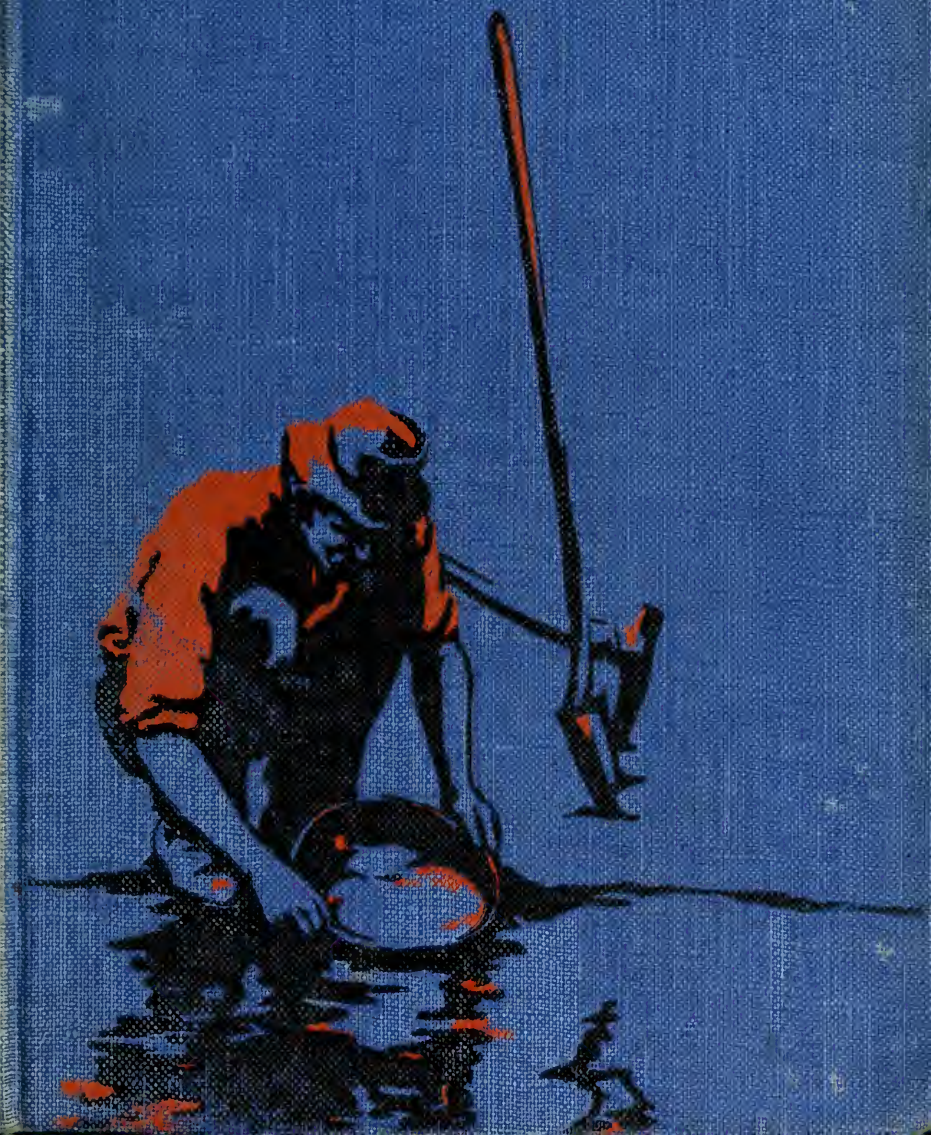


# A Tail of Gold

DAVID HENNESSEY





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A TAIL OF GOLD



# A TAIL OF GOLD

By

DAVID HENNESSEY

Author of "The Outlaw," "The Dis-Honourable,"  
"A Bush Track," etc.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

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TO MY WIFE.

IN MEMORY OF SUMMER DAYS SPENT TOGETHER  
UPON AUSTRALIAN MINING FIELDS.

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## CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
PROLOGUE : A BROKEN THEORY . . . . .	9
I THE MUD MAJOR . . . . .	11
II THE MAJOR'S FETISH . . . . .	17
III THE MAJOR GOES TO CHURCH . . . . .	28
IV MOLLY MAGUIRE . . . . .	34
V RETROSPECT . . . . .	40
VI REEFTON . . . . .	48
VII GAMMAGE FACES THE MUSIC . . . . .	59
VIII JOE CHANDLER'S CHANCE . . . . .	66
IX THE FETISH AGAIN . . . . .	78
X SUNDAY AT SELDOM SEEN . . . . .	85
XI TIMMERING FOREST . . . . .	96
XII ' LIKE A JEWELLER'S SHOP ' . . . . .	109
XIII COO-EEING CREEK . . . . .	114
XIV THE TABLES TURNED . . . . .	123
XV THE WOOLER CAN'T BE FOUND . . . . .	134
XVI BECKY BLUNT AND THE CROWS . . . . .	142

