on the point of adjourning for the day, when it would be too late unless the council could be called at an unusually early hour on the morrow.

When we emerged from the tunnel, we saw that something unusual had happened, for soldiers and others were lying about prostrate, and apparently in great suffering. The scene reminded me of a great explosion which I once witnessed at Antwerp, where a vast quantity of gunpowder taking fire levelled the population far and near. At last a man could be found to tell the cause. Some malicious person or persons had exploded a quantity of gunpowder or some other material near the Council Chamber, and though no injury to property had resulted, all the council were prostrate, and various other people, who had been near, had been similarly affected.

Naturally my suspicions turned to Maurana. Fortunately I was away, only one of us could have done this thing. But it was a desperate expedient; evidently Himetoa and Blackie were joining forces, and this was a scheme to prevent Barbarin's suit from being heard. She had failed with the manager of the mine, but now she had succeeded. Barbarin was in despair. He could think of no plan to meet the case, and

looked the counter-part of a tragedy-mask; his handsome face was seamed with lines, and the strong man was conquered by a woman's wit.

Fortunately I could refer to the classification of the laws I had made, and found one on state procedure which enacted, that if the council for any cause were not sitting, the president should be at liberty to carry out the duties of the council subject to a veto at the council's next meeting. I had taken note of this for quite a different purpose. I had thought of it in connection with Annette's presidency, and had planned in my own head how the meeting was to be adjourned, and Annette should have a free hand to legislate at will.

In a few words I communicated my intentions to Barbarin, and learnt that the president was back at the registry, and learnt that the president was back at the registry, having been carried there at his own desire. I could have wished to have found him at home, for I knew that as Himetoa was also there we might have trouble; she would be sure to be watching over him. But we could not stand upon our dignity; we must plead, nay further, I must use force if necessary.

We arrived at the registry and passed in. Himetoa was within, and looked up at us, as we came in, with the ghost of a smile. Her lip curled with triumph. She was certainly very beautiful, but what a cunning, wicked, scheming brain was covered by her lovely head of hair. We inquired, or rather I did, for Berwegin, and was told that he could not be seen. But I said—"I must see him. Please tell him it is Tommé Bateman who has come upon matters of urgency."

Still the answer came back—

"The matters must wait—the president could not and would not see me."

I saw that matters were at a crisis, and that I could only get what I wanted by using my prerogatives.

So I said—"Tell the president that the matters are so urgent that rather than not see him I shall roar with disappointment; he knows my infirmity."

Barbarin, pale with apprehension, stepped forward, and

tried to dissuade me; but my mind was made up. I felt annoyed at Himetoa's triumphant look: there was something in my British blood which boiled at the idea of a woman triumphing over me, and though I have no doubt it was a most unmanly prejudice, still I am writing of facts, and I cannot deny it.

The clerks began to fill their ears with cotton-wool, or some such material which they carried in their pockets, but I was not to be so stopped, and as the messenger, a young man—I am glad it was not a woman, I could not have touched her—was turning back, I caught him by the shoulders, and, gripping his arm as tight as I could, hissed into his ear—

“I will blow the roof off your head with a yell in your very ear if you do not take me to the president at once.”

He trembled, and cast a look about him as though he would flee, but my hand never relaxed, and I could feel the nerves and fibres of his shoulder spasmodically contracting with the pain of my pressure.

Then he said: “Come,” and I of course came.

I cast but one glance behind me to see Barbarin imploring me to come back, and Himetoa looking as near sulky as a beautiful woman can; but what had I to fear? I had the whip hand for a month at least, and was resolved to take out my death, if it came to that, in kind, so to speak. I would have my way while alive, and they should fear me, these child-like legislators, who thought they had reached the millennium, and instead had stumbled upon nurserydom.

Within a few seconds we were in the presence of Berwegin, who was being nursed by Valedina, for she, having no vocation for a few weeks, had volunteered her help. The poor fellow had wet rags upon his forehead, his face was pale, and dark lines under his eyes gave them a more than usually sunken appearance. At times his limbs twitched as though he had been hurt by a railway accident.

Valedina turned to me reproachfully—

“Do not disturb him; he is ill. Why did you bring him in?” she added, to my trembling guide.

He explained how he could not help himself. Then, before she could say anything further, I explained that there had been a plot against the state, to subvert the legal procedure; that I had no doubt that Barbarin's divorce suit had been intended to be postponed, so as to throw it completely over, and that as the president doubtless would agree with me, were such things to be allowed, all legislation would be stopped.

He faintly whispered—

“You, oh, Tommé Bateman, instituted the idea, and you are really responsible for the collapse of the council to-day.”

So I answered that I had been actuated by a good, the conspirators of to-day by a bad, motive—my action would tend to the public good, theirs to the public woe.

“Well, well,” he said, with some irritation; “I see you have set your mind upon it—let me see Barbarin. By the way, has he anything to do with your entry here?”

I explained how he had tried, even in the midst of personal anguish, through Himetoa's trickery, to dissuade me from carrying out my plans, and in a few minutes I brought him in.

The president told him to speak low, and they two whispered together so that even my strained ears could not distinguish what they said. But, by reading Valedina's face, I knew when they had done asking and answering questions that the president had decreed the divorce. He beckoned me to him as he put his seal to the judgment, and said—

“You are a man of terrific will; why do you follow up this matter? You are fighting for people who will not thank you, and against people who will thwart you at every step.”

“In my country,” I said, “injustice makes the—you know what I mean—in one's veins boil, so that Englishmen will often do the most risky and hazardous things to save a man or woman, or a nation, without thought of reward. They feel they are doing their duty.”

“Oh, of course, if the state enjoins it.”

But I did not think it an appropriate moment to point out what folks call moral duties, as distinguished from legal, and accordingly, with a wish for his welfare and a promise to try and bring the perpetrators of the day's outbreak to book, I left him. When I got outside again, Barbarin and Valedina were spooning to any extent, in a quiet corner, it was true, but under Himettoa's eyes, and though I had little enough sympathy for the woman, I thought that this at any rate was gratuitous cruelty, and so hinted to the happy lovers.

They were astonished at the feelings I displayed. So inconsistent a people are they, so sensitive to external sounds, so callous to internal pains and griefs.

Himettoa looked her defiance at me as I passed, but I cared not; at any rate I had attempted to do my duty, and although no doubt I was a meddler in other people's business, and ought at my age to know better, I felt that I had inspired in both the lovers' hearts a feeling that was akin to gratitude, and that they would help me if they could. Going back to the Council Chamber, I found certain damning evidence against the two persons I wanted to get at; two cartridges which I recognised as of the same calibre and make as those of the expedition, and the little piece of iron which Himettoa wore at her throat as a brooch. I learnt, moreover, that though she had been ordered to deliver up her precious head-gear, the throat ornament had been left to her for one month more, so as to console her for her disgrace and in memory of her past astuteness, but how had she been so foolish as to leave it here?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HIMETOA ON HER KNEES.

FROM Valedina I learnt the next day that Himettoa had not left the registry all day, so she could prove an alibi, but it was so evident to my own mind that she had procured Blackie to do this deed, that I set about at once to connect her with it. I soon hit on the version of the plot which I thought must be the right one. Blackie she had bought over in her despair, but he wishing for some evidence that he had been instigated, so as to throw the blame upon her, had bargained that she should lend him her throat ornament, probably telling her that he could not explode the cartridges without a piece of iron. She in her blind wickedness of purpose did not appreciate his diabolical cowardice and had fallen into the trap. Diamond had cut diamond. But—and here I was met with the ghastly conclusion—If I informed against Himettoa she would be sentenced to death; the punishment was so much greater than it should be, having regard to the nature of her offence—a clever trick in which she had failed. Was not that punishment enough for her? I would I had not been so delicate now, but it seemed so terrible for me then to bring this beautiful young creature to a horrible death. No, I could not. So I determined to have a talk with Annette, whose sharp woman's brain might devise some way to make use of this knowledge and thus to neutralise Himettoa's malice. I went on to Annette's house and found her in, and long and anxiously did we debate upon the course I must take. Annette's scheme was this: I was to let Himettoa know that I had discovered the part she had taken in the matter and hold over her head the discovery, leaving the brooch with Annette to save myself from being entrapped in some way or

the other, for it was now Himetoa's life or mine, and I knew she would not stick at anything. I was to tell the lovely woman that my life was guaranteed by the fact that another knew this secret, who could afford by having a clean record to compound the felony, for at most this would only involve Annette in a first offence, the first judgment upon her having been given in her assumed not her real name. Annette's life, so she assured me, would be guaranteed by the fact that Blackie, who must be the other conspirator, was too fond of her (she blushed violently and I liked her for it) to let her life be endangered, and she at last got my consent to her scheme, though I was very loth to let her share the danger.

The next morning I went again to the Registry Office. Berwegin had gone off to his duties and Barbarin was at the Council Chamber to present his suit and get the council's confirmation, in which he had no difficulty. So I went straight up to Himetoa and asked her if I could just see her for a few seconds apart, as I thought I could give her some valuable information.

She turned pale and would I thought have fallen, but controlling herself she replied, that perhaps I would speak to her then and there, for she had no secrets.

"Oh," I said, "no secrets; of course not!" adding pleasantly, "I think I can put you in the way of finding your brooch."

She clasped her hand to her throat as though expecting to find it there. Evidently her memory required strengthening; but, if it did, it received a spur without my aid, for she blushed again to her very lips, and looking steadily at me out of her little eyes, larger now by the expression of intense horror in them, she said—

"I will come; permit me to close the register."

Though her hand trembled she completed the entry she was making, evidently desiring at once to recover her composure and to impress me with her self-control. I certainly did feel more respect for her, for I could not help thinking that after all this lovely woman was but acting in accordance with her lights, and that to that extent she must be excused

for her cold-blooded schemes. As we went out I asked myself whether I had not known women in England who would scheme and scheme again for a husband, and conscience muttered: "Yes, and in the colonies also." "But then," said I to conscience, "they schemed for ambition, for money, for station, perhaps for love. But this cold person appears to have no love; and ambition, money and station cannot possibly influence her in this land of equality and division of all goods." When we came outside into the sunny air, for you must remember this was before the rain clouds came yesterday, I led the way for some time as though we were going to look for the brooch, and when we were round the corner, so that no one might observe us, I went within the huge forest by the roadside and standing beneath a large banyan tree, told my story. Of course I did not mention Annette's name, but I told it as though I intended before the twenty-four hours were up to deliver her over to judgment. Oh, the anguish and despair which wrung that lovely face! My God, I pray I may never witness the like again! The lost spirit could not have been more pitiful to look at. No tears came, but her grief was the worse for that, she wept and sobbed her life's-blood, so it seemed. How she implored me not to tell!

I marvelled at the awful contrast between the passionless schemer for the death of others, and this very natural piece of flesh and blood, offering soul and body to save that very life which seemed so small a matter when it was the life of another which was in question.

I felt very much like the man who applies the thumbscrew to the poor broken-down victim of the inquisition, or the usurious creditor getting his last penny out of the threadbare borrower, but I realised that the issues at stake were too grave to dispense with one chance of getting information, and I soon learnt the whole of the plot. Himetoa had promised Blackie that she would win for him Annette's hand by womanly tact and by influencing successive presidents and councils, while he had undertaken to frustrate Barbarin's divorce in the way in which we have seen he almost

succeeded. He had, as I guessed, told her that he must have a piece of iron for the purpose, and catching sight of the piece of metal that pinned her chiton together at her throat, said he could make that do, and he would send it her back again. She, filled with one idea, fell into the trap, and here she was out-tricked by her own tool. After some further questions, I learnt from her own lips the schemes she had planned for Barbarin's hand. Curious as it was, she loved the man, who cared nought for her, with a love so fierce and uncommon among these easy-going maidens and matrons, that I recognised in it the "sport," which in a different way I had seen in Valedina's modest love-making. There was no sense of the cruel way in which she had played with the lives of Jeremy and Annette, as counters in her game of love and ambition. The individual life—of another person—seemed to her of no account, when weighed in the balance against her own desires; though indeed she felt very much the same dread of death and pain, when it was mentioned to her, that her fellow-country men and women evinced. For when I depicted the struggles of young Jeremy to be free, his terrible sufferings from starvation, and the sight we had seen at the Circle of Rocks, she sank down fainting upon the ground. When I had blamed myself for my inhumanity and brought her to, she was as pliable as before she had been haughty. Nothing was too hard a duty for her to do, nothing too stringent a condition for her to lend herself to, and accordingly having, as I thought, frightened her enough, I escorted her to the registry where the dinner-hour having just been announced her arrival fortunately escaped notice.

Now, thought I, if I could only get hold of Blackie; but for this I require Barbarin's help, for alone my word would only be against his word, and I must have corroborative evidence of his rascality. Here, however, a new difficulty presented itself to me, for when I arrived at Batona's house I was greeted by the guard of soldiers whom by good luck I had managed that morning to elude, through rising earlier than usual. They had found a cartridge case near the

scene of explosion, and came to ask me if I knew it. Of course I did, but what was I to say? It certainly was not mine, that I could assure them, but this was as good as telling them it was Maurana's, for he was the only man who by nature of his profession had firearms.

But Maurana when arrested protested his innocence. See, he had brought seventeen cartridges in his belt and there they all were. It would only hold that number and the weapon held another five; there they were too. I did not suggest that they should search his pockets, for I had my reasons for keeping quiet, but on extrinsic evidence the president called Maurana before him and as he could without any evil consequences to himself accuse the man, even though he should not be convicted, I did not interfere. I went to listen, being anxious that Himetoa's name should not be mentioned; but after a time the inquiry began to take a serious turn, and Maurana looked round as though he were thinking of excusing himself at Himetoa's expense. This of course I could not allow, being under promise to help her if she did her best to reform, and accordingly I wrote on a slip of my note-book: "Do not mention names. I know all. Leave it to me." He looked astonished, and still more so, when I informed the president that the cartridges belonged to me, and that doubtless I must have placed them somewhere, where a mischievous boy had got hold of them, and had tried their effect. I carried two still in my pocket and I produced them as I spoke and in order to satisfy the council of my *bona fides*, I would deposit them with the council and they should be locked up in their chest.

This explanation went down very well with the council and my friend Berwegin nodded approvingly from his post as ex-president near the door, as though he commended my confidence in thus making a clean breast of it. But for my part my face felt hot and flushed, for I had told a series of white lies and deceived this body of men and women—I had frustrated their laws and yet gained credit.

Blackie could hardly believe his senses, but handed me back the paper, and without word or comment left the

chamber. He takes good care to keep out of my sight, but I wish he did not, for I don't trust him even as far as I can see him, and should be glad to institute a continual espionage on his movements.

The same day in the evening, I saw Barbarin, who has a fortnight's furlough, especially granted to him by the council, in consequence of the hardships to which he has been exposed, and the delay of justice in reaching him, and I then opened up a good deal more of the hand I want to play. As I had expected, he was startled and timid at first, and but for the courtesy and gratitude which he displays, I have no doubt that he would have politely but firmly declined to have anything to do with my scheme. Very, very patiently did I have to work him up to the point where he would give me his aid and support, for it appears I may not accuse this man, Blackie, and though of course I could get Annette to do so, I don't care to implicate her, and I am not sure that the president for the day, whoever he or she may be, would be agreeable to undergo the odium of a false accusation, for the president who set the law in motion against Blackie has been execrated by young and old for his failure to make good his accusation. At last I got Barbarin up to the mark, but he, I could see, would require a great deal of assistance from me before he could stand up against Blackie, the very man who has of all others tried to ruin him. Now as the day for Maurana's punishment of my attempted murder has gone by, the fortnight's respite applies to him, and though in duty to Batona I am bound to give him up, and would not care in the least if he were sentenced to death for the cowardly act, remembering as I do the long list of his crimes against us, I don't think that punishment will be quick enough, unless indeed I could bring it home to him within a few days at most, and even if I could he would have impunity to carry on fine games for the rest of his term.

"No," I said to Barbarin. "You must accuse him of state robbery, and I think that will prove a clencher to the matter."

"Even then," said Barbarin, "he will have his fourteen days respite, for the robbery took place long ago."

"Not so fast," said I; "at any rate, I think I can get round that." I remembered my Sydney lawyer once frightening me with the technical jargon of 'continuing breaches,' that is, acts which though committed one day are considered fresh acts every day they are unremedied, and I thought that it would go hard with me as an old legislator, if I could not make this quibble suit my purpose and rid the earth of this cool, calculating murderous scoundrel. The next day was to be fixed for the accusation, and I could see Barbarin was in a decided funk, as schoolboys say. The next morning came, that is two mornings ago, and we had first to catch our hare. My guards were extremely useful for once in their life, for they did not attract any especial attention, and put Maurana off suspicion, so that he was arrested and brought to the Council Chamber without trouble.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A CONTEST OF WITS.

WHEN we arrived in the Council Chamber, Barbarin was there to receive us, but trembling for the consequences of his courageous action in accusing so relentless an enemy.

Annette was there too, for she had heard of the trial, and Himetoa also waited in the vestibule.

She came up to me as I came in, and taking me aside said, in so low a tone that I could barely catch her words—

“Are you going to play true or false? Remember the bargain. I have kept my part.”

“True, of course,” I said. “I am a man of honour, and as long as you keep to the compact I will.”

Immediately turning to the lady-president of the day, she said—

“Madam Presidentess, I am, it appears in some suspicion of having conspired against the state and this stranger. As he is here now, I ask you to question him upon the point, for he is a man of truth”—she sneered a little, or was it my fancy—“and great judgment, and has investigated the plot himself.”

“We have heard something of this, Himetoa,” said the president; “perhaps it was the tongue of malice, in consequence of the offence you committed against Valedina. At any rate, you shall have the opportunity of clearing yourself. But the present is not the best occasion, for we have a much more serious matter to consider.”

“The matter of a suspicion resting upon one of the notables of the state, who has been decorated with the iron headgear of honour, is of the greatest importance to the state,” urged Himetoa a little haughtily.

Perforce, the presidentess signed to Himetoa to proceed, and accordingly I was asked to step forward and explain

whether I had discovered the instigator or actors in the plot which had almost thrown the ship of state on its beam-ends a day or two since.

I saw in a moment whither the questions were leading me, and that the woman was preparing the way for any dangerous statements which Blackie might in self-defence make; but as I was not concerned with the cartridge explosion, now that matters had been effectually righted, I repeated my story about the cartridges, and deliberately added, in answer to questions put me by Himetoa: That I had no reason to believe she had a hand in it: That I had discovered nothing which showed her complicity in it, and that I had heard nothing which could make me suspect her, except from idle rumour. I know the punishment awarded to tarrydiddlers, but I felt justified in what I did.

Triumphantly she retired from the chamber and the case of Barbarin, accuser, and Maurana, accused, was called on.

One would have thought that the two had, by mistake, taken each other's places, for Barbarin looked the pale and trembling culprit, Maurana the sturdy, honest complainant.