CHAP.		PAGE
XVII	GOLD WAVES ITS MAGIC WAND . . . . .	153
XVIII	THE ECHO GOLD MINE . . . . .	158
XIX	MISS MONCKTON TALKS . . . . .	165
XX	A 'WILD-CAT' SWINDLE . . . . .	172
XXI	MRS. MAGUIRE SWEARS . . . . .	183
XXII	SOME STORMY INTERVIEWS . . . . .	192
XXIII	THE MAGUIRE FAMILY CAMPS OUT . . . . .	200
XXIV	THE WHITE HAND OF A WOMAN . . . . .	207
XXV	THE PASSING OF MATILDA MONCKTON . . . . .	214
XXVI	WHO WAS MISS ST. CLAIR? . . . . .	222
XXVII	DISCOVERY OF TREASURE . . . . .	230
XXVIII	A SKELETON FOUND . . . . .	238
XXIX	THE LYRE-BIRD CLUE . . . . .	243
XXX	STONE WALLS OF CIRCUMSTANCE . . . . .	251
XXXI	THE SECRET CYPHER . . . . .	260
XXXII	OBERON STATION . . . . .	265
XXXIII	MAXWELL SMART'S STORY . . . . .	275
XXXIV	HOUNDS THAT HAD SCENTED BLOOD. . . . .	287
XXXV	CLEANING THE MAJOR'S SLATE . . . . .	296
XXXVI	THE MAGUIRE TOWER . . . . .	308
XXXVII	A TAIL OF GOLD . . . . .	315

## PROLOGUE

### A BROKEN THEORY

A MAN read from an old diary—  
‘ In the miner’s dolly-pot it yielded a fair sample of what one might expect to get out of a bulk crushing from the gold-bearing reef of Humanity. Panned out in the prospecting dish, the sample showed a tail of gold, which, if not wholly satisfactory, gave encouragement to proceed. . . ’

‘ But, Joe . . . ’

‘ No buts, please. I’m just weary of the lure of life, and the lure of women, and the lure of gold. If people would only say what they positively think, and have actually seen, and really know ; but they won’t. So it’s good for them, sometimes, to have the honest truth told in homely Saxon. If you think “ damn ” and mean “ damn ” write damn, and not D and a dash. I had a theory myself once ; but it was a broken theory. Broken ? Confound it, no ! ’ he shouted. ‘ It was smashed to atoms . . . and by the hand of a woman.’

That was all we could get out of him, so I have called this story—which is largely his—‘ A Tail of Gold.’





## CHAPTER I

### THE MUD MAJOR

ONE Christmas Eve, in a cool corner of the big smoking-room of a Melbourne Club, Major Smart might have been heard laying down the law to some of his acquaintances. He had a difficult task in hand, for he was trying to persuade himself, as well as his audience, that what he said was true.

A party had just gone up country, fishing and shooting, and the 'Mud Major,' as he was called, *sub rosa*, in the club, was expatiating upon his knowledge of the Bush, declaring that it was not only free from dangerous wild animals, but absolutely devoid of anything ghostly or uncanny.

'It's too new a country,' he said, 'for anything of that sort,' and he looked around the group of men with a self-complacent air, which challenged any assertion to the contrary.

Among others, a young lieutenant, who had had some experience in the vast solitudes of the interior and had fought in South Africa, was listening to him; and as the Major waxed warm in speech, not a few mysterious occurrences which he had been

unable to explain by natural causes came into his mind.

The men smoked for a while in silence, for in Australia, Christmas Eve is usually alive with old memories and thronged with the ghosts of other days. No one seemed inclined to question Major Smart's assertion.

At last Lieutenant Monckton, throwing away his cigar and moistening his lips from the glass which stood on the table beside him, broke the silence. 'It's Christmas Eve, gentlemen,' he said. 'Let me tell you a story, and Major Smart shall explain the "secrets of the prison house" to us, if he can.

'You have no doubt read in the papers lately about a man who is said to be a typhoid carrier. He seems to be immune himself: but he carries the disease around, and, here and there, makes a present of it to an acquaintance, as a man might give another a cigar.'

A close observer would have noticed that Major Smart, at this, moved uneasily in his chair. They happened to be his cigars which most of the men were smoking, although Monckton was probably unaware of the fact; but he regarded the lieutenant, whom he had known from his childhood, with a look of suspicion and dislike.

'There was a man I knew in South Africa,' continued the lieutenant, 'who carried accidents around with him, in much the same way. Men couldn't have anything to do with him, but something unaccountable happened to them. Usually they died by accident in some remarkable fashion; but he was in no way to blame. I bumped up

against him once in the Basuto Country, and nearly lost my life. I'll tell you the story if you care to hear it.'

Monckton waited for some encouragement to proceed: but he was taken aback by the silence which followed his suggestion. A story was usually acceptable, and Monckton was known to be a good *raconteur*; but to-night no one seemed anxious to listen to him. Not that they were at all discourteous, rather the reverse: but they all made excuses to get away. Colonel Pearce, with uncommon courtesy for him, went over and said 'Good-night,' adding mysteriously: 'No offence to you, lieutenant, only your story might have been a bit rough on Major Smart.'

The Major, during the long silence, had turned as pale as when, one parade day, his horse threw him nearly under the Governor's carriage. Looking at his watch, he muttered something about having another engagement.

It was getting late, but the lateness of the hour did not account for the sudden dispersion of the party. The significance of the thing was that none who were in the know explained to Will Monckton why his story was likely to ruffle the feelings of Boswell Smart.

The lieutenant had innocently hit a snag, as the saying is, and he had cause to remember it afterwards.

Major Smart was colonial rather than Australian. Which is another way of saying that his whole person, carefully groomed and tailored as it was, suggested mediocrity. He was of medium height, and ample girth; but too loudly dressed. He had

light hair, was of middle age, of mixed Hebrew, Manx and Manchester nationality ; and very smooth of speech. Blue evasive eyes looked over a prominent nose and clean shaven jaw. Across his vest glittered a heavy chain, and on the fourth finger of his right hand there shone a diamond ring. To use a mining illustration, a bulk sample of him panned out would have shown much mica glitter but little gold.

A large brass plate at the entrance to commodious offices in Collins Street described him as an Attorney at Law and Commissioner for Affidavits ; but he never practised in the Courts, and so far as any one knew, his only business was the legal management, as co-trustee, of a gold mine in which he and his family held the chief interest. Bye-products were company promoting and mining speculation ; but these were not nearly so remunerative as the steady old gold mine, which had once belonged to his father, and which for over twenty years had returned in dividends an average of several thousand pounds annually.

He was reputed wealthy by business men, but was not greatly esteemed ; for Boswell Smart's luck was a one-sided thing, which rarely benefited any one but himself. However, he had influence and followers, as will most men who have money at command, whether it be their own or other people's.

How he got into the military will be readily understood, when it is explained that he had money and influence, and that his father was there before him in the old days of civilian officers. He used to tell how his ' old man ' had spent a fortune upon

the regiment in the good old days of gold mining ; but Boswell had inherited none of his father's generosity, and knew as little of soldiering as he did of law. However, the square peg having got into the round hole, it stopped there, as it has a fashion of doing in Australia. Smart had been purposely affronted by fellow-officers both at mess and on parade in the hope that he would resign his commission ; but the title of Major sounded too dignified to be readily relinquished. So they had to tolerate him, with his led horse and officious manners ; they laughed at him behind his back, and, because he was afraid to ride, called him the Mud Major.

He was a bit of a mystery moreover, for through a quarrel with his father over money matters, he had been absent from Victoria for some years prior to the old gentleman's death. He returned then with a considerable amount of money, which he said he had made in mining.

He was extremely reticent about these years, which he was supposed to have spent in Queensland ; but Mrs. Madge Maguire, who probably knew more about him than any one else, had been heard to remark that the Major had a cupboard in his office which contained a skeleton.

Anyhow, on his return he dropped into his father's shoes, and took the old man's place, so far as he was able, both in the military and in the hurly-burly of Melbourne life. He had a strange habit of starting when spoken to and an astonishing right-about-face jump when he wished to cut an acquaintance ; but society neglected him, for he was no gentleman, and it was rumoured that he had a fearful fatality per-



taining to him. It was seriously asserted that he dared not ride, or drive, or sail a boat, or fire off a gun, or indeed travel by coach, steamer, or rail; for, whenever he did so, something was almost sure to happen, by which the Mud Major was injured, and some other man killed.

Probably this was an exaggeration; but at the time of this story no less than ten persons who had been associated with him in business had paid the penalty, in sudden death or frightful accident, and always, somehow, to the Major's advantage.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MAJOR'S FETISH

SMART left the club in company with the Hon. Ebenezer Gammage of the Upper House, and an honorary member of the Cabinet. This gentleman was also managing director of a company which had offices in the same palatial building as the Major.

They had known each other for several years and were mutually interested in sundry mining ventures ; few of which, however, had proved very remunerative to Gammage. The heavy calls of a silver mining company floated by Smart had recently been a heavy drain upon him, and he had told the Major that morning that he intended to forfeit his shares.

Smart took the opportunity, as they walked to the railway-station, to advise him to hold on ; but Gammage shook his head.

' I'm thankful it's a " No Liability " company,' said he. ' I'm not going to throw any more good money after bad. I'm sorry to have to forfeit, Major,' he continued in a more friendly tone, ' you must have lost a lot of money yourself by the dashed thing, and I'd like to help you ; but you know my

opinion of the "Silver Streak" is that it's nothing better than a pot-hole, and I don't intend to chuck any more of my good sovereigns into it.'