I had thoroughly drilled Barbarin in what he should say, and he then and there accused me instead of Maurana, stumbling along in his nervousness, until at last he pulled himself together. Then the accusation read—

“Barbarin, born of Huega, No. 5367, accuses Maurana, born of Titanua, No. 4936, of mutiny against the state and breach of its capital laws, for the attempted murder of Thommé Bateman, the stranger at the house of Dauna Batona, No. 4004, on July 7th, at night.”

The accusation finished, Blackie showed his teeth at once, literally and metaphorically. For, smiling his evil smile, he submitted to the president that Barbarin, who could not possibly know anything of the circumstances, unless indeed he had disobeyed the laws of the land and had been at Batona's house on the night of the crime, could not accuse.

This base insinuation was perhaps the worst thing that Blackie could have said. He overreached himself, and

changed Barbarin from a contemptible nervous opponent, into a revengeful, injured man, for was not the fair Valedina present!

So Barbarin pleaded long and ably against the technical objection raised by Blackie, pointing out that the accused had made wicked insinuations to defeat the ends of justice, and that he should not be thus allowed to draw away the attention of the president and the council.

So the president held, over-ruling the objection, on the grounds, first, that it was taken in an indecent manner, and as by one who did not want to assist the ends of justice and try the prisoner—but why the accused should help to his own destruction I could not see—and that secondly, it was bad, because a stranger could not be an accuser, and therefore, if as in the present case none but the stranger and murderer were present, justice would be denied.

I naturally commended the president for her Daniel-like judgment, and a murmur of acquiescence arose from the council.

Then Blackie tried another technical objection.

"The laws of the country," said he, "only apply to cases of offences against the state. How then can this be an offence against the state, when the person whose life was attempted is not and was not a member?"

Such a point had never been raised before. I saw that I must look to my laurels, if I were to win in this encounter of wits. The president and council were certainly rather staggered at the suggestion, and the man appeared upon the point of winning, when I interposed by remarking that, even though not a member of the state yet, as the state's invited guest, I was entitled to their protection."

"Well," said the president, "there is much in what you state, but even in that case the offence would only be single, not double or capital."

Blackie smiled again, but I thought a little prematurely, for I added—

"Very good; do I understand that that is considered to be a first offence?"

The council concurred, and Blackie again smiled.

"Then, Madam the Presidentess," I said, "the state suffers by the example of such a dastardly offence going unpunished?"

"True," said the presidentess. "There is an old law upon the subject. But we need not refer to it. The point is clear. That would be a single offence and with the other would make this a double offence."

Blackie did not smile this time, his face looked a little anxious, then brightened up. He had evidently hit upon a scheme to neutralise all these points of mine.

"Then," said I, "Madam the Presidentess, and ladies and gentlemen of the council, I regret to put forward a third ground, which I shall have to ask you to call a distinct offence. For when the state has sentenced a man or woman to—be put an end to (they looked grateful at my periphrasis) at, say, the end of four weeks, is it not a direct mutiny against the state of a most serious character for another to attempt to prevent the operation of the judgment in any way?"

"Of course," they all said.

"How more efficiently," said I, "can judgment of such a nature be prevented, than by anticipating the capital punishment?"

"True," said the president; "it admits of no arguing. Maurana, if you are found guilty of having attempted to kill this stranger, you will be adjudged guilty of a treble offence, and be sentenced to be put an end to."

The man bowed politely, bit his lips, but held his tongue.

Then I gave my evidence as clearly as possible; told all the tricks which I had played that memorable night to prevent being assassinated. My suspicions did not seem to fill the council with any astonishment. Where all men look upon each other as worthy of suspicion and untrustworthy, it would appear natural and not extraordinary to be suspicious of one's neighbours, and to take the necessary precautions to prevent surprise.

By the merest chance or good luck, an interruption here occurred.

Some of the members of the council, friendly to Maurana, perhaps bought over or cowed in some way, asked whether it was not a law that no person should attempt to kill another even in self-defence? This was a side issue, but how devoutly—in my secret heart—I thanked the honourable member for the interruption.

The president's answer was very clear. "That is so," said she, "but the point is of little importance in this case, for even if Tommé Bateman be subject to the law, the punishment could not come into operation until after the current judgment, and then as it is an offence of one degree, and the present judgment involves capital punishment, of course the stranger could not be punished." She bowed courteously to me as she spoke, and I could have kissed her hand, not on account of her beauty, for she was somewhat fat, and I am not an admirer of obesity, but because she had opened my eyes to the noose into which I had been running. Have you ever, reader, played a game at chess, and had it all your own way, until you found that one false move, and there would be—not defeat, it is true, but, stale-mate, which, in the eyes of all lovers of the sixty-four squares, is worse than defeat? Here had I been taking this offence first in order, and of course as punishment would be deferred for a fortnight, the culprit could do what he liked for fourteen days, and even though I might prove a capital offence against him without respite, his respite then already granted would be secure.

Quickly I made up my mind, and turning to Barbarin I whispered that he must whip out the second accusation, and say that I found all hung so closely together that I could not proceed with one apart from the other.

He without understanding, did what he was bid, and this move evidently threw Maurana into confusion. The accusation ran thus—

"Barbarin, born, &c., accuses, Maurana, born, &c., of mutiny against the state, punishable with the most severe and instant punishment, for that he has since January of this year, appropriated, and is still appropriating to himself, the moneys and property of the state, and has attempted by

force and fraud to dispossess certain persons, of whom the stranger Tommé Bateman is one, of their goods, arms and ammunition, and has told any number of lies in order to cover his offence."

The words any number of lies were Barbarin's free translation of my more pedantic expression—"has suppressed the truth and suggested untruths," but they were perhaps just as suitable, and were held equally comprehensive.

When he found himself thus pinned down, Maurana, without well knowing whither the matter was leading him, wriggled and wriggled to get away from the pin, but I was remorseless, for it was a case of sink or swim now, both for Barbarin and myself.

Of course the accused urged the council, and so did his friends at court, not to allow the two accusations to be taken together, and between them they threw the president and council into great doubts. There was infinite inconvenience in thus taking two distinct offences together, that was evident. Besides, if the first was proved, why mention the second? The lady-president asked the question without any knowledge of my position in the matter, but I begged it, by saying that although, as Maurana had said, barbarous countries like that from which I came might not hear two cases together, but one first, and the other afterwards, it had always, I understood, been the boast of the Valley Council that in no case would the example of barbarians be allowed even to influence their laws and proceedings, so that every case might be dealt with in an unprejudiced way. In these barbarian countries advocates were allowed to plead, and *they* very well knew with what consequence to the administration of strict equity; and besides this, rules of law were held binding by one president upon another, and so on, but surely *they*, the great and noble pioneers of thought and civilisation, who had solved the difficulties of social and political life, may even of religious methods, which were shaking to their very centre, the nations of barbarians—I could not forbear a smile at my allusions to my own beloved countrymen and women—Surely they were not going to copy slavishly and

servilely the customs of peoples so far behind them in all these their grand thoughts, that they allowed, men and women to be unequal, rich and poor to live cheek-by-jowl, and provided so complicated a scheme of punishment for breaches of their laws that no one knew how he was going to be punished, or whether he was to be punished at all.

I wound up thus—

“It is your proud prerogative to have been amongst the first to acknowledge the entire necessity of each case resting, not upon precedents and decisions, nor upon laws and statutes, but upon its own merits; consider then, I beg of you, how vitally important it is in this case that the whole of the facts should be placed before you, and that the individual, Bl—I mean Maurana, shall, if needs be, suffer in the interests of the state. Which is to be considered, the comfort or convenience of one accused person, or the benefit of his two thousand odd fellow countrymen and women, who rule the country, and for whose benefit that individual must work, and to whose interests that individual must give way?”

Barbarin gripped my hand in his, when I had finished, and almost made me cry aloud; this man had such a giant's strength. Thank God, he was a friend, not an enemy. The grip was inspired by the awe-struck air upon Maurana's face, and the murmur of assent which arose from the council. We had again prevailed and the president signed to me to go on.

So I told the tale which I have tried to tell in the foregoing pages, producing my journal now and then to show that the matter was not in my memory—a comparatively untrustworthy receptacle—but also chronicled as the events occurred, and so beyond suspicion. Of course I omitted mentioning any points which I did not think would be pleasant for them to hear, and naturally suppressed such facts as I did not want them to know; but in the main I told them what I have written, and, as I told, the frowns on faces of president and council deepened and Maurana's fate was, I could see, as good as settled. But I allowed no expression of triumph or success to appear upon my face; I attempted to

keep my voice from rising or falling, though it is very trying to speak for hours as I did in a whisper. Let any one try it! Of course I have had some experience in the art, but still I found, as I neared the end of my story, that my voice was failing me. When I had at last finished, Barbarin was in ecstasies, and but for my keeping him off by saying that I was in a very sensitive state, I could not be touched by any one, he would have wrung my hands and arms out of joint. Maurana was pale, ashy pale, though he must have known, when I first arrived, what he might fear. He refused to be examined for the bullet-wound, he refused to give information about the state gold, he was sullen and morose. Nor would he look at any one or speak to any one. The lady president, addressing him, asked if he had anything to say, why judgment should not be passed?

CHAPTER XXXV.

HIMETOA'S MOVE.

THE President's address to the accused scoundrel was not an empty formula, as in the case of our law-courts, a torturing Will-o-the-wisp that lures a condemned man into the abyss of double despair, but rather an invitation for the accused to state his case.

But Maurana saw that the game was up and replied nothing. He plucked up spirit again, for I suppose he felt he had a trump card up his sleeve.

When the president impressively condemned him to be put an end to at once in the desert, by starvation, as a mutineer against the state, he found his tongue and claimed the usual respite of a month. When told that this had been reduced to a fortnight, he said—

"Very well then, for a fortnight."

"Not quite so fast," I said; "why, Madam President, should this criminal have such liberty?"

"Because," she said, "the punishment has been delayed more than twenty four hours; the offence of theft was committed in January, most probably at any rate before he joined you in May, and the other offences are all completely outside the twenty-four hours limit."

"Supposing," said I, "I take away your robe? I commit an offence to-day, do I not?"

"Of course," said she.

"But, if I keep it to-morrow, and the next day: Do I not commit a fresh offence each day?"

"Decidedly," said she.

"That is what Maurana has done. Your gold he stole early in the year, I have no doubt, but he has kept it, or anything which it might buy, from you every day and hour since then. He is even committing the offence as he stands

there now, for is he not keeping the state out of its property at this minute?"

A murmur of astonishment ran round the council. They had never seen the matter in this light before. Of course it was as plain as possible.

"The judgment is affirmed," said the president; "let the accused be led away at once."

But this of course did not suit Mr. Blackie's book at all at least he would vent his spite, so he said—

"So be it, Madam President. But there is another criminal to deal with, I mean the stranger here, who committed three separate and distinct offences immediately on one day, and injured the statue in such a way that it still works badly."

"Ah, true," said Barbarin, looking at me with regret.

Then I had to defend myself: right glad was I that I had not read the third placard until on my way back, and right glad, too, that they believed Mitford, who had read it, was dead. My fate hung trembling in the balance, for they held that the mechanism of the bronze statue being still in an injured condition, made the offences as of that very day, and were it not for the two excuses I had, I should have had to cut and run, as soldiers say. As it was I was held wrongly convicted, and that I was now a member of the valley, with two "lives" gone, for I had at any rate committed two offences upon the Rock. Himetoa, who was playing a very deep game, came forward at once and claimed me for a husband, for being now a member of the valley, I was subject to their laws. In the excitement of the moment, they forgot all about my signing the convention, which I had so boastfully told Annette but a few days ago I would not sign.

Here was a dilemma indeed! How could I be married to this lovely fiend in human shape? I with a wife and sweet pure daughters of my own at home? And if I refused, my neck would pay for it. Or rather, I should lose my last "life" and, unlike the game of pool to which I have compared this eccentric legal system, I should *not* be able to "star."

Then a thought struck me. She could not really wish to marry me, she who was in love with Barbarin; this was only a plan to get me out of the way. So I said, "Of course I consent, who would not, when the lovely Himetoa asks? Subject, though, to the council's approval, which I presume will be a matter of form?" anything, I thought, to gain time. "I am not fitting, in this state," added I, "to mate with the peerless beauty, Himetoa, so she, I know, will be only too glad to hear that I propose coming for the council's approval this day week."

She was too much astonished at my acceptance to say anything, and hastily concurred. "Take a fortnight or a month," she said hurriedly, "if you like."

"Ho, ho," I laughed inwardly, like the imperishable Mr. Weller, and almost got apoplectic in my face.

"Very well, if she prefers it, and the council approves, I will take a month," said I; "within that time I will study all the customs and laws of the place and prepare my humble self to be a more fitting help-meet to the lovely woman than I can now be; and I suppose I shall have to pass examination by the state physician, meanwhile?"

"Yes, of course," said the lady president; "then let it be a month, so as to get all things done in decency and in order. Remove the accused," she added to the soldiers she had summoned.

But Maurana, embittered by failure, had still one trump to play. Pulling out his revolver, though he turned pale and reeled, he presented it at the soldiers and said: "I defy any one to touch me!"

The men ran forward, but in order to save his own nerves, which could not, I verily believe, stand the report of his own weapon, he shrieked aloud and thereby disarmed them; some fell writhing to the ground, those whose ears were nearest the prisoner, while others further away became sick and livid. The Council Chamber was in confusion, and rushing forth was the arch fiend himself shrieking as he went, so as to incapacitate all within hearing.

Tugging at my pistol, hidden within my breast, I hurried after him, but he was too quick and agile for me, for turning suddenly, he fired point blank at my left breast, and though his own face got livid and his eyes almost started from his head at the report, he managed to elude me, and darted into the jungle close by. I was wounded; I could feel the sharp cutting twinge in the muscle of my arm, and the flow of arterial blood down my sleeve. The pulsation was unmistakable! Annette, who had been a silent witness of this scene, darted forward and, though she grew deadly pale at the sight which my arm presented when I stripped it, with deft fingers she pressed the proper arteries, while with bandages she bound up the wound. The bullet had gone right through the fleshy part of the biceps as I flourished my arm at him, and though on the one hand there was no bullet to probe for and extract, the hot discharge at such close quarters had scorched and burnt the skin and carried some spent powder into the gaping wound. I have lost a good deal of blood, but perhaps I am the better for it. As it is, though this occurred two days ago, my temperature is hardly above normal, and I feel quite myself but for the extreme numbness in my left arm, which of course I carry in a sling. Three of the state physicians, hearing that I was wounded, called the same evening, after attending the many cases of headache and biliousness brought on by the discharge of Blackie's revolver, and insisted upon seeing the wound. They all had green glasses to prevent their being very much shocked at the sight of the clots, which of course were only too apparent on both sides of the biceps, but one good thing arose out of their curiosity, for they recommended a lotion of leaves which drew out the dirt and powder, and soothed the pain. They left the house, however, trembling in every limb, so sensitive are these poor cook-physicians to the sight of a wound.

Himetoa has disappeared! Blackie, of course, has disappeared too, but where? Evidently they have gone off together, perhaps they are even now plotting against me, but the deluge of rain has prevented any action being taken

against the male fugitive to-day, and Himetoa will, I have no doubt, as she has but one "life" to spare, take good care that she dies, if she must, for a less trumpery offence than that of playing truant.

So are we placed, now. I with a wounded arm, with no notion what my comrades are doing, threatened by two desperate persons within the valley, and striving to escape with Annette Blake from this vile paradise, if I may be paradoxical. Our situation is critical, so as the day was dark yesterday, I did not fear surveillance, and ascended one of the western hills, to see whether there was any chance of escape in that direction. But the mountain sides are terribly steep, so steep that on their outer face they are in large degree perpendicular and form thus an impregnable wall, not only to keep strangers out, but also to keep prisoners in. I suppose that there must be some spot in this valley which is, so to speak, vulnerable, for how otherwise did the early inhabitants get in?

On this western side there is another large cañon which is, I should think, an impassible barrier, as it is broad and deep with almost perpendicular and slippery sides. I could see this much, for at the foot of the mountain upon which I climbed, the gorge took a sweep towards the valley and far below could be seen the little wavelets of the stream and the sloping side of its high banks.

Beyond the cañon, on all sides, the desert stretched out interminably, so it seemed from where I was, and far away to the south it looked very much as though the two cañons met, at least they certainly trended together. Away to the north again they turned in, at least so I discovered the same afternoon, upon climbing another mountain, in that direction, and here at last I saw signs of some of our party. Away on the plain, miles distant, a little line of specks moved, or at least I fancied they moved, away from me over the plain towards the pinnacle. Had they tried to reach the valley and failed, and were they working back towards the Rock, so as to attempt a second attack from that direction?

As my thoughts ran on, a new difficulty, not to say danger,

presented itself. Even though I managed to escape with Annette, where should we find ourselves, and how far away from our party? Would they have exhausted their patience or provisions, and left? and if so, what would become of us? for we could not count upon any food in the desert, and our flight might land us at some point miles away in the desert, away from all help, saved from one death only to meet with another. It was a terrible thought! But still more terrible was the fear of being interred here all one's life, or of losing one's last "life" perhaps for some trumpery offence or blunder.

The prospect on either side was not very cheery, and my wound twinged at every step, but on arriving home last night I talked the matter over and over with Annette, whose ideas have become wonderfully quickened since she has been parted from her friends; her head is full of plans for saving us both, and one idea of hers deserves to be thought out.

"If," said she, "all this water which flows through the valley finds its way out, where does it run out, and where does it empty itself?"

Now my thoughts of escape had been directed towards the limestone caves, through which the railway runs, and which I have no doubt lead out somewhere or other upon the cañon, for where the water of past ages has formed such huge caves, streams must have at some time or other run through them and emptied themselves, not only by percolation, but also in substantial volumes into the cañon. How these huge cracks in the earth's crust manage to keep unfilled by the sand-storms would be a wonder if there were not plenty of water to scour them clean. These big troughs have evidently been worn through the sandstone by the attrition of centuries and doubtless at some time or other they drained the land. Yet the water runs southward. How is this? For I have not heard of any large lakes in that direction until one comes to Lake Eyre, which is very far south, perhaps three hundred miles away from here.

So I intend to-morrow to ascertain where the surplus and waste waters of the valley escape, and see if we can find a safe way by water to the outer world.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE WATERS'-MEET.

ANOTHER week has come and gone, and we are on the eve of success. I hardly dare to communicate my thoughts to paper, though I am aware that the eyesight of the Valleysites is so poor that they could not read my small scribble. Our fate trembles in the balance, for to-morrow is Annette's second presidential day, the day of all others when, if our effort to escape is to be made, we may have most chance of success. Now for chronological order, which an old historian says is the main feature in a work, be it history or fiction, science or art.

The day after the heavy rains I was early astir and, succeeding in eluding curious eyes, I plunged into the jungle and through plantations, following the muddy turbid rushing streams, which were carrying off the surface water from the overflowing dams and the saturated ground. The valley dips towards the southern end, as I have said, but there is here no visible break in the mountain barrier, and I was curious to learn how all this flood-water was discharged from the valley. For, if there were no outlet, the valley would be a vast lake whose waters might in time overflow the mountains and thus escape. The valley in this part seems to have been left very much to itself, it is wild and uncultivated, few if any houses are here; consequently I was on the look-out for my enemies, but, fortunately for all three of us, we did not meet. The trees were here lofty and in parts the ground was swampy; great hanging vines curled round trunks like snakes, while ferns and mosses grew around. The river grew in volume, and as I went I could hear a sullen roar as though of waters crashing and falling over rocks. "How do the waters come down at Lodore?"

thought I. Now for a realistic answer to the question. But if I had expected a picturesque sight, I was presented with something far beyond that, for on emerging from the depths of the forest into a place where the rocks, outcropping at the surface, only afforded a scanty foothold to grasses and small shrubs, I found another river rushing down from the western side of the valley, much larger than the one by whose banks I stood.

I was approaching the waters'-meet, but it was a curious sight, for I could see beyond the rushing waters, first a foreground of rocky grass-sprinkled plateau, then a fringe of jungle and further on the everlasting range of mountains, without opening of any sort. One only object attracted my attention and gave me a clue to what I was going to see, and that was an ascending column of mist or steam near the rocky plateau, about half a mile ahead; my memory rushed back to the description of the smoking river Zambesi, at Victoria Falls, and I guessed I was to witness something of the same sort here. A few minutes' walk showed me that I was partly right and partly wrong. The waters dashed and roared as they curled over one another; here they crashed and there they clashed, hurling themselves this way and that down the rapids in the direst confusion, until they leapt into the earth and disappeared, not of course, without a tremendous noise, which almost deafened me. Here at any rate, I thought, I am free from interruption by the inhabitants of the valley, for without ear-pads none would venture. A huge lake was formed where the waters poured over from the river, as rain-water pours round a drain, and near the centre was a frightful whirlpool, where the crashing of huge bodies of whirling water and the suction of the air made the terrible noise I heard. Here then was, as it were, the drain-pipe of the valley, here the spot where if we had to escape by water we should have to plunge. Oh, it was impossible! It was not to be thought of! Who would endanger their lives so? However, I might as well find out if I could where this raging torrent and tumult of waters issued out into the world again, so I

climbed the mountain in front of me after great difficulty, and gazing about at last noticed a place where the cañon was much wider than in other parts, and looking still more carefully saw that the stream above this point, though enlarged by the recent rains, was much smaller than it was beyond. This evidently was the outfall of this huge drain, at any rate here was a way if one could pass safely through the drain-pipe, of coming out again. Now, how had this drain been made? A glance or two showed me cropping up here and there the similar reef of limestone rocks, which had been pierced by the railway on the other side of the cañon, and the explanation was clear. In times past the mountains had doubtless contained a vast lake, but by gradual percolation through the porous limestone, the water had worn for itself channels until it acted as the drain of the valley, and gradually the huge lake disappeared, leaving a valley fertile with its alluvial deposits. I looked again towards the east, but, as the day was misty, could not discover the traces of my friends I had seen the other day. "We seemed no nearer safety, but in coming down the mountain I chanced to find a duck caught by the wing in a bush and having released it, I also released it from the troubles of this life, and lighting a fire cooked and ate a good portion of it. How sweet it tasted after my enforced vegetarian diet, so unappetising and unsatisfying, as it seemed to me.

Now after I had eaten my lunch a change came over me, a very marked change, which I remarked upon to myself with wonder. My mind which had been gloomy and despondent became cheerful and hopeful, plans and thoughts which had moved sluggishly through my brains went now with merry clatter and easy swing. I was evidently stimulated. The drain-pipe no longer seemed so terrible. I thought of the cooper of Niagara, who offered to go down the falls in a barrel. Why not ourselves? He would have done it for a bet, we would do it for our lives. The very fact that I became so cheery and energetic suggested to me what the effect of eating meat would have upon these vegetarians. Then I remembered our soldier-captive, to whom I had given

a piece of meat, and the voracious way in which he took it, and the stimulative effect it had upon his nerves and blood-vessels.

This was evidently the secret of my own stimulation, and as I retraced my steps I was making plans for future action as fast as my feet touched the ground. I would induce a number of the Valleyites to eat meat; they should do it at first without knowing it, and when once they had tasted it they would be like man-eating tigers and want more. I arrived at Annette's so jauntily and so full of my plans that she smiled and asked me whether I had had a telegram from home?

"Yes, my dear, I have a telegram such as you shall share very soon," and I told her my prospects.

She shuddered at the idea of the tunnel of waters, being naturally a little timid, though I did my best to make light of it.

"Why not try the caves on the railway?" she asked.

"Because since I spoke to you yesterday, my dear, I have found out that both ends of the railway are closed at sundown and cannot possibly be opened, except by a system of keys and clues which we could never find out," I replied.

"But," said she, "we could go in the daytime and, if need be, get lost there. When the gates were shut we should be able to make the best of our way without fear of consequences."

"And supposing we never found our way out?" said I. "I have heard of people being lost in the Fish River caves, and dying."

She shuddered again.

"I had thought of the scheme myself," I said, "and really think that the shortest and quickest way is to go through the tunnel, and let our friends outside know what we intend to do, so as to be able to rescue us. We must communicate with them. I am suspected; will you manifest an interest in the mechanisms of the pinnacle and take the opportunity to get there late in the afternoon, when the light is fading?"

She agreed to do this and to drop a missive down the cliff urging our friends to hasten down towards the cañon, march

southwards along its eastern bank and look out for two barrels, in which they would find two persons, alive or ———. We were getting as careful of speaking the alternative as these gentle Valleyites.

On the next day these arrangements were carried out, and I am happy to say that Annette was completely successful, for the ensuing evening I saw the caravan marching south-west to strike the cañons at their junction. That was four days ago, and in the meantime I have not been idle. Of course one cannot make barrels unseen, so I have had a couple of very strong, narrow large casks made for the purpose of bringing, I say, a supply of mineral water which I have discovered, and they are now standing in my verandah, protected from prying hands by the electric thief-guards, which my hostess kindly set up for me when I was attacked. Batona herself has left her house, that is during the day-time, having been ordered to take up her duties at the state laundry for the next few months, after which I believe she will have a course of tailoring at the public institution, where the raw material, flax and cotton of various forms, is made into garments of all sorts, which indeed are not many. One of her children, a boy of but fifteen years, has entered the army since she left; not with her knowledge or consent, or even that of Dauna her husband, who is at home now, having been drafted to the public carpentry works, on account of ill-health in the mine. Husband and wife are not particularly effusive towards one another, even after their long separation; though both are young in appearance, they seem to have lost much interest in life. Out of regard for the universal kindness and courtesy shown me by Batona, I have not tried any of my flesh experiments upon Dauna, who I fear would prove only too easy a victim, for he is what we at home would call an effeminate man, and easily led. Effeminacy in the valley conveys no sense of obloquy, where women are equal in status and in intelligence, nay almost equal in physical strength, to men.

But though I have for Batona's sake been thus tender of

her husband's weaknesses, I have not spared others. I made an expedition to the lunatic asylum, tenanted only by the four youths I had heard of from Valedina, whom I found to be four well-made young men, grown sturdy and strong, though naturally embittered at the restrictions placed on their movements. To be confined in an asylum for life, for having once incautiously "lifted the little finger," sounds so ridiculous that I very much fear if I do not chronicle the fact, here and at once, I shall in time come to believe this to be a myth. Fortunately these youths expressed a wish to be helped to escape and their guard being weak, I promised if they obeyed my orders to aid them. But I told each one apart from the others, so that there might only be word against word, if it came to the ears of third parties, for I had made up my mind to play a desperate game, and though I am at ordinary times veracious to a degree, I would not hesitate at a few fibs, if the truth would have damaged me. I also strove to foster the spirit of discontent with existing conditions, which one or two of the more energetic show; Barbarin, for instance, feels discontented at having to work for others who are lazy or incompetent, while he gets no especial benefit for himself, and by great care and patience I won him to unbosom himself to me and found in him all the germs of ambition. Valedina, for all her modesty, is a worthy consort for the man, and I have had the pleasure of being present at the confirmation of their marriage-pledge by the council.

I have found one or two other kindred spirits, men and women who are tired of the ceaseless round of duties, the uninteresting circle of state aggrandisement and individual abasement, and, by feeding their ambition, I am hoping tomorrow to create a revolution in the state, under cover of which Annette and I may escape. The conspirators have a programme and talk very big, and I have at last persuaded them that they must signalise their revolt by first partaking in the early morning—every man and woman of them—of the flesh of animals. I have managed to secure a large number of ducks and one or two swans, and in the recesses

of the forest, near the waters'-meet, I have been engaged, this very day, in cooking the birds, so that all may be in readiness for to-morrow. Under cover of darkness—for the night is again very dark, and the rain is blotting out everything—I have brought the ducks to the house and concealed them under a small table in my room. This rain is most auspicious for the rivers soon fall here, and after the heavy rains of last week the weather seemed to set in permanently fine; but now there will be no difficulty to float the barrels gently down the stream this very night, and land them in the forest. Considering that I have, within the last eight days, received a severe wound in my left arm, I rather pride myself upon my exertions; but this part of my plans has to be kept secret from every one but Annette and myself, so I am forced to grin and bear a good deal of pain and inconvenience, rather than give in when we are on the point of winning. The manufacture of the two barrels, which are to carry us to destruction or life, has been the subject of great thought and attention by myself. I have superintended the coopers, and have had the casks weighted at the bottom by large masses of gold, which, you will remember, are here only valued as masses of iron are at home. Thus I think these tubs will, at any rate, keep right side up. They stand some six feet high, and are made of double strength, one barrel, as it were, inside another, all hooped with copper and bound at the bottom end with similar bands to strengthen them. The tops are, of course, removable, and by a little sophistry I got the head carpenter to screw a strong fillet of wood around the inside, about two inches down, against which the lid may rest and prove almost watertight, while, with the aid of a small piece of cloth, it can be made entirely so. Thumb latches are also made apparently to close on the outside, but by reversing the cover I have made them to act from the inside, and have carefully instructed Annette again and again in their use. A great cross of copper fastened to the lid, I have thought necessary to strengthen it, though I pretend to the carpenter that it is to serve the purpose of a handle for hoisting; still, I hope

that neither of the barrels will ever want to be hoisted, but that by this time to-morrow they may both be—ah, there is the rub! Supposing they stick in the tunnel of waters, what an awful death we shall die! Caught like rats in traps, we should never be able to escape. I feel very much to-night like a man going to his execution on the morrow. That man who can face death in cold blood must have a most enviable constitution, which I certainly do not share. Annette, I am pleased to say, has been making the arrangements to victual our craft, for it is possible we may miss our friends even though we do escape from the valley. She is, I believe, now fast asleep, for, in order to keep up her spirits, I have made such fun of this barrel trip that she is persuaded there never will be such an easy and delightful adventure in the world. My sense of responsibility with regard to the poor child is something dreadful, and I would to Heaven she were not here, as I feel unmanned when I think of her being perhaps asphyxiated. As for myself, I take my own chances and must be, as the poet says, "with a heart for any fate," and though I am not free from some nervousness and often look at the miniatures of my dear wife and girls, and particularly baby Rover's, which hang in my locket, I do not feel any great timidity for myself. Instinct, perhaps encouraged in this valley of incongruities, tells me that I shall live to emerge once again into daylight; and I am pleased to have this infatuation, if it is such, for it naturally helps to buoy up my spirits. I have made Annette eat a good meat meal to-night, and she has felt the same stimulus from it that I did the other day in my solitary consumption of roast duck, so I am in the best of hopes that all will turn out for the best. I should add that one of the barrels, the one into which I intend to go, has a couple of spy holes, through which I can protrude the barrel of my revolver, while both, of course, are provided with bungs to push in and out from the inside. Annette has one similar small breathing-hole near the top, whereby she can prevent herself being suffocated as soon as she finds herself through the tunnel and bobbing about in the cañon waters below. I have also fitted

straps in both barrels by which one can fasten oneself up and prevent many of the bruises which are not unlikely to occur if we get much thrown about. Each of us also has a closely fitting thick felt hat, or mask, to protect the whole of the head from bumps, leaving only the eyes, nose and mouth free.

One matter which still gives me uneasiness is the continued absence of both Himetoa and Blackie. I cannot think that they have fled from the valley. That would hardly suit their purpose, and I fear that they may be themselves devising a plot against us. Plots and counterplots! And they call this a happy valley! But I cannot write more to-night, for between now, that is midnight, and to-morrow at daybreak, I have to accomplish, single-handed, a great many feats, and my hand electric lamp is giving out.

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CHAPTER XXXVII.

A MEAL OF MEAT.

SAVED!

This word is entitled to especial prominence, from the fact that it represents the essence of the thoughts which run through my brain, while Jack is writing my Journal for me, and I am lying on the ground with head and feet wrapped in blankets, and feeling confused but happy.

Shortly after midnight, when all the city had been buried in darkness for some hours, I set out to roll my casks down to the river-side, and, having fastened in their heads and tied them together with rope, I safely convoyed them down the rushing stream. It was not easy to find my way at night through the dense masses of foliage, which grew in tropical waste and profusion by the banks of the stream, and I could not help thanking my stars that I need not fear, as I should in any of the settled colonies, the presence of snakes in my path. To prevent mistakes, I had taken the precaution, on a former occasion, of blazing a tree here and there and fortunately I was able to distinguish the whitened marks where my knife had chipped off the bark, otherwise I should have sunk in many a bog-hole on the banks of the river, and perhaps never have struggled through my task. However, everything has an end (except the importunity of printers' devils), and so by two A.M. I had anchored the two barrels at a convenient spot near the waters'-meet. I returned, of course, much quicker than I had come down, and, had it not been for my aching left arm, I never felt better in my life nor fresher than when I thus crept back to prepare for the revolt of individualism against socialism, and carnivorousness against vegetarianism, in this so-called Happy Valley. The watery moon was behind me as I walked, and, knowing that any belated citizen, if I might meet such, would be sure to ask

awkward questions, I took great care to walk silently, and watch where I went; very fortunate was I that I did so, for as nearly as possible I fell into my enemy's hands. A glint of the feeble moonlight on the unmistakable electro of Blackie's revolver, polished and burnished till it shone again, for he was a bachelor in such habits, made me stop as dead in my tracks as though I were, in fact, a frozen corpse; and though I could see that he and a party of some twenty or thirty more were only a few yards from me in the jungle, and heard him ask "Who's there?" my motionless, statue-like posture, and the dimness of the night, together prevented him, or any of his companions from seeing me. I heard one of them say, with a smile—

"Maurana, you are timid; of what have we to be afraid? We are on a noble errand!"

But the man replied—

"It is not timidity, oh, Mosenin, that I feel, it is caution to save you all from being overwhelmed. The new arrival is a fiend who watches all one does and finds out even things that one does not. Therefore, it is necessary for us to be circumspect."

Little did he think that he was even then being watched. Little did I think when I came out that I should occupy this position of being unable to move without calling attention, and that by these means I might gain valuable information.

But so it proved, for by their talk and their arrangements, it appeared that Maurana and Himetoa—I knew that woman was at the root of the matter—had persuaded certain malcontents to band together and force Maurana, under his name of Blackie, upon the president's chair. He would then inaugurate a new constitution, with them as his council in perpetuity, and with Himetoa as joint president. The man did not evidently see that he was only this ambitious woman's tool, and that as soon as she had used him as her ladder to the dictatorship, she would spurn him off.

Well, this was a comedy indeed. Here were Barbarin and Valedina, the two good genii of the place, planning a

revolt at the same moment that Blackie and Himetoa, driven thereto by desperation, also schemed to overthrow the existing state of things. "All the better. The lion and the unicorn fighting for the crown," said I to myself.

After waiting thus a long time, at last I saw the gang move off in a different direction, to join Himetoa, as the dawn was only one hour off, and they would require to possess the Council Chamber first.

Hurrying on then to Batona's house, I hastily pulled all the cold ducks from their hiding-place and set off at once to Annette's, the appointed rendezvous, where the breakfast was to be held.

There I found them all in a state of great alarm and diffidence, for they had thought, through my long absence, that something had gone wrong, and that they were perhaps betrayed. Their revulsion of feeling, however, when they found not only that their apprehensions were ill-founded, but that I had the most valuable news to impart, was the very thing to aid my schemes. For they one and all partook of the meat set before them, and within a very short time were remarkably pot-valiant. But I wished some of this stimulus to wear off, so I stayed their appetites, while I set out to bring in the four youths from the asylum. I easily managed their escape, a rope thrown across, and caught hold of, soon pulled them over their prison wall; no one was watching, and I soon had the satisfaction of bringing in four as fine, well-made, sane young fellows as one would wish to see, and straightway I fed them with the forbidden meat, but more sparingly than Barbarin and his friends had partaken. It was now nearly daylight, and having first provided all with ear-guards and arranged a short system of signs, in case of need, I led them out in the early morning to the Council Chamber. I remember that it was a most delicious morning. The rain-clouds had gone, and left the earth moist and sparkling. Blue mists filled the valley, out of which here and there tall palms and other trees thrust forth their heads, as though out of an ocean of cloudland, and cloudlets were wreathing and twisting about the mountain

sides; away in the east the glowing blush of a new day showed clearly behind the dark sharp outlines of the mountains on that side of the valley, while the soft cool blue of the western heavens caught and reflected the glow, and the whole picture reminded me of Adam's song in paradise. An earthly paradise this certainly ought to be, but how had the inhabitants disfigured it, and what fierce passions and unholy desires were even now about to be displayed there! The roads, I remember, were beautifully crisp, with that pebbly "feel" which hard rains produce upon sandy paths; the verdure of tropical plants, the blossom of tropical flowers, and the brightness of tropical fruits, alternately distracted and attracted one's eyes at every turn; and yet it seemed so hard that one must leave all this beauty to a pack of highly civilised children, who would fight and squabble among themselves until perhaps there were none left. Then, to think of the enormous wealth of which these Valleyites held the key: the gold and copper mines; the silver mines, besides the other minerals and chemicals which had been discovered. My reverie was short-lived, however, for we had now arrived at the Council House. No one was yet about, though in a very short time the guard would doubtless arrive, and the council would soon begin to take their places. It was our intention to act within the letter, if not the spirit of the Constitution, and the president of the day before, who had shown a great liking for Annette, had been induced to come with us and invest the young girl with the insignia of office before the council could arrive. This was done with all due solemnity, perhaps for the last time, for curiously enough Annette forgot to unbind the seal from her forehead, and it is now lying beside me. One thing we had certainly accomplished, we had forestalled the rebels, or perhaps I should say the *other* rebels, and I was at a loss to understand how it was that they had given us such an advantage. Of course they were in the plight of having no secrets from us, while our plans were not so far as we knew known to them; but it would have been prudent, to say the least of it, whether Blackie feared opposition or not, for him to have

gained the bloodless victory which we had now achieved. Within a few minutes the guard began to arrive and stationed themselves in the porch, while Annette took her seat as president with me at her right hand. The conspirators constituted themselves as her council, and had but just confirmed her appointment as temporary or provisional dictator, a term which the ex-president did not understand, coupling it as he did with his schoolboy days, when a turmoil without caused us to look alive. Every man and woman of the council had an ear-pad, for our conspirators numbered women as well as men, and all looked eager for the fray. Thus had their taste of meat stimulated their nerves and awakened their long dormant pluck and enterprise. The turmoil came nearer, the guards were being beaten back, that was clear, and suddenly the curtain from the far end was torn aside and Blackie and Himetoa, at the head of a victorious band, appeared at the entrance. I shall never forget to my dying day the look of intense surprise upon the faces of both of these ringleaders when they saw the council and the president seated in silence, as it were awaiting them. They stood spell-bound, as though the touch of their feet on the threshold had paralysed their limbs, and for a second or two presented a tableau vivant of a most effective character. Chagrin and rage were depicted on their faces. But the picture was momentary, and Himetoa was the first to recover her senses; stepping forward, she haughtily said—

"What means this buffoonery? Come, we have had enough of this foreign play-acting."