'Very well,' replied the Major without any display of ill-feeling. 'But you can do nothing now until after Christmas. This is Tuesday, and to-morrow's Christmas Day; there'll be nothing doing before Friday, and the Stock Exchange will not open until Monday. I shall be in town for an hour or two on Friday morning, and will look you up. There may be news from the mine by then.'

They walked down Swanston Street to the Central, and together boarded an incoming train: they lived only a section apart, on the Suburban line.

On reaching his station Smart rose to leave, and as he did so drew out his watch and noticed that it was ten-thirty-five. As he closed the carriage door, and stood by it for a moment, Gammage gave him what Smart thought was a peculiar look, and asked: 'Are you going to your office to-morrow?'

'Not likely,' replied the Major. 'Christmas Day; no mail and probably ninety in the shade. No, sir! I shall attend morning service and afterward be found at home, with roast goose and plum pudding, in the bosom of my family. Good-night!'

They laughed as the train moved on; but the Major's mind was ill at ease as he turned his steps homeward. He had been nettled by Will Monckton's proposed story. He was not quite sure whether the lieutenant intended his remarks to be personal; and some of the others evidently took it that way. Monckton was a confounded upstart, with his swagger about having been in active

service. 'I'd like to put all these beggarly South Africans into a bag,' muttered the Major, 'and sink them in the Bay. Anyhow, the rotters haven't much chance of promotion; we can block them there. And so Monckton bumped up against a fellow with a fetish in South Africa and nearly lost his life. Pity he did not quite lose it, it would have saved a lot of trouble; and now the beggar's bumped up against me!'

The Major might have been heard to chuckle after this, but he did not chuckle long.

'Hang it all!' he exclaimed, *sotto voce*, 'how I hate Christmas! For three years now it's always brought trouble, and this one is no better. There's that Tasmanian option to pay or forfeit next week, and if Gammage draws out of the "Silver Streak" and there's no change in the formation, I shall have to carry the dashed mine myself, or let the whole thing go; most of the others are slackers. Then there is that strike at the Cyanide Works, and the bank manager, of course, wants to see me about my account—the idiots always want to see you at the most inconvenient time. It's like my luck! I shouldn't wonder if something else happens. That wretched old fetish doggerel has been swinging to and fro across my brain all day—

“ Ay, though he's buried in a cave  
And trodden down with stones  
And years have rotted off his flesh  
The world shall see his bones.”

'That's a pleasant rhyme for a man with half a

score of dead people to his credit to have swinging through his brain on Christmas Eve. I must have heard it fifty times to-night at the club. But it isn't true. Her bones will never be discovered, and if they are, who cares? There are scores of skeletons buried in old shafts and drives upon Australian gold fields, that will never be discovered until the Day of Judgment. Ah! the Day of Judgment! Isn't that a most inopportune thing to think about on Christmas Eve?'

But the thoughts which so strangely passed through the mind of Boswell Smart on this particular Christmas Eve, were brushed away later on by a glass of whisky and the laughter of the girls and boys of his family. It was the ghost of something which belonged to the dead past; but the years were so many that it had almost ceased to matter. The ghost had grown familiar and ancient, so that it had lost much of its fearsomeness; as such things will, when many other things have piled themselves above them.

However, Smart could not shake off the feeling that something else was going to happen. He had hoped all that day to get an important telegram from the mine manager of the Silver Streak, and after some thought he decided that if it came he would let Gammage forfeit his shares. It would be all the better for himself and the remaining shareholders if things turned out as he hoped and expected. The wire might have been taken in by the caretaker.

So he determined to slip quietly into town early next morning. No one would be about. He was



not sure but that it might even then be lying on the table of his office.

Miners, mining speculators, and mining gamblers are all to be found in Australia. It was to the last class that Smart belonged. It seemed to have been born in him, for, although he had never lifted pick or shovel in his life for serious labour, he had the mining mania to his finger tips. Ordinary mining men left business alone during holidays ; but not he. The lure of gold enticed him back to his office at unwonted hours. He was always expecting some great news. So, on Christmas morning, he left by an early train for Melbourne, without telling any one of his destination. His wife understood that he was going for a morning walk and would meet the family at church, and as he was not a man to question she said nothing more about it.

Few Melbourne people visit the city proper before noon on holidays. The advent of the motor-car has somewhat altered things, but at the time of this story, the principal streets of the city presented an appearance of absolute desertion in the early hours of Sunday, Good Friday, and Christmas Day. Bright sunlight shone upon broad roadways and wide pavements, flanked by gaily furnished shop windows and all the panoply of modern retail trade ; but save for a solitary policeman or caretaker, whole blocks gave no indication of the tens of thousands of busy feet which, on other days, trod those pavements.