The president, inspired by me, said—

"Himetoa, you have transgressed the first rule of the new constitution, which requires respect to be paid to those in authority."

"We recognise no new constitution," she answered. "You are rebels."

"Rebels yourselves," I interposed. "I have heard all your plans from Maurana or Blackie, or whatever he calls himself, in the wood near the river."

Blackie turned pale with rage and hissed—

"It was so; I knew the man-devil would hear. I told you that he was spying upon us and you laughed at me. Oh, that I could have found him then!"

"It would have been of little use," said I; "for I could have defended myself." I let him see the revolver hanging in my belt, and played with the swivel by which it hung. "This, however, is idle talk," I added; "Annette Blake has been constituted president of this valley for the time being and no power on earth can displace her. Birona can answer to that," and I turned towards the ex-president as I spoke.

"It is true," said Birona; "I did not know," he added confusedly, "that it was coming to this. But she is duly installed president, by virtue of her name and rotation, and as president we must all do her homage."

Himetoa's eyes blazed with wrath. See now, how this woman had intended to break the bargain she had herself made. She whispered to Blackie, and he, poising his revolver, aimed it at Annette, while the lady spoke—

"See," said she; "I do not speak to these strangers, but to you who have lived in the valley. Maurana will fire his weapon unless you all retire from the chamber at once. His name is Blackie, and as such comes between Birona and Blake. He claims to sit in the presidential chair. You know the cost if you do not grant our demands."

I had covered the man with my sight, and replied—

"We know the *cost* to you, Himetoa and Maurana. You are rebels against the laws and the constitution; you are arch-fiends and plotters; hoping by despotism to gain your ambitious ends. But the cost will be your lives, if you do not leave the chamber at once."

I knew she would not do this, and, as I spoke, I placed myself in front of Annette, whose face looked pale and anxious. Now, I knew if the man fired, her life would, at any rate, be safe; and I somehow did not fear Maurana's aim, his hand was unsteady and agitated.

"Stand aside," said Himetoa; "I demand it, and let me speak to the president."

At a sign from me, our body of conspirators assumed their ear-pads; for I saw the crisis was fast approaching.

"Look here," I said, in my natural voice; "my good woman, if you do not want bloodshed, you had better leave."

The sensitive ears of herself and her companions were offended at the loudness of my tone, and I saw that perhaps after all no lives need be taken. But she quickly, seeing that a few shouts from me would render her companions *hors de combat*, and put her and Blackie into our hands, turned round and gave the order to her band to stuff up their ears, and nudged her fellow. Clapping her own hands to her ears, she stood still for a second, as the man quickly turned to avoid suspicion, and coming round on the right wheel fired point-blank at me.

Fortunately for me, the device he adopted was so clumsily executed that I suspected it, and covered him carefully, and as I saw the spurt of fire from his barrel I myself pulled the trigger and he dropped. Then, as it were, disclosing Annette, I told her to make the sign, and she throwing down a spear, all our body simultaneously started up and rushed at the group of wonder-stricken persons at the doorway, some of whom were limping away as though *they* had been shot, while others were still holding up their hands to their ears.

"Charge!" I yelled, though of course our side could not hear; but the two or three stragglers on their side became disconcerted at once, and while I spoke were overborne by the rushing fierce throng of councillors whom they had proposed to displace.

"Now," cried I to Annette, "is our time to join in the *mêlée*."

We managed to run through the ranks as we saw citizens and soldiers running to the scene. The meat-breakfast had served its purpose; for the council—men and women—had lost for a time their fear of bloodshed; and while the sight of their own wounds only made them fiercer, it sickened the very foes who had made the spear-thrusts.

As I passed Maurana, I stooped to pick up his revolver.

It was gone. Who had taken it? But his cartridge-belt was there still, so hastily undoing it, I put it round my own neck. The man was dead—dead without a groan; he had at last suffered the penalty of his crimes, and now that he was a corpse I confess to having felt a momentary thrill of horror that I had been his executioner. But it was no time for sentiment. The mob was pouring in, all was excitement and butchery.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TUNNEL OF DEATH.

THE last scene impressed on my memory was that of Barbarin and Valedina triumphantly urging their companions in pursuit of the partisans of Himetoa. All this had happened in a marvellously short space of time, for as we came out I noticed that the sun was just peering over the eastern mountains, so that it was probably not yet seven o'clock. We hurried to a spot close by where Annette had placed a couple of baskets, and, catching them up, buried ourselves in the forest and forced our way by the blazed track along the river to the waters'-meet. Even now we were not safe, though it was not likely that our escape would be soon discovered, or even if discovered, that we should be easily traced, so we hurried on. Now I am not going to say that I did not feel nervous with the sight of pretty Annette daintily tripping on ahead with the basket on her arm, looking as though we were out for a picnic. Long before we got to the waters'-meet I could hear the waters roaring in front of us. The rain had been timely, at any rate, and if I could only launch our craft, and the tunnel was free from obstruction, it was clear that we should not be long before we should have passed through the solid mountain barrier and be floating along leisurely in the cañon down below. If we were to be drowned, one thing was also certain to my mind, the death would not be slow and lingering, for the huge weight of waters would knock not only breath but all life out of us at a blow. How glorious the sunlight looked; I can remember, as we hurried along, it cast its lovely tessellated patterns, through the quivering leaves above us, over the path at our feet, and Nature was in her best humour, smiling and contented. But the river

rushed on strong and rebellious, foaming here and there and roaring as it met its huge sister from the further side of the glen. The tumult and turmoil of water in the rapids was fearful. How thankful I was that I had not adopted my first intention, of getting into the barrels near the Council Chamber, for thus I had been prevented a long and tedious knocking about before ever we reached the whirlpool. Annette, I must say, blanched as she looked at the wild waters and the spray which they dashed up, but she glanced at me and I smiled. Words were useless; the noise was far too great. But my smile, though coming from one who felt very little hilarity, achieved its purpose; it nerved her to her task. The meal which she had tasted also stimulated her courage, and when we reached the overhanging bank she was as merry as ever. The barrels were bobbing about now here now there, and tugging at their cable in the swift current of the stream. I had noticed that here the stream from the western side of the valley forced its waters into the bank, and the current rebounding, struck straight away towards the huge hole in the centre, whose presence was now only manifested by the foaming and dashing of waters in the centre of the lake. No time was to be lost, snags of timber were coming down the stream, and though they had fortunately been whirled away into eddies which formed in various parts of the lake, at any moment a trunk might come and strike our craft or block part of the entrance of the hole and thus entangle our descent.

Kissing my hand to the Valley, gaily, but with my heart thumping away violently beneath my waistcoat, I signalled to Annette to get into the barrel, which I had brought to shore for her, and she imitating my action, tripped in as lightly as a feather. Of course I saw that I should have to push off the barrel into the stream, as her weight bore it down in the water and it stranded. So I signalled to her to catch hold of the lid and screw it in from the inside, while I would push her off. But as I stood up to my knees in the water, she leant over, and suddenly clasping her pretty arms round my neck, pressed my shaggy old face fervently;

and then and there, piously pressed her lips to my forehead. Tears glistened in her eyes, as I returned the salute; but time was pressing, and I knew delay meant that the act would never be accomplished, for I remembered my boyhood days when a jump had to be made without thought or hesitation. I saw her pull the lid over her pretty head, and heard the bolts fastened, then I knocked at the lid to see if it was firm and tried to force in the bungholes. All was in order, and with trembling hands I pushed her off. The barrel bobbed a little with the violence and commotion of the current, but kept its equilibrium very well, and I was satisfied. Just then I heard a pistol shot high above the roar of the waters. It was discharged so close to my ear that it almost singed my beard. Starting round, I saw Himetoa with Blackie's revolver aimed at me. She had ear-pads on and was impregnable to noise or reports. What could I do to save my life? I could not fire upon this beautiful woman, and yet how was I to accomplish the next step of my escape—that is, get into the barrel—a very difficult feat at the best of times—if she stood there to shoot at me? Was this woman so implacable? God knows, I had done her little harm, except under provocation, and then I had lied to save her life. This was to be the return for my perjury. So it was as usual: the foolish man sacrificing himself for the unscrupulous woman, and getting punished by her for the sacrifice. But I was not going to give in without a struggle, and though I could not shoot at this woman, this fiend, with the face of an angel, I could at least prevent her shooting at me. You must not think, you who read, that I was debating with myself all this while I stood there. I give you here my after recollections of the impressions which surged through me in the instant of time which elapsed between my turning round and my jumping at and seizing her smoking weapon. Then indeed I found out how muscularly strong she was, for I had to exert all my force to get the weapon out of her hands; and when I had done so and thrown it into the lake, I still had a raging tigress to meet, whose eyes, starting out of her head with

the ferocity of her hatred, glared with the intensity of a cat's. She made a step towards me, I should say a spring, but I eluded it by stepping back. Another was similarly eluded by a similar device upon my part, then we both slipped over the bank and fell into the water, and I clutching at the rope beside me, held myself up and clambered into the barrel, but she missed this aid and was swept away by the current. As I looked, I saw that Annette's barrel had disappeared. She had commenced the terrible journey downwards evidently. And I? A new danger assailed me and brought my scattered nervous wits to their normal coolness. A couple of huge trees interlocked were being borne along on the surface of the swollen river at a tremendous pace, and would inevitably entangle me and drive me out of the current. So, cutting the rope with my hunting-knife, I stooped down, pulled at the straps, and fixed myself in them, then pulling up the lid which hung over the side, I held it ready to adjust at any moment. I had made a species of step in my barrel whereby I could get my head above its top, and, thus mounted, I was swept rapidly along. The end of one of the trunks tipped my barrel over to one side, and had I been a moment later it would have swayed me away into some outside eddy, for the huge tree had too much momentum to be pushed here and there by the leaping, foaming, surging tide. As it was, it set me spinning and my head began to be dizzy. A hand clutched at the lid of my barrel, it was Himetoa's. She was fixed in her savage intention to kill me even if Samson-like she should die too, but with all my force I pulled down the lid and bolted it just as a dash of spray assured me that I was within the vortex of the tunnel's mouth. Faster and faster I spun, over and over I went, so that I knew that Himetoa at any rate was unable to hold the barrel down; where should I be in a second myself? Where was Annette now? Suddenly I felt my heart in my mouth, as one feels when the cage of a deep coal or gold mine suddenly falls. A great roar filled my ears, even through the double walls of the barrel, and I could hear them scraping

against rocks. Evidently the descent had commenced. Then I felt a spurt of water at my face, and found that it came from a bullet-hole in front of me, so hastily pulling out my handkerchief I forced it in and stopped the leak. All at once the barrel stopped, and so great was the velocity at which I had been carried that I was almost stunned by the fearful jar I got. Fortunately the thick felt hat protected my head and the pads and straps held my body. The barrel stood the strain miraculously. Not a crack or snap could I hear, though for that matter the roaring and rushing outside would probably have drowned any such noise. Then a sudden crash came in from the side opposite to that at which I felt the stoppage, and I was free again, careering round and round, over and over, at a fearful rate, and sometimes crashing against some obstacle, at other times having a crash at my back. It was plain to me at the time that Annette's barrel had not as I had thought sunk before mine, but that the extra spin from the trunk of the floating tree had given my craft an impetus which had carried it down first. Then I had stuck fast somewhere, and had it not been for the collision of Annette's barrel with mine, I have no doubt that I might have stuck where I was, perhaps between two rocks, until I was asphyxiated. At any rate we were both sailing along, that I could be sure of; but had her barrel stood the shock as well as mine? I was too quick in thinking that I had sprung no leak, for the next moment I felt my left arm dripping. So feeling now along the sides, of the barrel and now against the lid for the leak, I at last awoke to the real fact: my wound had reopened and was bleeding through its bandages.

Evidently the severe tussle with Himetoa upon the bank, in which I had forgotten that I had my arm in a sling, and in my despair used it freely, had caused this reopening. However, though this was a serious matter, there were more serious matters to be considered. As I made this discovery, I could feel the motions of the barrel getting feebler; it bobbed less about, and held up its head pretty steadily, the ballast of gold at the bottom performed its function for the

first time. Before this the barrel might just as well have been labelled "this side up with care," for all the benefit it derived from its ballast in the tumult of rushing waters. Were we out into the river already? "Hurrah," I thought, and pulled open the bung-hole. Certainly there was air but no light, so putting in the cork again, I carefully undid the bolts of the lid to put my head out. The barrel was almost still, gently swaying about, and as it were scraping along the sides of rocks; but there was darkness—pitch black darkness, and the hollow roar of the waters, though less distinct than they had been before, reverberated through the air with the unmistakable sound of a cavernous noise. I knelt down and pulled up a small electric lamp which I had brought away from the Valley. Out flashed the welcome light, and at last allowed my eyes to pierce the gloom. We were in a cave of the purest white limestone, the very sight of which would have made a pantomime manager's soul ache with envy. For it was hung round with stalactites of the most varied form and delicate hue. Some were distinctly coloured like corals, evidently by the percolation of water through some coloured earths, others again showed up in their virgin purity. Here hung a bridal veil of almost translucent mineral—there a canopy of rose-pink, fringed with tassels of darker hue. My glance at these things was most transient. I was looking for the other barrel; at last I saw it floating slowly through the water towards me and away from the direction whence the rushing waters surged; we were evidently in a cavern where the waters stayed, forced up by their own violent rush before they again descended along their channel. By pushing myself along the side of the cavern, I soon made my barrel touch Annette's, and pulling it round, I forced in with a knock the bung and knocked loudly on the top. It was our mutual signal to one another if we should discover the open air. And after a few raps, the bolts of the lid were undone and the girl's face appeared.

"Thank God," she said as she saw me; and then added, "Is it night?"

I explained to her where I supposed we were and she shuddered.

"Well," said I, "my dear, we have come so far well, now let us trust in the Great Architect of these subterranean wonders that we shall be as successful with the latter part of our journey."

"I'm afraid that my barrel is leaking," said she; "not so fast now, it is true, as before. But I hit something a terrible shock with the end of my cask, and I noticed very soon afterwards that water was rushing about the barrel as we turned over and over."

Here was this young girl, who had been through this terrible adventure, and had performed the evolutions of a cork in a stream, talking as composedly as though she were in an open boat on one of the Paramatta's lovely reaches. I found a little ledge where we could alight, and after first tying up my barrel and joining hers to mine to steady both, I got out on to the platform and helped her out too. I could not possibly lift the barrel out of the water, nor could I get to the crack. But, putting on the lid from the outside, and closing the bung-holes, I turned it over and examined its end, while Annette held the lamp. There was, it was true, a serious fracture of the external surface of the bottom end, a great indent with a crack in two directions, where no doubt it had struck some edge of mine.

I made up my mind what to do. I could not remedy the crack, that was clear, for it was not big enough to caulk, as one would caulk a seam in a ship's side. But I could bale out and change barrels with Annette. This I proceeded to do, while she held the lamp, and very soon all was in order to proceed. Then I looked at my watch. It was ten o'clock. We had probably been two hours in the bowels of the earth.

"Now," said I to Annette, "we will eat a lunch, so as to prepare ourselves for the rest of our journey. Come, do not be frightened; I believe we have come through the worst, otherwise, you know, there would be little enough air here if the tunnel below were narrower than that above."

So we ate our lunch in that lovely banqueting-hall, that palace of virgin snow and hues of the rainbow, where the water sparkling with the electric light was the most sombre sight. After lunch, Annette insisted on looking to my wound which was not, however, very pleasant to look at, for, though it had stopped bleeding, the bandages and my sleeve were saturated with blood.

Then we unmoored the barrels, got in them and moved off. I was glad to find that the water did not leak through the crack in my barrel, at the ordinary pressure of the water, at least not appreciably, and hoped that we should not have to pass through such an enormous weight of water again. I had carefully plugged up the bullet-hole in the barrel I had before used—and in which I now placed Annette—by cutting one of the plugs in half and trimming the spare half to fit the hole, and I flattered myself that as I hammered it on from the outside with a piece of rag round it, she would find her barrel hermetically sealed. Slowly I pushed both barrels along the sides of the beautiful cave, Annette still holding the lamp to show us where we were going, but the sound of the roaring water would alone have guided us in the proper direction, as well as the current we had to meet. At last we were near and could see that, as we had thought, the cave where we had stopped caught, as it were, the surplus water of the huge mass that gurgled and spluttered down the declivity and shot away some yards below. This was evidently a pool in the cave, and the difficulty of getting the barrels over the lip of the pool against the current was not slight.

I got Annette to give me the lamp, made her thrust all her bolts home and then steadily and firmly I navigated her and myself towards the river. The water, I saw, came into the pool at the lower end of the lip, and flowing in a current went out again at the upper end, being as it were, sucked out by the immense speed and violence of the rushing torrent. Then I gave Annette's craft a violent push over to the other side of the pool into the out-flowing current. Her barrel spun round, first moved inwards as it

crossed the inflowing current, then steadily took an outward course, and, rapidly increasing its pace, passed the lip, and was gone, snatched away as it were by the violent waters. Taking my bearings carefully, I drew the lamp within, got the lid all ready, felt the bolts, to see that they worked at this the eleventh hour, and giving a mighty push back from the side of the cavern, at once pulled on the lid and shot home the bolts—at least I shot home two out of the three. That was all I could do before I, too, felt the barrel snatched away, with my head bumping against the top; but, hanging on to the straps, I managed in the first straight shoot away to get the third bolt home. Well was it for me that I did so, for the barrel had hardly been thus sealed before it stopped against a projecting rock, pitched over, and commenced tumbling about like a cork. My only anxiety was for the crack at the foot of my barrel. Would it spread, or would the barrel again be subjected to the immense pressure which had caused it to spring the leak before? Little time was left from me to cogitate. One blow succeeded another with fearful rapidity.

My head was dizzy, my straps were pulling me, and bruising me with the violence with which I was tossed from side to side, and, with all, I could feel an increasing amount of water dashing about within, like butter-milk in a churn. My breath was becoming short; I gasped; I felt suffocated, then one merciful blow hit me harder than before and I was stunned.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

REUNION.