Somehow the Major felt almost ashamed of himself as his heavy tread broke the silence of Collins Street. Not one of the hundreds of well-dressed

citizens he was wont to meet at ten in the morning was there. The shop windows were mostly without shutters or blinds, and it was as though every one of them was an open mouth saying : ' What dost thou here, Major ? '

He looked up and down the deserted street before opening, with a Yale key, the big door of the huge building in which he had his offices. Pushing it gently back he entered quickly, closed the door again, stood in the marble vestibule, and listened.

He could hardly have explained why he did not wish to be seen. Surely he had a right to enter his own offices at any time. There were dozens of them in that great building ; but he seemed to be the only person about, and everything was silent as the tomb.

The caretaker and his wife lived on the topmost floor ; but they were away for Christmas, and the lifts had been left upon the ground floor.

The Major, who was not used to much exertion, mounted the white marble staircase with deliberation. The morning was warm, and he removed his tall silk hat, to wipe the perspiration from his forehead, as he paused upon each landing and listened.

The silence seemed strange to him, for on ordinary days the great building was as busy as a hive of bees ; but, save the noise he himself made, not a sound was to be heard.

Reaching the floor where his own offices and those of Ebenezer Gammage were situated, he took some keys from his pocket, and was about to open the door of his private room ; but instead, he unlocked the outer office, usually occupied by a clerk and messenger.

Everything had been left in order, swept and dusted. Some opened letters were on the table ; he glanced at them, they were only circulars and accounts. The telegram he had come for was not there ; so, with a careless glance around, he walked over to the inner office door, upon which was written in gold letters, ' Private, Major Boswell Smart.' He lit a cigar before unlocking the door.

After turning the handle he put the keys back in his pocket, thinking the while that the telegram might have been slipped by the caretaker under the outer door ; then he passed in.

But, upon the threshold he stopped . . . looked . . . tried to speak. The exclamation froze upon his lips. At last it came. ' My God ! What's this ? '

Confronting him, leaning back in a large leather-covered armchair, was a white-faced figure. And as he looked, cold sweat broke out upon his forehead and the blood went surging back to his heart. A woman, between thirty and forty years of age, confronted him. One who had been comely in life but now, stiff and cold, sat there with dark lines under the eyes, stone dead.

Callous as he was, a nameless horror filled his mind, as he fell, rather than sat, upon a chair. Suddenly he sprang to his feet, however, and hurried into the outer office. He remembered that he had left the outside door upon the latch : but not a sound was to be heard in the great building. He locked the door, and returned to the inner room.

The corpse was totally unknown to him. The head had fallen back upon the leather covering of the chair : the glazed, open eyes were almost black :

the hair dark : the face full and round, and well-nourished. The dress was plain, but of good material ; one ungloved hand displayed three rings, two of them costly, the other a plain gold wedding ring. She was not tall, for sitting in the chair, her feet were off the ground.

The horrified man looked around, to see if this mysterious visitor had brought bag or parcel, or anything by which she might be identified ; there was nothing to be seen. How she had come there, and where she had come from, and what had caused her death, were thoughts that hurried rapidly through the Major's affrighted mind. Was it another victim to prove still further the existence of his insatiable fetish ?

Suddenly, with wide open eyes, the Major started. He had made a discovery . . . an extraordinary discovery ! It was not a chair of his office that the corpse was seated on ; but one of a suite which adorned the more sumptuously furnished private office of the Hon. Ebenezer Gammage.

The mystery deepened ! He had previously supposed that the woman had come into his office alive ; but how could this have been, in view of Gammage's chair ? At this he went over, and felt the hand of the corpse ; the fingers were cold and rigid. She must have been dead since yesterday.

For ten fearful minutes Smart sat there, trying to think what he ought to do : ' Ring up the police ; go for a doctor ; see if any one else was in the building ; or leave everything as it was, say nothing, and get back home as quickly as possible.'

Just then the cathedral bells commenced to ring,

flooding the hot still air of the city with their call to worship. The chimes rose and fell, and reverberated through the streets, which now echoed to the tread of a few passing feet. It was too late to leave the building in the expectation of no one seeing him. He would have to wait until the church services had begun.

Then a great idea came to him. He knew nothing about this woman. She had died in one of Ebenezer Gammage's chairs. He would return the chair and its contents to Ebenezer Gammage's private office, and say nothing about it.

'Let Gammage see to it!'

Upon this, several other thoughts presented themselves: Gammage had come into the club late the previous night. Where had he been, and what had he been doing? Why had he asked him whether he was going to his office on Christmas morning?

Ah! Why indeed?

A dangerous light shone in the Major's eyes: 'Gammage knows something about this thing,' he thought, 'he may have put the woman in here himself; she was sitting in one of his chairs when she died.' Then he smiled; he had a duplicate key which opened his neighbour's private office. He would put the chair, with its occupant, back again!