THE next thing I clearly remember was the sensation of being in a boat upon a sunny day. I felt a warm glow about my face, and a fresh breath upon my forehead. Then I awoke to the sensation of noise. Some one was saying something: though I neither knew nor cared what they said. At last I heard, I thought, a baby crying, and stretching up my arms to rub my eyes, and find myself as I expected at home with little Rover, being punished by the immaculate Miss Gregg for some childish peccadillo, I hit against something hard and grazed my knuckles. Then I remembered where I was, all in the flash of a moment, but I felt weak and sick and for the first few moments did not care whether I made an effort for life or not.

"Oh dear, oh dear, Mr. Bateman, are you alive? Oh dear, oh dear!" Poor Annette was crying. Thank God, she, then, was alive!

I tried to undo the bolts of my lid, but for some time was unsuccessful; in the meanwhile I spoke back to her a few words of comfort. I felt that, if I did not soon open the bolts, I should not be able to do so without assistance. But by a supreme effort of will I pulled myself together, and pulling one bolt after the other shot up the lid into the air. It fell aside, and I looked up to see first the blessed sight of God's blue sky, and then the still more blessed sight of Annette's face, cut a little and bruised here and there, but smiling through her tears.

"Don't stir," said she; "I can help you easily; I remembered how you did it, and as soon as we came out into steady waters I opened first the bung-hole, and then the lid, and finding that I was some way ahead of you, I waited to see if

you would do the same. But as you didn't I felt anxious, and managed to paddle myself with the lid towards your barrel, then I caught hold of it and tied it to mine, and as soon as I found a quiet eddy I paddled hard into it. Now here we are, with great rocks all round us high up. Can you see them?"

I certainly did, but could not lift my head without pain.

"I'm afraid, my dear," said I, "that I have broken my collar-bone, though how I managed with my thirteen stone to escape fracture of my neck, my ribs and every other bone in my body, I know not."

"Oh, dear, I am so sorry," said she. "What can we do?"

"As you have managed so well so far," I said, "I don't think I can do better than make you commander of this expedition; I will be consulting engineer. Now tell me what you see."

"I see a river which flows strong and deep between high walls of rock. In some places it tosses about, but not dangerously. In others, it broadens out considerably. I see the same up and down, except that in the direction from which the river flows, I see a mountain-top, some two or three miles behind, I should think."

"Very well," said I. "Now keep us tied together, for I fancy we shall have greater stability; besides, if I faint and you see any danger of rapids, you can put on my lid and bolt it from without and save my miserable life, you know."

She seized my hand and kissed it. I wish she had not, for my broken collar-bone resented it.

"Oh, Mr. Bateman," she said—

But I stopped her; I couldn't afford to have sentiment interfere with business, and I told her so. I knew what she was going to say. Thanks! But, stuff and nonsense! If she wanted to be commander, she must keep to business.

So we went on; for I got her to push out from the bank, and our strange craft careered away, bobbing about here and there like a couple of corks. She would every now and then tell me what she saw, but the wall of rock was the same; only here and there the top did not seem so lofty. Had it

not been so warm, I should have found the water, swishing about at my feet, very unpleasant; but as I was unable to remedy the discomfort, I became a philosopher, and found it cooling and refreshing. My watch, which I with difficulty let Annette pull out for me, told us how the hours went. Noon, one, two, three, four, five, and still on we floated. We had not yet joined the western cañon, if indeed we could join it, and, by watching the swaying compass as well as I could, I noticed we were bearing a long way westwards.

A short time before we could expect sundown I told the commander to look out for a cove into which to run our craft, and about six we ran into a sheltered nook, where the eddy of the river set in, and would have kept us moving round and round all night. But of course, with deft fingers she got out the rope which was coiled in my barrel, and anchored us to a rock, while she tried to see if she could help me out of the barrel. In this she was unsuccessful, the pain of my stiffened joint was too great, nor had I the least idea how to set the broken bone, which I could feel, when I moved, scraping one end against the other.

Climbing up a short distance, she met a wall of rock which prevented any further progress. Evidently the river-bed had worn its narrow way through a hard rock, and then coming to a softer stratum, hollowed out a wider channel, so that the upper rock overhung the lower, presenting an insurmountable barrier to further progress.

You may be sure I did not sleep very much that night (it was last night). My jumping muscles round the broken bone would have alone prevented what my anxieties for our fate rendered impossible—that is a quiet repose. For I was oppressed with the notion that after all the Valley river emptied itself out, not into the eastern, but into the western cañon, and that we were moving further away from our comrades at every step we took on the river's surface. Annette made me eat some of her provisions, those in the barrel I occupied being saturated with water; but starving people cannot afford to be choosers, and I was not sorry for whatever was at hand.

The most eerie part of our river ride, was, that there was not a single blade of grass, nor bush nor tree, to be seen. No animal, bird or fish moved above or below, and the silence, except for the murmur of the waters, was unbroken. So it was at night, and so it was the next day. That is to-day, for early this morning we put off again on the river surface, and not very long after my fears were relieved by Annette's report that the western stream joined us here, though it ran much more feebly than did ours.

And as the morning wore on, she from time to time told me that the tops of the cliffs looked as though they were getting lower and the flow of the river slower. At one place, where it divided, I made her take the left or eastern stream, and as it ran on dividing from time to time, ever we took the eastern streams. Lower and lower the river-banks approached the water, and here and there a solitary tree, stunted and forlorn, often dead and ghostly, stood out on the river banks. But now another change came over the scene; the river was flowing slowly, and so shallow that I could sometimes feel the barrels scrape along on the sandy bed, at least my barrel was the recalcitrant one, and very well advised were we to have tied the barrels together, for the same feather weight which had saved her through the terrible tunnel, now stood us both in good stead, when my barrel, weighty, with leakage and my own corporation, would sometimes stick fast.

"If we do not meet our party of friends to-night," said I to Annette, "we will thrust the barrels to land and encamp on the sand. I can crawl out, I'm sure, and shall be glad to dry my boots and feet a little."

"I can sometimes see the level of the plains, where the banks dip," said she. "They would be sure, I suppose, to be watching for us?"

"Oh, yes! The only difficulty is, have they, thinking this branch of the stream too small for us to travel upon, crossed it and kept along the main branches?"

"Do you know," said Annette, "I don't think that this is any smaller than the other branches; they all looked to me

about the same size. Is it possible, think you, for a stream to lose itself, as it were, in the desert?"

"Oh, yes! Giles, Ernest Giles, the explorer, more than once found rivers which did so."

"Well, then, I think we are on one. Hoy! hoy! bravo! bravo!"—and she clapped her hands.

"I say," said I, "that is a capital way of keeping up your spirits; but why this thushness?"

"I see a man on horseback, far away along the plain, standing by the side of the river bank. It flows here straight for a considerable distance. Ha, he is gone! Hoy! hoy!"

I joined my voice to hers; but to little advantage. I only hurt myself, and the sound reverberated within the barrel and almost deafened me.

"Ha, he appears nearer! he waves a handkerchief!" cried she.

A dull report fell on my ear.

I looked to my revolver, and asked if she thought the horseman was an enemy.

"No; he fires into the air," she said. "There, again!"

Well, one thing was certain—it could not very easily be a Valleyite, for he would not readily ride on horseback nor fire a pistol. And Blackie and Barbarin, the only horsemen, as far as I knew, were very unlikely to pursue me, for obvious reasons.

We were lazily gliding along, bumping here and there, and by the greatest difficulty Annette kept us moving in the centre of the channel, for the banks here were far apart and low.

"Hallo! hallo!" I heard this time, distinctly in a voice which I recognised as Jack's.

"Wave your own handkerchief, my dear," I said; "that is my son."

I suppose she did so, for soon afterwards I heard a splashing and snorting, and nearer and nearer came the voice.

"Are you alone?" I heard him cry, in a startled tone, naturally anxious, through not seeing me.

"Mr. Thomas Bateman is in this other barrel," she cried back; "in good health, but with a couple of wounds which, though not dangerous, do not let him stand up."

The splashing came nearer; it was a horse swimming, and the rider's head soon peered down my barrel.

"My boy, shake your father's hand," I cried, "by deputy with this young lady here! It is a fine day, is it not?"

But Jack was crying and laughing, and, notwithstanding my alarm for his safety, as his horse veered round and round, he would not go away.

"Tow us to land, Jack!" I cried, and, turning round and catching hold of the rope which Annette threw to him, he made for the eastern bank, and helped me out, and, fording the shallows of the river, we all soon reached dry land.

There we saw Cousin Jeremy riding hard to join us, and then, as it was late, Jack set out for the camp they had made a little higher up, to bring along some conveyance for me; for I was unaccountably weak and dizzy, and though I essayed to walk, I fell down and hurt myself almost at once. But the young fellow had not gone far before he was back again, and, jumping off his horse, knelt on one knee before Annette, and said—

"Mrs. Blake—for I suppose you are that lady—I thank you in the name of my mother, sisters, and, not least, myself, for taking this care of my father"—and he kissed her hand.

"Don't forget baby Rover," I said; "but for this young lady his supply of bread and butter would have been cut off."

"Hallo," said Cousin Jeremy, who rode up in hot haste, and reined up his horse; "what is this sudden appearance on the scene, of Jack Bateman welcoming his step-mother?" But his eyes glistened with tears of emotion, and as he leant over me he whispered: "God be thanked, old chap, that you are alive! We will soon pull you through this. Now, then," he added, to Jack; "you be off and bring up a couple of the baggage mules and a few of the poles we cut to drag the river with."

"Allow me," I said, as I lay on the ground, with my head resting in Annette's lap, "to introduce to you, cousin, one of the bravest, best, and wisest young ladies that ever walked this terrestrial globe."

Annette blushed crimson, and threw back the head-mask which she had worn till then by way of hat. The introduction reminded her of her very unconventional appearance.

Jeremy took her hand, and said slowly: "Mrs. Blake, allow me to welcome you back to life and freedom. Freedom, not only from your valley prison, but also from all the evil thoughts of you which we have had. Candidly, I tell you of them simply to tell you that, looking at your pure sweet young face, and hearing my cousin's words, I swallow every thought or word against you, both of my own and others, and will be to you what my son would wish—a guide and father."

"Oh——"—and she stopped.

"Tell us," said I, "where is your son, and how he is?"

"Tom? he is alive, thanks to you: but that is all I can say. He is terribly emaciated, and, try as we may, we cannot put any flesh upon his bones. His anxiety for Mrs. Blake's—may I say Annette's fate" (she flushed and bowed her head) "has preyed upon a mind already enfeebled by privation."

"I will hurry on and nurse him back to life," she said; "you have good cause to hate me, for if it had not been for me, your son would never have come up to these wilds, and you would not have lost him. We will be quits, and I will restore him to you."

"My dear," he said, with more softness than I could have thought him capable of, "you have already given me my son; he was a stranger to me before; we are friends now, such friends as the bonds of death could not part—as Mitford would say, eh, Tom?"—and he pretended to wink at me; but it was a poor wink.

I was very thankful to find that they came to such a quick understanding, and, wonderful to relate, before Jack could return, we were all at our ease, talking and chatting over

our respective adventures, as though we had been tourists, who had taken different routes through a foreign country; not people who had been in various dangers and valleys of death.

In a short time Jack returned with an improvised litter between two bony mules, and after the two men had hoisted me into it, and had induced the animals to start, we soon reached the little camp, which our party had made on the river bank a little lower down.

As at this spot the river irrigated the ground, the horses and mules were tethered out on to scanty patches of grass and other herbage, chiefly consisting of the succulent plant of which I have spoken when we were nearing the pinnacle.

Annette had run forward as we came up to the camp, and when we arrived, and I had asked to be laid down as I was near young Jeremy—there she was with his head in her lap, leaning over him with womanly solicitude and dry eyes, though her heart must have been aching within her. Few could mistake the significant signs in his face; his cheeks were colourless and almost translucent, so thin were they, while the blue veins on his forehead stood out distinctly. My heart sank within me; I had then rescued the poor boy only to find him thus three weeks later just holding on to life and nothing more. Cousin Jeremy had little to thank me for. If I had given him back his son but to let him die in his arms, what was that? Of course I strove not to let them read my thoughts, but as one power wanes so another gets quickened, and he read me as though I had been a book.

"Never mind, Uncle Tom," said he; "I am happy now—happier far than I deserve, and I have to thank you for it."

"Not a bit of it, my boy," said I cheerily; "there's no need for you to thank me for your sweetheart, not a bit. You must thank her, and we shall all dance at your wedding in a few weeks' time."

"If I dance at my wedding, I'm prepared to eat my hand," said he, with some of his old spirit. "No, no, Uncle Tom,

there's no fear of my turning cannibal; I must sing 'Dem Golden Slippers' in a day or two."

"Yes, so you shall, or anything else you like, and for as many weeks as the old station piano will stand your fist thumping down in unison, or rather I dare say very much out of unison with Annette's fairy fingers."

So we tried to cheer him up, and the brave girl was if anything braver and cheerier than any of us, though she must well have seen that he grew weaker and weaker almost every hour.

Mitford, who just then came with Wangewata as his body-guard, having heard the signal for return, and being in fact tired out with his day's watch, was over-joyed to see us. It appears that wherever they could, they have for the last few days stationed watches by the various branches of the river, so anxiously have they searched for us. It was very pleasant to notice how one and all seemed to take a personal interest in shaking hands with both of us, over and over again. Wangewata, I am sure, had I been in any but a recumbent position, would have embraced me and rubbed noses, or shown some other of those marks of affection which savages may be supposed to display; and as for Wirri-wirri, he has been dancing round like a lunatic for the last half hour. As for Mitford, I am certain he missed his vocation, and that instead of having a cure of souls, he ought to turn his talents into curing bodies, for as soon as he saw my inability to move, he whipped out his medical *vade-mecum*, refreshed his memory, got bandages and splints ready, and before I very well knew what he was doing, he had fixed the broken bone, so that it could no longer scrape and cause me such agony as it had, when I moved about my arms or head. The consequence of his surgical operation is, that my left elbow is firmly bound to my side, that the re-opened gunshot wound is bound up with cool bandages, and that I feel already relieved and easier.

Jack, who lays down his pen at times to feel my hands and squeeze them, so as to make sure, he says, that I am here in very fact, is going to read me his journal to-morrow, as

Cousin Jeremy has come to say he fears we must stay here for a day or two, as his son could not bear to be moved again just yet.

"Just yet!" poor father, he knows what that means. Mitford tells me that the exhaustion from which the poor lad is suffering will admit of no alleviation. His digestion is so ruined by having for days and weeks nothing to prey upon but itself, that he can absolutely keep down none of the rough soups and tonics which have been repeatedly administered to him by Mitford, who has nursed him, so Cousin Jeremy says, with the assiduity of a mother. If anything on earth could have brought these two opposites together, that is Mitford and Cousin Jeremy, this was the thing; and one can see that there is an undying affection for one another between them, which is very pleasant to perceive.

CHAPTER XL.

JACK'S JOURNAL.

[The following is Jack's Journal, taken *holus bolus*, without any alteration whatever. The young man is very proud of it; I am also, but I am his father, and consequently may be said to be the grandparent of the Journal, and therefore a prejudiced person. But I must say that here and there I have laughed over his quaint terms and argot.]

"My dear father was entrapped by those blackguard cowards to-day, and the old gentleman only knows what has become of him. I don't mean by the old gentleman, my father, for that would not describe him, he is young in face, young in heart, young in figure and limb." (I have asked Jack to let me off these panegyrics or satires, as the case may be, but he refuses.) "Please don't interrupt," says Jack. "You'll spoil the current of my thoughts, so to continue—

"I have wondered what other fellows would do, whose paters or governors were suddenly swallowed up in a rock, kidnapped by a number of cowardly men in armour, and I've given up guessing. I know what I did. I just sat down opposite the rock and blubbered like a baby, wiping my eyes once or twice with the back of my hand, as I've seen Rover do when he gets his dander up.

"I could have chucked Wirri-wirri into the rock for running up at such an unfortunate moment, and so withdrawing our attention for an instant, but he looked so down in the mouth that I could not find it in my heart to do so; and consequently let the poor devil sit and howl by my side. If I hadn't been so horribly afraid for the dear old dad, I should have smiled at the thought of us two young 'uns sitting down and turning on the salt-water tap. But instead, I went for the door once more, knocking at it now

with my revolver, now with my knuckles, until the one was battered and the others were torn and bleeding.

"All this while there was a terrible row going on overhead, or rather along the pathway leading to what the parson had told me was a platform of dead bodies, and I waited by, thinking that the kidnappers would open the doorway again to surprise Uncle Jeremy and his party from behind. But no such thing happened; so I caught hold of Wirri-wirri and tore him away, hiding him and myself behind the next cape of rock—low down so as not to be seen. We had not waited long before a halloo came from behind us, and turning round I saw Uncle Jeremy and his men running as fast as they could round the corner, for after hearing my revolver shot, I suppose they kept up the noise until our silence warned them that something was up.

"In a giffy I described what had happened, and he told me to keep my eyes upon the rock door, while he and another hurried back for some gunpowder to blow it open. In a few minutes he returned alone, carrying a large keg under one arm and picks and shovels under the other. We marched to the rock, and dug and picked away at it like winking; then we placed the whole of our charge in the hole we had made, and lit a slow fuse. Cut? I should just think we did, as though for our lives; for the plaguy thing commenced spluttering as though it were no longer a slow fuse, but a jolly quick one. I managed to dart round the corner of the rock just as it went off. Fine? I should think it was fine. Like the Aurora Australis and Queen's birthday fireworks all in one. So as soon as the great rain of mountains had stopped, we all ran back to find that the doorway of rock had been blown clean into the cave, and had fallen half over a narrow, well-like place about four feet square. It was lucky we barked our shins against the rock, for the place was as dark as anything after the sunlight outside, and, but for that, we might have toppled down the hole. We soon rigged up a torch, and looked about. The doorway, instead of being blown into fragments, had been split up the centre only, and it was thus wedged right across the

well-hole, leaving, however, room for a thin chap to squeeze down.

"Who goes?" said Uncle Jeremy, looking round for volunteers.

"No one but me," said I.

"Oh, my dear boy, where was your grammar?" I interject.

"Bother grammar!" says Jack, "when a man is volunteering to hoist himself down into Hades."

"So I got a rope, and we fastened the end round me and under my legs, so that I might go down sitting as it were, and tied the other end to one of the pieces of rock, and Uncle Jeremy himself lowered me down—down ever so far, until I could only just see the faint glimmer of the torch overhead like a star. Then I waited a bit, for still I had not touched bottom, and Uncle Jeremy pulled once at the rope to ask, was I all right, and I jerked myself twice to show I was. Then I went lower and lower, for Uncle Jeremy had tied another rope to the one to which I had been fastened, and I could see nothing but black, inky darkness which almost hurt my eyes. Then, at last, I saw a glimmer at the bottom some way below me, and I got rarely excited, I can tell you, and felt about for my revolver. The glimmer came nearer and nearer, and I saw that I was near the bottom. Then the rope stopped, and I could not get any further; but it was so tantalising, that I jerked again twice, and Uncle Jeremy signalled back thrice, meaning, so he had said, that he could not let me go any further. It was awfully disappointing, and, just then, one of the cowards came below me about twenty feet, with a lamp in his hand, so strong that I was half blinded. I heard him give a harsh whisper, and saw the light start back, so I thought perhaps he was going to shoot at me; and I gave the three tugs to be pulled up. I guess I was in luck's way that I thought of it; for, the moment afterwards, I felt as though some one was sitting on my chest, and my head swam, and great sparks seemed to dance before my eyes; then I felt I was suffocating, and I thought of the carbonic acid, and gave three more tugs and yelled up to Uncle Jeremy. I didn't remember

any more until I opened my eyes to close them again pretty sharp, for the sun was pouring down on me, and Uncle Jeremy was fanning me and throwing cold water over my face. He says he pulled like winking, and the men say that he caught me up as though I had been a feather, cut off the rope and tore round to the stream. The men found, when they went to cut off the rope, that they could not stand against the terrible, suffocating gas; so they pulled out as much as they could, and cut it off from the outside.

"As I don't feel quite the thing to-night, Uncle Jeremy has made me lie still, giving me pen and paper to keep the journal going; and here we are, very down in the dumps, and not knowing whether the dear dad is alive or dead. I guess I am not going to have much sleep for thinking of him.

Next day.—"I guess I couldn't keep count of the sleep I took, for though I was in a regular stew about the dad, somehow, the next minute, it was broad daylight. At any rate, it was to-morrow, so to speak, and I was all right again. Poor Jeremy Bentham looks very peaky, not at all like the man who rowed No. 3 in the 'Varsity boat on the Paramatta course only a few months ago. The parson is just like a wet-nurse to him, dangles about him, and feeds him every hour or so, but—poor chap!—he's got a most ungodly sickness, and don't seem to make any way.

"I got Uncle Jeremy to come up with me and Wangewata to the eastern platform, and we found there an announcement that Tommé Bateman had been captured, and would be shortly punished by the Valley Council with death, for violation of its laws.

"I tell you, I just jumped round, and cursed and cried till even Uncle Jeremy looked blue.

"What shall we tell them, Jack?" said he.

"Tell them that if they don't release the dad at once, we'll roast our prisoner alive," I cried out, hardly knowing what I said.

"But Uncle Jeremy didn't write quite so fiercely as that. He only threatened that if the dad wasn't given up within

twenty-four hours, the hostage would be killed and tied to the bronze figure. And we've been eating our hearts out ever since, climbing up and down to see whether our ultimatum is answered. At any rate we know, or, at least, may infer, that my father is still alive. But perhaps they are torturing him, the devils!

Two or three days later.—"The next morning, after I last wrote, we climbed up again, and found that there was a fresh writing which said: 'That as sure as we killed the soldier, we should all perish; the stream should be poisoned.'

(Doubtless they could easily effect this with the arsenic they made in the process of purifying the gold from the pyrites. Though there was very little iron in this, I had noticed a great deal of sulphur and arsenic.)

"Uncle Jeremy didn't mean, of course, to kill the man, who we still kept strongly bound with cords, and who never spoke to one of us; only lay and looked sulky, or grabbed at the meat we set before him when meal-time came round.

"'Jack,' said Uncle Jeremy to me, 'we will try what we can do in the way of attacking the valley, keeping this man as a hostage, and working upon their feelings if we fail. I wish,' he added, 'I could get a message to your father.'

"But of course that cat wouldn't jump, so answering the defiant message that we should hold them to their word and keep to ours, we left the same day. Of course we had to put Jeremy Bentham upon a litter ('Like you came in,' says Jack) and by nightfall we had reached the great ditch or cañon over the other side of which the valley lay. The next day we tracked up the stream in the hopes of getting to its source, but all that we found was that another cañon ran up to it from the westward. We were no nearer our object, for even if we could cross the main cañon we would still not be within the charmed circle. The mountains on the other side were covered in some parts with trees, but looked very rugged, and all round, so far as we could see, was a straight-on-end mass of rock which, as it were, shut in the valley like the turrets of a prison. However, we were not going to be frightened of the wall, if we could only get

across. Here and there from the hills torrents came down and as it had been raining a little, the water we could see dashed down through gullies, over rocky slopes. If only we could get to the bottom of the gully on this side, we could climb the other. But all to no avail, for though we got some short-way down, we could not even with ropes do more than hang over the river, and had to face a fall of water over slippery rock beyond.

"So after managing to get a bucketful or two of water, but spilling most of it in dragging it up the side, we stayed the night and made south along the river bank.

"Here we are still making south, and though the river seems to divide up a good deal, we have not been able to meet with any spot where we could cross it. One place we saw shortly after we passed the end of the mountain range, where a tremendous stream bubbled and boiled up in the river bed—probably some big springs there. Uncle Jeremy thought the water might be the drainage from the valley, unless it has some opening on the western side.

A week later.—"We, I and Wangewata, are back at the pinnacle without any very great success, and one failure. The soldier has disappeared; Wangewata and the other black were left to watch him when we were out once reconnoitring, and they played the fool and snoozed. When they opened their eyes their bird had flown, and though this happened in the desert, he could not be seen; probably he had taken advantage of a sand ridge and hid himself, or burrowed out some sand and made a sort of *cache* in which to hide his precious self. It is awfully vexing, for at least we might have confiscated his helmet and armour. They would have looked grand in the hall of Canbelego; but now he has gone with helmet, armour, and all.

"We wasted two days looking for him and scouring the plain. We made sure he would gain the Rock, and Wangewata and I rode back and have kept a diligent watch, hiding ourselves so that no one might know we have returned.

"To-day has been a day of surprises though, for as I was looking up at the platform to see whether anything or body

was stirring, I saw the signal rock capering about like mad. Wangewata got into a funk and hid himself, like an ostrich—that is, he buried his head in his hands. But noticing that it generally stopped pointing over the other side, I thought something might be up, so I cut round in the shadow of the rock, and, as I was creeping along, saw a piece of paper flutter to the ground. Where it came from I don't know, except of course from above, for the rock here overhangs so much that one can see nothing of the summit. But there was a message from the father saying that he was well and hoped soon to be free. I first intended to hurrah, then I held my breath, thinking that it might be better to hide our presence.

Next day.—"Uncle Jeremy is back again and says he has been able to cross two or three of the streams lower down than I went with him, and he reached the other side and standing on a little hill of sand and rock looked over the plains, only to see sand everywhere to the south and west, except a little tinge of green where a sort of ice-plant grows. Then he travelled up to the end of the valley, having to make a very wide circuit to do so, and there he found that the two cañons formed in one below as well as above. So it seems hopeless to try to get at the valley from the outside. *If* we could only throw over a bridge! Ah, *if*! But what is there here to make it with? Besides, the narrowest part of the cañon is a couple of hundred feet wide. We are rather down in the mouth, and poor Jeremy Bentham is worse than ever. He is continually telling me that he looks upon himself in the light of dad's murderer. But I have to keep up his spirits and my own too, by telling him that as long as the dad is alive and able to send messages, I'm in hopes, for he will be sure to find his way out. I can't make out why if he could send a message he couldn't send himself, unless they have put him in chains. Young Jeremy thinks it may be that he is trying to rescue Mrs. Blake as well as himself. He says that the dad's kind heart would not let him leave the girl behind, and I clapped his hand in mine as I said—
"Right you are, my boy, you're a brick."

Two days later.—"We have been hanging round the rock with nothing to do until late to-day, when we found another missive at the post-box where I regularly go. This was signed Annette Blake, and told us to go to the southern end of the river as far as we could and as fast as we can, for she meant to escape there.

"Not a word of the father! But later on I saw what appeared like a mere wavy line on the paper, and putting my burning glass above it, I read—

"Mr. Thomas Bateman, that brave good man, is planning to escape."

"Uncle Jeremy said that evidently the girl wanted to save the dad's life, should she be found with the letter upon her, and I've made up my mind to kiss Annette Blake's hand as an empress's when, if ever, I see her, and won't believe that a woman who can do such a noble thing as to take all the chance of blame upon herself, unknown, I'm sure, to my father, would commit such a cowardly crime as she was once accused of.

"So we are off to-morrow again, bag and baggage, though the journey will be very trying for poor Jeremy Bentham."

END OF JACK'S JOURNAL.

Jack's Journal contains no further entries of general interest. There are one or two manly prayers chronicled, prayers by Mitford and by himself, which show how near a hazardous journey like this brings home the Ruler of the Elements to the minds of those who at other times may be conventionally indifferent.

I am glad to say that, tough old fellow as I am, Mitford's therapeutic process is already beginning to tell upon me. Would that he could make some impression upon young Jeremy.

But of course his skill is limited by his *vade-mecum* and the general knowledge which is his forte. He cannot make grass grow on a rock, as was said, I believe, of Lord Melbourne,

though he does try hard and wrestles with the Angel of Death from day to day, increasing his efforts as he finds his patient slipping away from him.

Of course he is assisted by the boy's father, and lastly, but not least, sweet Annette Blake, whose endurance and tirelessness are wonderful, infinitely in advance of any of ours.

CHAPTER XLl.

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS.

THE end has come! Aye, and it has come quicker than we expected! Yesterday at noon the dying boy seemed to be taking a turn for the better. He lay under an open awning, around which Jack had, to please Annette, placed a few branches from the stunted shrubs which grew near the river, forming thus a cool bower.

The river was rippling not far off, so gently musical that only by strained ears could one hear it, and the intense silence of the day was only broken by the quiet chit-chat which we kept up, so as to prevent the invalid from brooding over his sad state.

Jack had, at my request, rolled one of the barrels in which we made our journey, to the camp so as to interest young Jeremy, and I noticed with joy how the sick boy's face lit up, and how he frequently interrupted the stories I told him, with eager questions and intelligent comments.

How cruel is such a flicker of the flame! How disappointing! Deathly disappointing to both the dying man and the friends alike! So it was with our invalid. In four hours he stretched himself, sighed once as though with relief, and—was gone! Poor Cousin Jeremy! He would not believe it. He grew fierce when I tried to lead him away, and shook me off roughly; then the next moment he clung to me, and begged me to say whether the boy was not sleeping. I cannot chronicle his fearful grief. I know not whether, through living with persons who are sensitive to pain for the last few weeks, I am hyper-sensitive now, but I hope that I may never live to see a father suffer such agony as Jeremy suffered. None of us could comfort him. Not one; for even Annette, strained and tired, with the awful

watching of the week supervening upon the anxiety of her stay in the valley, was prostrate herself. But the father's grief was so terrible that she, rousing herself with an heroic effort, went to him, and, kneeling down by his side as he himself knelt, kissing the dead boy and calling him to life to speak one word, only one word, she put her soft little hand through his rough, brawny, muscular arm, and, laying her head upon his shoulder, sobbed as though her heart would break. We left them alone, those two; for my part I not only felt it in good taste, but positively a relief from the intense, helpless, sympathetic pain I felt. And there, when we returned at sundown, they were together—the strong man and the weak girl; the father who had found and lost a son, and the girl who had found and lost a lover, comforting one another with undying promises not to part, but to be henceforth father and daughter.

Last night I had been taking my turn at the watch, as of course we may have to guard against an attack, and while looking to the north-east I saw, as the night was clear, flashes as of flame leaping high to heaven. *That*, thought I, meant one of two things—either a conflagration in the valley, or signalling. If a conflagration, I regret it, as possibly a result of the revolution, though, indeed, the moist foliage and humid trees would not readily catch fire; still, it matters not to us now. If, however, these be the signals from the pinnacle of rock, they may augur evil to us, for they may mean a search party of overpowering numbers.

Now a great deal will necessarily devolve upon me, I can see. Cousin Jeremy has quite broken down, and I, though nominally only second in command, am virtually the head of the party.

We may be in danger if we delay now, so I have overhauled all the stores, set Jack and Wangewata to cut fodder, and established videttes on two knolls near the camp, so as to warn us of the approach of the Valley-folk, should they come.

I find that we are about 150 miles, as a crow flies, from the green belt of country to the south-east, where we left Tom

and Dick, which means that we must make a series of forced marches to get there by the direct route. On the other hand, the river evidently stretches away some distance to the south-west, though I have no doubt that it eventually loses itself in the thirsty desert; but, according to Treloar, the mutineers had come due west from the patch of verdure, meeting frequent oases and water-holes as they came.

Then again, if we went on the south-eastern route, no doubt the valley soldiers would be looking out for us on that route, that is, supposing that we are being pursued. It appeared as though our escape from the Valley were the least of all our difficulties, so thick did they look ahead. I have had the heavy gold plates removed from the bottoms of our barrels, and as our stores are not so many as they were when we came up, I have managed, by distributing the plates over the mules, to increase the load of each by a very little. The fodder which Jack and Wangewata cut yesterday is drying in the sun, and I have no doubt that we shall be able to take a few days' supplies for our horses when we get beyond this belt of comparative verdure.

One matter of course has not been overlooked. Wirri-wirri and one of our men, at an early hour this morning, dug the grave in which we have laid the poor boy, who, led away by boyish impulse and chivalrous desire, has sacrificed his own life, and the lives of the others who have fallen on this expedition, besides bringing us all into considerable jeopardy.

Mitford read the burial-service from the prayer-book which he carries, and rarely have I heard a more impressive service than that read under the early morning sun, on the vast desert, in the presence of the awe-struck natives, and our men, rough diamonds as they are; nor could the floweriest of French orators have spoken a more beautiful speech over a dead comrade's grave than did "our parson." I have heard the service on board a vast liner, where passengers stood around, silent and sobered, for a short hour or so. I have heard it when the snow fell fast, and foretold more funerals within a short time for the grey, uncovered heads and shivering forms of mourners; and I have read it myself

at sea, over a dead comrade; but none of these memories will, I am sure, live with me like the sight of that group, where two chief mourners stood side by side tearless, for their grief was too great for tears, yet holding one another by the hand. The strong man, barely past his prime, was weaker far than the frail girl who stood by his side. Somehow, he is stunned, and nothing will serve to stir him from the lethargy in which he sits, with his eyes upon the two barrels supporting the simple wooden cross, tied together, which marks the last resting-place of his only son, his forlorn hope, whom he, in fatherly pride, had intended for such great honours. *Sic transit gloria mundi* would be a fitting motto for the cross; but, as a matter of fact, Jack, with the true loyalty of a comrade, has carved with his penknife a much simpler motto: "He died for others." The bereaved father, though apparently unconscious to external relations, shifts about uneasily, and murmurs if Annette leaves his side, and the sweet girl does her best to acquiesce in his whims, and yet take part in the very necessary operations which she, with intuitive and quick perception, sees that we are bound to make. However, with her usual tact, she accomplishes the difficult task; one could not think that behind so girlish a forehead, with curling hair and blue eyes, there is so womanly, so mature, so considerate a brain. How we could do without her at this juncture I cannot say, for Mitford has to do the part of a man, now that we are thus short-handed. And right loyally does he help; one would think to see the easy way in which he doffs the parson and becomes water-carrier, groom, or Jack-of-all-trades, that he were a professional roustabout.

One of the sentries came in, late in the day, to say that, far away, he had made out, with the aid of a small telescope which we have among the baggage, what he took to be a flock of crows moving, though slowly, over the plain, from the eastward far to the north. This has decided me. They cannot well be any but the search party from the valley and, accordingly, we must fly ere the place is too hot, for their very numbers would overwhelm us if they came in

force, notwithstanding the superiority of our firearms. I have made all the necessary arrangements, and am giving the horses a good meal and watering, and am making one and all of the expedition take a good meal, for I mean to travel all night; as now that the sun is getting nearer us, day by day, the days are getting hot, oppressively hot, and the nights are still tolerably cool. Just before commencing my journal, I went to the river bank to witness its flow and see how fast it ran, and what chance there was of its continuing far to the south. I have decided to cross the river, and march along, as nearly as we can, between this stream and the next branch, so that we may have a double chance of getting water. The effect will also be to put any pursuers off the track—at least, so I hope.

* * * * *

We have been pursuing our south-westerly course for some days now along the side of the river or its many branches. It is perceptibly diminishing each mile we go south, sopped up by the insatiable maw of the desert. But we have fortunately kept the grassy plains with us in our southerly journey, making about thirty miles a day, or rather, a night, for we do very little travelling in the daytime.

Jeremy takes but little interest in our march. He would have stayed by the grave which holds the remains of his poor boy, had not Annette awakened him for a second to a sense of the duties he owed to himself and the living. For a brief time he was again the hard-headed commander of the expedition, but for such a brief time, that his relapse into his apathetic, dejected state almost immediately followed. I am sure that none of us could manage him like Annette does. Poor Mitford he has rebuffed more than once, by asking him morosely never to speak to him of God again. "It is a mockery," he says. "You say He has given, and has taken away; and you describe a demon, a fiend, a Juggernaut, not a God such as the Christians think they worship. Pshaw! It is child's play! There is no God; there is fate. I have striven hard, endangered the lives of all these good men, including yourself, and, in the hour of

triumph, my fate pursues me, and Clotho cuts the cord which binds my only child to me. So be it!"

With this one exception, our party is in fairly good health, though on short commons. Of the blacks, Wangewata and his fellow seem of tougher fibre than Wirri-wirri, but the Queenslander is so light and frolicsome that he thus redeems his inferiority of nerve. Only lately he told us, after having been assured a hundred times that Blackie is dead, that it was that scoundrel, as I suspected, who tied him up and left him to die; he it was, too, who found those mysterious scraps of letters, and told the black to say that *he* had done so, then threatened his life if he so much as whispered a hint of the other's treachery.

CHAPTER XLII.

HIMETOA'S REVENGE.

We have, at last, struck eastward. This is our second day in that direction. The river had, during the last two days of our journey by its sides, become simply a series of unconnected, shallow pools, drying up fast in the sun. Probably the recent floods are answerable for a good deal more water than at other times, for fodder had gradually diminished until it could only be gathered by the beasts in infinitesimal quantities near the water's edge. For many days past, we have seen no shrub or tree, only the little sedum, to tinge the sand with a green hue. Then, finding ourselves in almost the same degree of latitude—according to Jack's calculations—as the oasis upon which we wished to fall back, I made up my mind to strike out for it, and, by a series of forced marches, which I calculate will take us over about thirty miles a day, hope to meet it in about five days.

In the meanwhile, Mitford and Jack have constituted themselves scouts, and ride out in the cool of the morning or evening to search both sides of our route, so as to make sure of water-holes, of which we have not met one since we left the river; likely places are choked with sand, hurled there, doubtless, by the great sand-storm of a few weeks since. In consequence, we are all strictly allowanced, and the poor beasts are treated in the same way, receiving just enough to moisten their parched tongues and make them long for more.