With a sigh of profound relief Smart opened his door and looked out into the wide corridor, and listened . . . no one was to be seen . . . nothing to be heard.

The Major stole quickly out on tip-toe and unlocked the door of his neighbour's board room, and, as noiselessly as possible, wheeled in the chair with the dead

woman, and placed it hurriedly at the foot of the large directors' table. Then he stealthily closed the door and slipped back into his own room.

It was with a sense of supreme satisfaction that he looked around as he closed the door, for just then he heard a sound from below.

Some one else had entered the building; he was only just in time. He listened at his door. Silence again! It must have been some one on another flat!

As may be surmised, the events of this fearful half-hour had left the Major considerably shaken, and his hand trembled as he poured himself out a glass of whisky, obtained from a private cupboard. 'At any rate,' he thought, 'I've got rid of the corpse, and Gammage can do what he likes with it. It was in his chair!'

He lit his cigar again, and sat at his desk, for he did not wish to leave the building until after eleven, when people generally would be in church. Presently, close by a cedar bookcase, near where the easy-chair had stood, he saw something lying upon the carpet. It appeared to be a letter. He picked it up hastily, and with trembling fingers tore it open. It had been dropped there by the dead woman. Smart read it with ashy face, and then dropped into his chair, staring at it with dim eyes, as he held it in his hand.

He knew now who the dead woman was, and tried to speak her name; but his lips were palsied with dismay. His mind was, for the moment, unbalanced, and imagination played tricks with him. He babbled of a dead captain in the North, who had been his partner.

Presently he recovered himself somewhat, and muttered thickly: 'Another dead! It's all mine!' He drank more of the whisky, which seemed to revive him, and then whispered hoarsely: 'She must have come here to tell me of her husband's death, and climbing the stairs, have died of heart failure. What an awful thing! and I've put her in Gammage's board room. There'll be the devil of a row, and heaven only knows what will be the end of it; but I can't bring her back, for there are people in the building.

'I must get out of this or I shall smother!'

As he stood once more in the quiet street, and the glare of the hot sunlight struck his face, he closed his eyes to recover himself; but as he did so dead faces stared upon him, and every one of them was the face of her whom he had left in the silence of Ebenezer Gammage's board room.

'I shall go mad,' he thought, as he opened his eyes, 'unless I brace myself up. . . And this is Christmas Day!'

He hurried to the railway-station. But as he did so, again and again, like some haunting terror, from his subconscious memory, the doleful strain repeated itself—

'Ay, though he's buried in a cave  
And trodden down with stones  
And years have rotted off his flesh  
The world shall see his bones.'



## CHAPTER III

### THE MAJOR GOES TO CHURCH

**A**T the Central Railway Station the Major caught an outgoing train for Toorak. He had met no one he knew, and although late, he decided to slip into the church, as he had promised his wife, and walk home with the family.

The church was near the station, and he managed to find a seat at the back, just inside the door, unnoticed save by a few unimportant people. He was thankful that no one knew of his intention to call at his office, and he was very hopeful that no one in town had recognized him.

Sitting at the back, he could look all over the church. He had guessed that Gammage would be present, for he had seen the family motor-car outside. His own pew was occupied by his wife and family.

Nearer to the pulpit was the square pew belonging to old Miss Monckton and Mrs. Maguire ; there was room for three more in it, and Molly Maguire and Will Monckton being in attendance, the seat was fairly filled, as, indeed, was the whole building.



Prayers were over, and the old vicar was preaching a Christmas sermon which made a singular medley with the Major's thoughts.

When Smart sat down, he heard the vicar say : 'Brethren, the decorations of the church, the prayers we have offered, and the Christmas hymns we have sung, remind us that this birthday of our Lord should be kept by us here with solemn joy before it is observed with greetings and congratulations in the home circle.'

The Major shivered, notwithstanding the heat of the day, as he looked across to where the Hon. Ebenezer sat at the end of his pew. Mrs. Gammage had on a new hat with ostrich feathers, and three of the Miss Gammages and two young brothers occupied the rest of the seat. They were all well dressed, and made a very presentable appearance.

'I wonder,' thought the Major, who was still a bit unhinged, 'whether, after all, it may have been a murder, and whether Gammage will be hanged. I shall have to slip out quietly at the close. I couldn't trust myself to speak to him.'

But he had lost an interesting part of the sermon. The minister had been telling the congregation how a Christmas card had been placed upon his plate at the breakfast table that morning. It had upon it a wreath of holly berries encircling the miniature picture of a snowy landscape, and underneath was written the old message, 'A merry Christmas to you!' 'How like some magic mirror,' said the vicar, 'that card recalled the Christmases of long ago. The gloom of the old land ; winter was upon the landscape, and snow upon the ground ;

the pond upon the village green, or in the city park, was frozen inches thick, and merry skaters glanced swiftly past, and the keen, frosty, bracing air sent the quick blood tingling through the veins.'