I have omitted to say that the signet which bound Annette's brow as president of the day of our escape, we left at young Jeremy's grave, in the hopes that if the Valleyites were in search of their beloved sign-manual, they would find it, and, resting satisfied, no longer seek to molest us.

Three days have passed since I last wrote, and again I have to make this page a memoir of thanksgiving from a cruel death. Not that of starvation, it is true, nor death at the hands of blacks, though they had something to do with it. A curious destiny seems to preserve me in dangers where others get the worst of it and go under; or is it something grander than destiny? Mitford says it is; but let the story speak for itself.

The night after I last wrote we made another thirty miles and lost two of our beasts, one horse, Jack's, and one mule; we had not sighted water for three days at that time, and the poor beasts could not stand the strain any longer. They fell down and refused to move, and we had mercifully to dispatch them with a bullet. Their meat was tough and wiry, but in our dire necessity it will help, at least, to keep hunger at bay.

Another broiling day passed and another night's journey succeeded.

Another beast, this time Mitford's, fell down, for Jack and he have, from the nature of their duties as scouts, used their animals more than any others of us. Within two hours of this last calamity, we came of a sudden upon a pool of water, amongst two or three rocks. Evidently the water-courses met here, and when the rain *did* fall it was led in this direction by the underlying rocks. Of course I commanded a halt, and restrained our beasts as well as I could from drinking too freely, or trampling about the water and making it unfit to drink. But the blacks, who are like children, and difficult to restrain, surfeited themselves with drinking. Of course the results were unpleasant, not only to them but to others of us. Unpleasant I say, they are worse than that, they have proved almost deadly. The men themselves first suffered terribly; their eyes standing out as though with excess of blood in the head, and their bodies swelling up with intense pain as though with dropsy. Mitford alleviated their sufferings as well as he could, and shortly afterwards they fell asleep, and in an hour or two on awakening announced that they were all right again, that is

Wangewata and his fellow awoke, but Wirri-wirri was in a deep lethargic sleep. In the meanwhile we had made our camp, and Jack and Mitford had gone off, for the day was dawning; Mitford to take water to his horse and bring him up if he could, for we had spared the beast with some such hope as had been realised; and Jack to scour the north and east to see whether there were any signs of trees or grass in that direction. After a bit all settled down again, and those of us not in the watch took our sleep. Wangewata, when he had somewhat recovered as I have said, asked to be at liberty to go after Mitford, but this I could not allow, for fear of their missing one another. So he then petitioned to take his usual watch. This I also refused, thinking it unsafe to trust to him; but he with much importunity prevailed over me at last, with promises that he and his fellow would keep watch together and wake me when it was noon. I was nothing loth to get a little rest, for I had been having a good deal more of the hard work of the expedition lately, now that Cousin Jeremy was, so to speak, incapacitated; so I stretched myself out on the ground beneath the edge of the large awning, which we always rig up against the sun. I suppose I was soon asleep, and that I slept long, for when I woke it was with intense pain in my arm, which had been gripped as it were by my weight. I had I suppose lain upon it, and accordingly strove to turn over, but found I could not, and at the moment a hiss in my ear, showed me that some one was purposely keeping me down.

"If you utter a sound or stir," came in a whisper, "I'll put the gun to your ear and kill you."

Was I dreaming, or was this Himetoa's voice? Oh, I was dreaming of course. Himetoa was dead, and I again strove to turn round so as to wake myself. But I was as unsuccessful as before, and the voice again said—

"Feel that, and see if I am in earnest?" and I felt the unmistakable muzzle of my revolver, which had been abstracted from its pouch.

"You know me," hissed the voice. "I am Himetoa; Himetoa, whom you have foiled at every turn; Himetoa, who

saw another woman in the place she ought to occupy as queen of her fellow-citizens; Himetoa, who saw another woman loving and loved by the man who ought to have been her husband; Himetoa, whom you thought drowned in the river; Himetoa, who at least has the president's signet on her brow, and has the president's intent in her heart, to make one law, which no one may gainsay, and that law is your death. Do you hear me?" she whispered with a shrill tone: "you, who schemed and planned to overthrow me; you, who will so soon be overthrown yourself; I am Himetoa, the banished; Himetoa, the wanderer, ex-queen, ex-president, ex-inhabitant of Paradise, and this I owe to you. Say, can women hate like I can, in your country? Can Annette Blake, whom I see close by, hate like me? I think not."

"Woman," I replied, "leave me alone, and I will bring you to civilization, where at least you may live in peace and not starve to death in the desert. Blackie's gold must be somewhere; perhaps you know, and the Valley Council care little, I dare say, what becomes of that which they value so little."

"Yes, Blackie, whom we call Maurana, is dead and by your pistol," hissed she. "Your pistol, which is in a few moments going to avenge his death: but I play with you like the birds do with butterflies. Oh, it is delicious, this revenge of mine! Would that it could endure for all my lifetime; but it must come to an end when you do, and that must be so soon, ah me, so soon!"

It was certainly an unpleasant situation for me to have to listen to this demented creature, for I felt sure that reverses had turned her brain, gloating over her revenge, and bemoaning that it could not last because she had to kill me.

"I took no man's life except in self-preservation," I replied. "Tom Bateman did not fire until Maurana or Blackie fired at him. That, you know well; besides, he had attempted my life twice before."

"And you let him go until I thought you were afraid, and so you led me on to my own ruin. Do you think I care aught for Maurana? He died a little before he would have

done, if matters had gone right with me. But I do care that you frustrated all my efforts and cozened me into lending my aid to a man who was but a broken reed."

"I kept my part of the bargain," I said. "I gave you your life when it was in my hands, when I could have delivered you over to be starved to death, when you offered me your beauty, and God knows what besides, if I would let you off; and I took none of these, simply a promise to behave! How did you keep that?"

"How did you expect me to? Man! Are men so dull, then, in your country, that they think a woman can ever forgive a man for placing her in this position of gratitude for favours? And when she offers you what I did, to refuse it and pass it over as though I were a pretty flower which had asked to be picked, but which your mighty self disdained to pluck! I almost think to let you go unpunished, for such folly must bring you to your ruin. But, no, I cannot! I have panted and ached; how have I suffered! how did I suffer when I was almost dragged down into the pit! how did I suffer when I clung half-drowned to the logs of wood which swept over me! and all for this—to see you writhe under my hand, to watch your agony in death, to see your limbs quiver, and hear the last death-rattle in your throat. Oh, you thought you had put me off the scent! You thought you had eluded me, I have no doubt; but you cannot shake me off so. I am a leech to stick to you and to drag you down. I have hunted here and there for you. I have known of safety at hand for you; but I would not guide you to it. I saw you starving in the desert, and now I have found you alone and unarmed!"

Was this indeed true? Were the others away? It seemed impossible, for she spoke but a moment ago of Annette as lying near by. Where were the blacks, who had promised to watch? Where was Mitford, who should have returned? But a man who is on the point of being put to death cannot ask such questions with that deliberation with which he puts them on paper. This mad woman must be got round; but how?

"I will give you one chance," said she; "will you swear that you did not mean to frustrate me, and that all you did was ignorant meddling with other folks' business, and that you are sorry you did this?"

How could I?

"Not a bit of it!" answered I. "What I did was done on purpose, and I would do it over again. I verily believe, even to letting you off again with your life!"

"Ah, ha! I tried you and you still defy me!" cried she, hoarsely. "Do you think I would have spared you, even though you had told the lie I tried to make you? But it would have been deeper revenge for me to have felt that you died with a lie on your lips. So——"

CHAPTER XLIII.

A DROP OF WATER FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!

BUT at this moment she was suddenly thrust off my body, and although she fell heavily on my left arm, and dazed me a little with the discharge of my own weapon, I managed to scramble to my feet.

The infuriated woman was being vigorously attacked by Annette, who was trying to wrest the smoking revolver from her hand, while Cousin Jeremy was starting to his feet and rushing forward; Wangewata and his fellow were jumping up, and Mitford was running towards us, evidently anxious to assist at the affray. All this I took in at a glance. In the same moment I saw that Annette and Himetoa were unequally matched, and that Himetoa, even in her half-starved condition, was unmistakably the stronger. I sprang forward just as Cousin Jeremy joined the group, and Himetoa discharged the revolver again. Poor Jeremy received the bullet in his leg, and fell for a second; but springing up again, he helped me to wrest the weapon from the mad creature, as she was about to fire for the third time. Had that bullet sped its way, its billet must have been Annette's breast; but I managed to jam my fingers round the stock and between the trigger, so that the hammer simply crushed my fingers when she pulled it. Having disarmed her we stood aside for a breathing time, and Wangewata and the other black came rushing up, while our two white men, not knowing what to make of the disturbance, also came forward. But Wangewata and his friend started at the sight of this imperious, awful-looking woman, upon whose brow was bound the seal of the Valley. They thought her to be a goddess. Seeing that her presence created some impression, she seized the opportunity, while

Mitford and I helped Cousin Jeremy to lie down, to jump at me, and had not Annette again intercepted her, she must have stabbed me with a knife which she had concealed in her bosom. Then the fierce creature turned on Annette like a tigress. Twice had this frail girl frustrated her, and should be punished. To my horror, I saw the knife uplifted, though the arm was caught by Annette's hand and, hastily dropping poor Cousin Jeremy into Mitford's arms, I ran back. Our white men seemed paralysed. Australians do not understand how to combat with a woman. Their innate gallantry stands them sometimes in bad, not good, stead. But a quicker one than I had seen the impending blow. I heard a rush behind me. I saw a black form hit the hapless woman, and she fell, pierced through and through with Wirri-wirri's spear. He had awakened from his torpidity, seen his master, his beloved master, assailed, and hastened to his revenge, careless of seals and signs, knives and other weapons. Let no one say, after this, that a black is not faithful and loyal to his master, and his master's kith and kin. Annette I led away to attend to Cousin Jeremy, and see with Mitford what could be done to his knee. The sight of the once beautiful Himetoa, now gaunt and weazened with her privations, her face hideous with the pangs of death and the fierce emotions which had swayed her, almost unnerved me, and I knew it would be too terrible for our sweet little lady to look upon. The terrible woman died without a word or groan. Unbinding the seal from her brow, I set two men to prepare a decent grave on the north slope of a ridge of sand; gently they bore between them, as became their rough natures, the body of the once peerless Himetoa, while Mitford read over it such parts of the burial-service as he thought were appropriate. They laid her down in her everlasting bed in the desert, without headstone or cross, or anything to tell that the desert covered the remains of a woman who, only a few short months since, had been so peerless, so beautiful, so wicked, that the very air felt lighter now that she had ceased to breathe. If Helen of Troy, that namby-pamby maiden of good looks, could do so



HIMETOA ATTACKS ANNETTE.

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much mischief, what infinite evil could not this woman have worked, who, to the physical beauties of Helen, added the wicked devices of a Poppæa Sabina, and the clever brain of a Lucrezia Borgia.

When Jack came home at evening he was thoroughly tired out. He had seen nothing, he had heard nothing which could be of any use to us. No signs were there in that direction of trees or grass.

Cousin Jeremy, I regret to say, is very badly wounded in the knee. The bone is so fractured that there seems no chance of setting it, and the swelling is most painful; but he utters no groan or sign of feeling the agony, which I very well know, by the perspiration which bathes his brow, he must feel. Unfortunately the bullet took a downward direction, and is still in the leg, and has probably carried some of the comminuted portions of bone with it into the muscle; so says Mitford. Out of evil has come good, for Jeremy has at last awakened and regained his former self; at least to a modified degree, he is the Cousin Jeremy of old, the considerate but hard-headed commander of the expedition, whose active brain is ever ready to suggest plans and organise our operations.

We have taken counsel together, and are going to march straight forward as fast as we can go, for drought and starvation, fiercer foes than the valley soldiers, threaten us; and now that we have learnt that Himetoa was expelled, I have little fear that we shall be pursued by my good friends, Valedina and Barbarin. And yet, if this be so, what could have been that band of men we saw from our river-camp? Good God! Could it have been a rescue-party? If the situation were not so terribly hazardous, it would be ludicrous for us to fear friends and run away from salvation.

* * * * *

Since we left the pool we have travelled three days without coming across a sign of water, and as, according to my calculations, we are a degree or so *east* of the point where we ought to have sighted the part of the oasis where the mutineers struck away northwards, I am getting anxious.

I have accordingly altered our course a little to the south-east, adopting Jeremy's advice upon the point.

He rides in a litter made of canvas, stretched over rifles which are tied together, supported by two mules, one in front and one behind; but the poor beasts stumble often, for they are weak from want of food, and every jar must give him exquisite pain. For all that he is in good spirits and is always encouraging one or the other of us with some quip or cheery word. One can see he is making up, so to speak, for lost time; time when he was rather a drag and a curb than a spur on our spirits.

Another horse and a mule have fallen out and have been sacrificed by us for meat. The consequence of this is, that half of us are now dismounted, and take it by turns to ride. Annette would, if we permitted, also take her turn at walking, but this is expressly forbidden, and if she walks, at once all the others, black or white, dismount by way of protest. She laughs then, and gets up again, as she does not, she says, want every one to suffer through her caprices.

Although I put a pleasant face upon it, I must say that things are looking very serious. If we do not meet water to-night or to-morrow—and now we do travelling at the daytime occasionally, so as to miss no opportunity of finding this precious article—we shall perish; while even if we do find water, we are by no means out of the wood, for our beasts will, I verily believe, all collapse together.

* * * * *

Our first death since we left the river occurred last night. Wangewata's comrade fell out and did not answer at muster-roll. Vainly we looked at one another's gaunt thin faces for some tidings of the missing man. But no one knew when and where he had been missed. To make sure, Jack and I walked back some miles and found the poor fellow some distance from our track, fallen forward and unable even to turn himself over. Jack buried him with the spade I had with me; what a lugubrious thing to hunt up a fellow man with a spade in one's hand!

When we regained the party—what I feared had happened.

The horses had collapsed and two were panting their last. One mule of all our cavalcade alone survived. Oh, God! Oh, God! send us a drain of water or even of dew! The sky is electric blue in the daytime and the sun scorches us, while at night we are cold, but no dew forms; there appears to be no moisture in the air, out of which the dew can come.

It is terrible, this thirst upon us all; and, to make matters worse, one of the white men in my absence got at the water and drank it up. There was not much. Hardly a pint left; but that would have given each of us a thimbleful for a day or two. Now we have none. Jeremy has the only beast of course, but the poor brute totters at every step. Still we push on knowing it is our only chance.

* * * * *

Two more deaths to chronicle. Wangewata died early in the night, and the white who drank the water got a surfeit of blood to the head and expired shortly afterwards. How glad I am I did not punish him for mutiny. Mitford crept up to me during the night and whispered that there were still some medicines in the chest on his back, and they were liquid; should we take and divide them? Before he could well finish speaking, Jeremy's horse stumbled and fell, and the poor fellow, though I was by his side in a moment and Jack had pulled him from under, was terribly shaken by the shock. So we clubbed rifles together, and, when we had buried our dead, we made a sort of palanquin or stretcher which two of us carried, but only for a short time, as we panted like fat old gentlemen trying to catch a train. We could not perspire, there was not a drain of liquid blood in our system, so it seemed. It was awful that burning heat, even when the wind was cool, for it has begun to blow upon us from the south—a cooler breeze than we have had for a long time. Were it not for our terrible straits, I should take fresh hope at this wind, for I fancy it must come from the oasis, and accordingly I am going due south henceforth. But what pace can we expect to make?

Annette, of course, is on foot. She trips along fairy-like, encouraging now one, now the other; she is God's blessing

personified. The rest of us are gaunt and grim spectres of what we were. Even Jeremy is thin and sallow, though he has been the least tried during the last awful week. Upon our backs we carry the few provisions we have saved from the falling mules and their backs, and in another day I fear that the provisions will be of no use to us.

CHAPTER XLIV.

WE THREE.

THERE are but three of us left now to cheer one another. Annette, Jeremy and myself, and we were seated on the sand where we were yesterday. Soon after I gave the signal to proceed, I found myself unable to get up, and though I tried over and over again, my legs seemed to be paralysed. I felt that my quietus had come, but I only smiled and said—

“You run on, boys, I’ll be after you soon, never fear. Make due south, you know, and fire a gun if you find water.”

But Jack was by my side in a moment.

“Father, my dear father,” he said; “we will not leave you, we will all die together rather than leave our leader, my father.”

His tears were falling fast, but I said—

“My dear boy. *You* must not mutiny. Put aside your sentiment and use your cool judgment. If you can push on and find this water, come back to meet me, by all means. If not, God speed you and save you all. *One* must not cripple the party. Promise, my boy!”

With sobs the poor lad promised, I knew it was the only thing to save the party, for he and Mitford were both comparatively strong, and could help along the litter.

But an unexpected opposition came from Jeremy.

“You may make your son do what you please, and quite right he is to obey his father; but I’ll be damned—I beg your most humble pardon, my dear,” he added to Annette; “but you know the occasion perhaps excuses me. I’ll be bothered if you order me about. You’re not head of this expedition, I am. Boys, you’ll just put me down and take up Mr. Thomas Bateman, I order it.”

They put him down and looked askance. Our white men

came towards me and Jack looked more hopeful. But I absolutely refused.

"Look here," I said; "Mr. Jeremy Bateman commands you now, but he cannot touch me. I prefer to remain here; I should be jolted to death in the litter."

"Very well, boys," said Jeremy, "then just listen here. You will push on south as hard as possible, and take Mrs. Blake with you—"

"Oh no, they won't," said that young person; "I'm not a member of the expedition and don't intend to obey. Where my father," and she looked at Jeremy, "and my saviour," and she smiled at me, "are, I will stay. Come, you are wasting good time while we are talking," she added.

So these sentimental people have had their way, and thus we are alone, Jeremy and Annette and I. Here on the burning sand, half sheltered by the flimsy awning from the scorching rays of the sun, but baking with the fierce reflected heat around, we are lying prone, our young girl companion supporting Jeremy, who is overcome and suffering great pain, and in the intervals of my writing which are lengthening, as my hand gets tired, I too, rest my head against her shoulder. She, the weak woman, and we, the strong men, aye, of a week ago—but now all is changed. Her sex endows her with endurance and our care for her has buoyed up her strength. Once only she left us, and, speaking for myself, I may say that I would not have it happen again. One felt lost, utterly lost without her and her cheery words and soothing caresses. I saw a sight of water away in the clouds which banked up in the south, but could not cross the desert. There were trees and water in the clouds and then I saw them on the plain, but though Annette toiled over the sand she came back almost exhausted and ready to faint; she had seen nothing, nor could she see any one of the party who left us this morning. It must have been a mirage. Poor child! It is awful to think of her dying here untended and alone at her tender age. With Jeremy and myself it is another matter. We are old and have run our course, but for her!

And she has seen no sign of the rest of the expedition. The expedition which started away so lusty and strong some months since, now reduced to three persons in the last stages of thirst, suffering (I speak for myself, the others never complain) agonies in throat and head; and two or three miserable men struggling across the parched plains of sand under the merciless sun or—rolling in agony on the plain itself, grasping in their delirium at the sand and filling their mouths with it as though water. My God, it does not bear thinking! My son is one of them. God speed you, Jack!