By this reference to an English Christmas, the preacher had evidently gripped the attention of his congregation, for there was a hushed silence in the church. But it did not grip the attention of Boswell Smart. Nothing would just then!

Gammage moved and mopped his face with a silk handkerchief, and the Major, whose mind was possessed with the thought of the dead woman in his neighbour's office, thought, 'Pity it's not winterly weather here just now; there'll be a bad smell in Gammage's office by Friday.'

'Life,' continued the preacher, 'has been chequered since then; but we have not forgotten . . . Voices come to us through the long distance, and we see visions that belong to other days.'

'I can't stand this any longer,' said the agitated Major, almost audibly, 'that dead woman—and visions of other days indeed! Good heaven! haven't I been punished enough, without this thing coming upon me? I must get out of this. I was a fool to come. I might have known that on Christmas morning old Payne would have some mournful thing to tell us about ancient memories and past misdeeds. Curse old memories, I say! I ought to be rich, and I mean to be rich. I've never murdered any one myself, and never intend to, and the ill-luck that others have had, when on my business, hasn't been my fault. All I want is gold, and it's to be had in plenty in Australia, and I mean to have it,

and no prating old fool of a parson is going to stop me, either.'

That is what the Major said to himself; but to the verger, who sat near the door, he whispered as he went out: 'Beautiful sermon, Bentley, I feel a bit faint with the heat; a little heart trouble, nothing serious. I'll stand outside in the fresh air, I think; or listen in the porch. I may walk home presently without waiting for my people. You might let them know, please.'

In this way, the Major effected a clever retreat. He had been to church. The verger could testify to that. He had successfully checkmated Gammage's move in putting a dead woman into his office . . . if Gammage had done it . . . and moreover he had seen him in church with his family, and yet avoided a meeting, which might have been embarrassing.

Yet, as he walked homeward, he told himself that he had no appetite for his Christmas dinner, and no relish for Christmas festivities. A great fear was upon him, and more than once he resolved to go and see Gammage, and to make a clean breast of it. But his courage failed him, and finally he resolved, like the coward he was, to let events take their course.

He was afraid that in wheeling the chair with the dead woman into Ebenezer Gammage's office, he had made a mistake. 'Such tragedies,' he thought, 'are best left alone,' and he cursed his luck, in that he had gone back to the office at all that morning.

Some men are always blaming their luck.

It was usual for the Smart family to have a kind of re-union of friends and relations on the evening

of Christmas Day, with supper on a wide veranda overlooking the lawn. A number of relatives and friends dropped in as usual ; but it was explained to them that the Major was not feeling well ; and the gathering, so far as he was concerned, was not a success.

On the whole, Major Smart was, an easy-going husband and father, and was usually jolly enough with his children ; but, he paced the garden walks alone that night, smoking ; and his wife, cowed by some remark he had made to her, said to the children : ' You'd better leave your father alone to-night, he seems frightfully out of sorts.'

On the warm night air there came to him from the house the sound of music and dancing, and laughter ; but the dark mood was on him. It was not now so much this dead woman that occupied his thoughts as that her death had furnished further evidence to him of his evil fetish. His restless brain would not remain idle ; he was plotting now to get Will Monckton in some way associated with him in business, in order that he might become another victim.

He would have to be careful however, lest suspicion should attach to himself, for he had a reverent interest in the Monckton property, and his project was somehow to secure Miss Monckton's money for himself, and the hand of Molly Maguire for his eldest son Bob. In both matters Will Monckton blocked the way.

He marched up and down under the oak trees, in the warm summer moonlit night, lost to all Christmas sentiment and kindly feeling toward his

fellows. He wanted to be rich . . . very rich . . . and it mattered nothing to him who went under so long as he came out on top. Fearing the dead and hating the living, he was no companion that night for the gay throng which was keeping Christmas under his roof.

It is not to be wondered that he would not go in.

## CHAPTER IV

### MOLLY MAGUIRE

THERE had been a bond between the Moncktons, Smarts and Maguires, better understood by Australians of the olden days than by others. The late Harold Monckton, banker, Charley Maguire, squatter, and Boswell Smart, mine owner, had been shipmates; and in the days of long voyages to Australia by sailing vessel to have been shipmates was accounted by many to be akin to actual blood relationship. When a man told you that he and another were shipmates, you might usually conclude that they were something more than friends.

These three men came to Australia together on board the *Great Britain*, and in the absence of other relatives had been drawn to each other, so that they had been like brothers in the rough days of early Victorian gold mining. All three had prospered, all three were now deceased; but the feeling of kinship had continued with their posterity. The young people were on friendly visiting terms. And as for Will Monckton and Molly Maguire, they hardly knew themselves at this period of our story whether

they were brother and sister, sweethearts, or only chums.