I find I am getting very tired and sleepy, though I have slept heavily lately; I must be careful of my strength. I wonder what my dear wife and bairns are thinking at home. Their suspense must be worse than even these our sufferings. They know not if we are alive or dead, and must perforce watch and wait. Our deserters have probably spread lying reports that we are all dead, and the family at the station have heard of the rumour. But have they believed it? I think not. My wife is much too true a Scot to take rumour as Gospel. She would try to disprove the evil report. Yet how? Who could track us up here? Even if the line of the blacks were broken? If Jim, my trusty Jim, were living, there might be some chance for us. He is a bushman of no mean repute, and as true as steel.

I have been to sleep and had strange dreams of home and happiness. I thought that as I looked, the sand had a gentle glow and a fountain of water laved my feet: I saw flowers and shrubs spring up around, and a lovely prospect open before me. I sprang up and walked, oh, how I walked; each limb was light as a feather, at each stride I skimmed the ground, and of a sudden came across my old chum Bronté, who died a couple of years since. We clasped hands and he welcomed me to the other side. How grateful I felt that at last the trials were over and that the valley of death was so easily passed. But then I bethought me of my dear wife and bairns, and was weeping when I woke. Yes, it was a dream—only a dream—and I still look at the burning sand

and my jaded companions. Oh, to pass through the valley as easily! It would be my wish. My pain is so great, each pore of the skin aches as though a thousand red ants were stinging me. My mouth is so dry, that I tried to say good-bye to Annette and Jeremy, but could not form a word. Annette soothed me and Jeremy is breathing hard and is delirious, his face red and his veins out-standing. I will say good-bye to all, good-bye to my darling wife, good-bye to my children, all of you, perhaps you may read this. Thank God, I can die, and say I have tried to act up to Nelson's motto, and done my—

CHAPTER XLV.

RESCUE.

My wife has just read over the last few lines of my Journal. The last I shall write for some time to come. Though they seem arrogant, I will let them remain, to show the feelings of one who thought he had made a long stride across the Black River. My wife is my amanuensis and sits by my side, while Jack, who ought himself to be in bed, is fanning away the flies from my forehead.

And now I must tell as nearly as I can, in my wife's words, where we are and how we have met one another.

After we had left our home about a month, my wife, who had been growing uneasy, chanced to hear that one of the men who had formed the expedition had returned, and after making the most searching inquiries, found him. As I expected, the fellow asserted that he had alone escaped from the expedition. But when on further inquiry, she found out that he had left us where grass and trees were, she knew he was a deserter and told him as much. The fellow, who had been under Blackie's thumb, and was half-sorry at the scurvy trick he had played us, confessed all and volunteered to conduct my wife back to the place where he had come from and, if necessary, take her on to the desert where Blackie had said we were going. She made up her mind in a moment. She would organise a relief expedition at once, and find us. She rode home to our station, telegraphed for supplies from the railway terminus, and herself set all things in such order that within a very short time she had a large and strong expedition, with drays and horses, ready to start. Burroughes volunteered, and his offer was accepted, as my wife wanted a strong man who had been accustomed to order his fellows about, so that he might be the nominal head of

the expedition. At the moment of departure, Agnes startled her mother by saying she wished to come too, and the mother, who saw in Agnes a suitable companion for her long journey, was at last persuaded to grant Agnes's request, giving over the reins of the household to the immaculate Miss Gregg. So these two weak women started to follow on our track, and right well did they make pace. Not so quickly, indeed, as we had come, but yet they reached the fatal ravine where we had been attacked by the blacks, within five weeks of our having left it—so I find by comparing notes.

There they met with the three men at our depôt who had been out scouring every day for some time past, and then their steps became quicker, their work easier. Leaving a large depôt at the oasis, my wife, daughter, Burroughes, and a strongly provisioned convoy, pushed on over the desert and reached the Pinnacle of Rock with little suffering, having by good fortune managed to elude the sand-storm which occurred before they left the oasis. At the Rock they found our traces, but of course we had gone, and they rambled about scouring the country to find whither we had gone. They lit signal fires and these were not put out like ours had been, but were turned into huge flashing signals by the friendly though invisible rulers of the Rock. Evidently these were the flashes which I had seen, and Barbarin and Valedina, to whom I had been so long imputing ingratitude, had in fact tried to help the rescue party to recall us. Of course they did not discover our whereabouts. But they did light upon the grave where poor young Jeremy lay. They must have reached it very shortly after Himetoa left it, but they lost traces of us here and, returning to the Rock, made for the oasis by the direct route, thinking that we might possibly have arrived there by some other route. My wife tells me that when they found the two barrels by the grave, with the inscription, Agnes cried with overwhelming grief. It appears that the poor child thought that it was Mitford who had thus perished, for Jack had, it seems, omitted to put poor Jeremy's initials on the cross, and the

motto seemed more appropriate to Mitford than any other member of our party.

When they arrived back at the oasis, there was of course no sign of us, and so my wife commenced throwing her whole force into loose skirmishing order, and thus managed to scour the whole district to the north and south of the oasis; at last one day she noticed, through a field-glass she carried, some specks as she thought on the horizon and riding rapidly forward found that they increased in size. At last, when nearer, she found two men clutching one another's arms and making desperately over the plain towards her. They did not seem to see her and Burroughes, who was riding by her side, until close by, when reeling, they both stumbled and one fell. She darted forward, as the other was picking up his comrade, and found herself face to face with her own son and Mitford! Jumping off her horse, she stooped over poor Jack and kissed him again and again, and then she says, with a most becoming blush, that she turned to Mitford and hugged and kissed him, as though he had been another son.

It appeared, in answer to her rapid inquiries, that after they had left us, the four kept steadily on until Wirri-wirri fell out and refused to move. He grew sullen and turning his face to the sand prepared to die. Within an hour the white man rolled over cursing his fate though feebly; his tongue lolling out of his mouth was dry and red, cracked and fissured, and Mitford and Jack looked at one another helplessly; then Mitford gave the man a little dose of St. Jacob's Oil, which he had in his pocket, and this acted as a tonic and enabled the man to struggle on further. Just fancy, half a bottle of St. Jacob's Oil, the only drink amongst three men! Then the poor fellow went crashing to the ground, and Mitford and Jack holding on to one another's arms, struggled on alone, always helping each other up when they stumbled and fell. We hear something of British pluck and determination dying out now-a-days. I wonder when a finer sight was seen than that of this gently nurtured clergyman and the young colonial undergraduate helping one another's

tottering footsteps over that burning plain, determined to get south and find the water for their friends left behind. They pledged their word to one another, these two, that if need be they would crawl on hands and knees to get along. It was just then that the wife saw them. Within a short time they were both mounted and being held upon horse-back, and a volley of shots from Burroughes's revolver had announced, first to one, and then by being signalled onwards, to each of his long line of outposts, that the lost had been found. How enthusiastic they all became over the discovery! But there was no time to be wasted in enthusiasm, for the news the two poor spectres brought was of five lives in danger; and one of these was a life which my wife considers very dear to her.

Setting off with food, water, and fresh horses, and leaving directions behind for a couple of waggons to follow, my wife, Burroughes, and a number of the rescue party, came and found us one by one. First they picked up our poor white and sent him back; then Wirri-wirri, and treated him in the same way; and shortly after nightfall they found our little camp. The moon was shining brightly and the camp was so quiet that my wife says her heart stood still, for she could see three forms all stretched on the ground, beneath the awning. Were they dead? The sight which she saw, when she pulled up her snorting horse, was little better, for I at whom she first looked was, it appears, pale and still, while Cousin Jeremy was leaning over breathing stertorously and supported on Annette's fair bosom. The girl herself lay like one dead. But she turned her face as they came up and faintly opened her eyes.

In a few minutes each one of us had received a little cordial except Jeremy, who, it was seen, was suffering from a fit of apoplexy. As soon as Annette could sit up, she leant over the poor man and did her best to relieve the congestion of his head; she, who had but just escaped the terrors of death, at once thought of the man to whom she had constituted herself a daughter.

And so we are all here, with green trees and waving

grasses to look upon, assiduously nursed by gentle loving hands, we, who a few hours ago, were bound for "the other side" if ever men were.

Mitford is, I learn, weak but cheery as ever, and pretends he is nursing himself and almost well; but Agnes, whom her mother has deputed to look in upon the young fellow, has a different story to tell.

Sweet Annette, though weak herself, is tireless in her attendance on Cousin Jeremy, for whom she and my wife are really working wonders. He has regained consciousness and spoken two or three words; they told him, little by little, the story of the rescue, and he muttered: "Mitford, Jack, thousand pounds, token heroism."

Mitford told Agnes that he would not accept a penny for doing his duty, and as it appeared to be a pleasure to Agnes to take messages to and from the young man, I sent back word, asking if he were so cross-minded a fellow, that he wanted a gift for *not* doing his duty?

But I could not understand his answer which came back.

"The circumstances were quite different; of course he would take such a prize."

My daughter blushed as she gave me the message and I said—

"But Agnes, darling, is he light-headed? I didn't tell him any circumstances."

"Oh, mama and papa!" she said—but there, this journalist didn't set out with the purpose of being an abuser of love-confidences.

"Any way," I said, intending to be severe; "the young man might have asked leave first. I'll send Jack to punch his head." But Jack had crept out by himself a minute ago.

Agnes looked a little frightened, then came to me and putting her arm round my head as I lay down—like a halo of pure white velvet—she said—

"Oh, you naughty father! you aren't very bad, if you can tease like that; you're shamming. Do say you like him."

"My sweet," I replied; "if I had only known that this was to be the end, I would have taken him in hand, and polished him up and rubbed him down, until he would have made a most delightful son-in-law, but now——"

"Yes, papa?" she asked eagerly.

"He's a great deal better, my sweet. He's a *man*, and right sound to the very core, and though he is a parson and may want to carry you away from us to some snug vicarage, I've seen enough of him to know that there are very few men who would make a better husband. You know," I added, "he saved my life, so I must speak well of him. But, dear me, we haven't asked your mother," and I pretended to look concerned, though I knew very well that in such a matter mother and daughter had no secrets from one another.

My wife smiled and kissed the girl. "Run away now, and relieve his mind," she said; "and tell him if he doesn't take care of our treasure, we will be the most terrible father-in-law and mother-in-law that were ever depicted in jest or earnest."

"How glad I am that poor young Jeremy did not stay in her mind for long," I said.

"I made a great mistake there, I think," remarked my wife; "but before you had been gone a week, I knew that the flower given to Mr. Mitford at parting, was given for his own sake, though of course he was not told so."

"Why in the world not?" said I. "Are men alone to show a preference in this world?"

"Oh, Tom, you would not have Agnes anything but a modest girl."

"Ah, my dear, I was thinking I was back in the Valley again. But was not Mitford rather quick in bringing about the circumstances, think you, under which he could accept Jeremy's prize?"

And so we chatted on, and so we seem likely to chat on, for some time here, until our generous diet, tinned soups and jellies, shall put us on our feet once more.

Only a woman would, I am sure, have thought of bringing

a lot of dried jellies out to this part of the world, and only a man who has been living for weeks on meat which was more unpalatable than shoe-leather, and bread as stale and hard as a biscuit baked in Anno domini I., could really and thoroughly appreciate the jellies aforesaid.

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CHAPTER XLVI.

TWO YEARS LATER.

FOR two years has this Journal been untouched, and it is only because I fancy that its revelation to the world of readers may be instructive as well as amusing, that I add a foot-note before sending it over the seas to Mr. Editor, whom I have carefully instructed to keep the original diction as much as possible, and if anything not to add, only to cut.

Two years later! Yes; two years have passed since the events chronicled in the foregoing pages first happened, and the Jubilee year of her Gracious Majesty, God bless her, as we say in the colonies, has become little more than a misty memory in the past of pageants and festivities, banquets and balls. But to me it is an ever-present memory of some of the most stirring incidents which ever happened to me. It is a theatre in which move the figures of Barbarin, Valedina, Blackie, Batona, Annette, Jeremy and others, among whom Himetoa—the luckless, beautiful, perjured priestess of evil—stands prominently forwards, and the last memory impressed upon my mind is the evil smile she had, a counterpart of Blackie's, when she and I stood side by side, by the boiling torrent, into which I was about to plunge.

But these memories are sombre, let me present other and pleasanter memories which the last two years have brought.

Memories of a wife nursing me back to life; of Cousin Jeremy getting about again, but white-haired and aged; of a slow journey down country back to the homestead; of celebrations amongst our neighbours at our return; of the wedding of Mitford and Agnes, amidst the greatest enthusiasm; of Cousin Jeremy presenting Mitford, and, regardless of my objections, Jack, with handsome rewards for their pluck.

Then there comes a memory of a bright Sunday, a few months

ago, when my boy Jack had just come home from the university with his honours thick upon him, and he and Annette, who was staying with us, came out to me as I was looking at some eccentric tarantulas fighting for dear life, "as though there were anything worth fighting for in life," I remarked to the two.

Jack laughed. "One would think you believed that, father. You who fought for Annette and jeopardised your life."

"Ah," I said with a smile, "don't you do what your old father did, my boy; most men are content to fight for their own wife, not for somebody else's."

"Not when that somebody else is their own son's?" asked Jack, in his impertinent manly way, while Annette hid her head on his shoulder.

"Sho!" I said. "Dear me, permit me to be taken by surprise. Oh, you couple of deceitful young things, to go on like this and not let your dad into your confidence."

"Oh, but we are at the very first opportunity," said Annette, blushing violently.

"Well, I don't know what your second mother, *my* wife, will say, my dear," said I; "she doesn't think Jack half good enough for you. No more do I. No more does Cousin Jeremy."

"That's what I should call a tarrydiddle," said the voice of the ruler of the homestead behind us.

"Eavesdroppers," said I, "ought to be treated as for all three offences in one. First, because they never hear any good of themselves, and a certain person, who is not a hundred miles from me, by the sound of her voice, ought never to hear anything but the good which all men should speak of her. Secondly and thirdly, because, like the laws of the Valley, it is the president's will that it shall be so. Do I understand that voice, which is not a hundred miles away, to maintain that what I have just said is not the truth?"

"You do," said my wife; "I think that Jack is just good enough for anybody—"

"So he is, mama," said Annette.

"And, I think that Annette is just in the same case."

"Bravo, mother!" cried Jack.

"Seems to me as though certain persons like to hunt with the hounds, and run with the hare," said I; "for my part, I will be no timeserver, and I stick to what I have said."

Then from behind, a couple of small hands, for notwithstanding her many duties, the little fingers, which charmed me thirty years ago, are still as soft and gentle as before, this shameless pair of hands came and blindfolded me, while their owner pulled me round and kissed me.

"Well," said I, "I am surprised to be treated in such an unceremonious fashion by my wife. Won't you take warning, Jack, in time?" I added.

"No, dad; I think you're jolly lucky, and I could almost be afraid that I wasn't going to be so lucky."

"There, my love," said I, "just see what a terrible example you have set our hope and comfort, our son and heir; he tries to please wife and mother in a sentence. Bound to offend both."

The young people laughed, and ran away; and so hot-headed is master Jack, that within a month, Annette Blake had become Annette Bateman in very deed. Of course Mitford tied the knot, and of course Cousin Jeremy gave away the bride. In the matter of marriage settlements, my cousin was absolutely extravagant, but as he is a terribly obstinate old fellow, and likely to get apoplectic when opposed, we had to let him have his way.

You may be sure that before this I had satisfied every one who still thought it worth while to inquire what were the true facts of Blake's death, almost two years before. But I will say, that not one person has ever thought seriously of coupling the gentle favourite of everybody, the brave self-sacrificing Annette, with the author of that crime.

Out of evil has come some good, for there are no two firmer friends in Christendom, than Mitford and Cousin Jeremy, although they still argue as fiercely as ever. Certainly the two little cherubs, who have flown down to Agnes and her

husband, could have no more generous or indulgent grandfather, than the man whose nature was often hard, and generally cynical, before he found—and lost—his son.

Mitford, as may have been gathered from the Journal, lost a great deal of his bigotry, and, in fact, I may say he lost it all, and is no longer the same man, in this respect, as the narrow-minded, frock-coated fellow, who first made me laugh over egotism. Perhaps, when he reads this Journal, he may turn the laugh against me, for the first person singular, nominative, vocative, and accusative, genitive, dative, and ablative, has been pretty fairly declined in these pages.

As to the Valley Council, I know little more than that about three months ago, Jim, who is sound and well again, and in the habit of giving himself airs in the way of looking after me, conducted a stranger, driving flocks up country to, the homestead. The man put a communication from Barbarin and Valedina into my hands. It was written in large writing, so I suppose that the Valley diet has not yet so much changed, as to materially improve the eyesight of the inhabitants, and I have inserted it below, as a sort of testimonial to the truth and accuracy of my adventures. I should have said that the gold plates, which were found by the rescue party, on following back along our track, through the desert, and turning over the dead mules, were not deemed sufficient evidence to convince people that I have not romanced in this Journal. Even the signet had no such effect, and I believe there are still neighbours who believe that a disordered brain conceived the strange adventures, which I have stated here as facts. If there be any doubters, perhaps they will be less doubting, when they read the following:—

Message from Barbarin Valedina and Valedina Barbarin, to Thomé Bateman.

"If it be true that the bravery and honesty of purpose, which you displayed when you resided as an inhabitant of

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the Valley, even when under sentence of death, have enabled you to escape the terrors of the desert, as we are told, accept from us, and the whole of the community, over which we jointly preside, our best and warmest thanks for having shown us the apathy into which we had fallen, and the mistakes in many of our systems, whereby evil-minds took advantages of the brave and good, and virtue was often punished equally with vice. It has come to our ears that the gold, stolen by the renegade, Maurana, whom you call Blackie, is to be found hidden in a small cavern, near the valley of Katomba, where the Orphan Rock rises to heaven like the Great Rock, which still stands as the gateway to the Valley. By a plebiscite, this gold has been awarded to you. May it prove to be of service to you in the barbarous country in which you still live, and may the joy which you derive from it, be a continual reminder of the love and gratitude of those who now wish you a long—perhaps an everlasting farewell.”

P.S.—I've banked the gold, Mr. Editor.

Yours, &c.,

T. B.

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THE END.

ONE OF THE THINGS

WE ARE APT TO GRUMBLE AT

IN FRANCE,

The providing of one's own soap at hotels!

Permit me to remark that this is one of those things

THEY DO MANAGE BETTER IN FRANCE

than we do here. I am strongly of opinion that every one when travelling should carry his or her own soap as one takes one's own hair-brush or sponge. It is much more cleanly, and there can be no better providing in this respect for the hot sun and warm winds and dust of travel than a cone of

"PEARS"

which, under such circumstances, I have found very efficient in the prevention of sunburn and allied annoyances.

FROM AN ARTICLE BY

Dr. Andrew WILSON, F.R.S.E.,

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Editor of "Health."