They had grown up next door to each other in adjoining Toorak mansions, known as The Firs and The Poplars, with only a three rail fence dividing the grounds ; in which fence, by the way, was a white gate, with a well beaten path on either side of it, so worn as to suggest that the two houses were on very friendly terms.

Old Harold Monckton, who had built the mansion with the fir trees, was a life-long chum of Charley Maguire, who had erected the big house with the poplars, while Miss Monckton of The Firs, who was now quite an elderly lady, and the more youthful Mrs. Maguire, of The Poplars, had long been like sisters.

Not that the two families were much alike in their tastes and leanings. The Maguires were all for the Bush, and spent a good deal of their time on a station owned by them ; while the Moncktons were for the town and society and the military. But for years it had been a settled thing that Christmas should be kept by both families, in good old-fashioned style, in Melbourne, and on alternate years they joined together in united festivities at The Firs and The Poplars. This year it was the turn of The Poplars, and invitations had been issued to a number of friends. But the Moncktons and Maguires were on a far more friendly footing with each other than with the Smarts.

For the information of some readers, it may be explained that Christmas in Australia is, in many respects, different to Christmas in older and colder



lands. The gathering of kinsfolk and the coming home for Christmas are less noticeable, as holidays are more numerous, and sons and daughters better able to visit the paternal home at week ends. All this tends to make a family reunion on Christmas Day less common in the Sunny South. Then, too, the hot summer weather of December makes Christmas, of necessity, more of an out-door holiday. Picnics and sports are held where cool breezes blow from the ocean.

Probably too, as the Rev. Charles Payne pointed out in his sermon, Christmas is less of a religious festival in Australia. Santa Claus is still of interest to the children ; but the dear old Saint has become shoppy in the Commonwealth. The big Christmas picture advertisements of the stores are plastered on every hoarding. There are no Christmas Clothing Clubs, and few, if any, starving mouths to feed ; no cold to nip and perish the children of the poor. And the Child-Christ sentiment, which makes Christmas so essentially a religious festival in Europe and America, is largely wanting.

Both Miss Monckton and Mrs. Maguire agreed that it was beautiful to think of people in all Christian lands being possessed with a common sentiment, which made it easier to be good and generous, and easier to forgive.

‘ But,’ interjected Will Monckton, who had travelled and seen something of the world, ‘ the fact remains, that although an Australian Christmas is, to the bulk of people, less domestic, it is less exclusive in regard to strangers and on the whole freer and more open-handed and neighbourly than elsewhere. In Europe, Christmas is kept with closed doors ; we



keep it here with doors wide open ; and,' continued Will, looking across at Molly with a smile, for they were having mid-day dinner together, as on Sunday, 'it's the way we like it best.'

'Indeed we do,' said Molly, laughing, 'it's a fine dance we'll have to-night upon the grass, in the big marquee, beneath the trees.'

Molly Maguire had inherited from her mother a delicious spice of Irish brogue, which added no little to the attractiveness of her conversation.

Dinner over, Will went off to the stables, to smoke a cigar and have a look at the horses. He took Tommy, Molly's only brother, a boy of thirteen, with him, and the three ladies were left in the drawing-room, talking about the evening and their expected guests.

Molly, sitting at the piano, had been running her fingers lightly over the keys, possibly intending to express thereby the brightness of her glad young heart, when, jumping up with a mock curtsy to the piano, and two or three steps of a waltz, she glided lightly over toward where her mother sat beside Miss Monckton.

'Stand there, Molly!' called out Mrs. Maguire, 'and let us look at you. Do you know, child, that next month you'll be seventeen?'

Molly laughed, and bent her dainty little form to the two ladies, and, with a twinkle in her blue velvet eyes, stood up to be admired. She had intended to go off to the boys in the stable, and take a few lumps of sugar with her, for her pet pony ; but she stood dutifully before her mother, while that lady discoursed to Miss Monckton.

'She gets more like her father every day; he had the fun of the world in the corners of his mouth, and lovely blue eyes like Molly's. Of course he was a great deal taller. They used to say it was wonderful how devoted he was to me, and to think that a little lass like Madge McCarthy could have absolutely bewitched a handsome man like Charley Maguire. He was much older than I was, but I loved him dearly.'

Her listeners were both smiling by this time at these Christmas reminiscences; but Mrs. Maguire went on without heeding them. She knew very well that they were interested, although they smiled.

'Molly has my hands and feet and ankles'; at this Molly drew up her dainty muslin dress, to display her shapely feet and ankles, then turned her proud little hands on several sides, and looked at them with comical approval.

'You're a vain girl Molly,' said her mother, laughing, 'I'm afraid we shall spoil you.'

'There's no fear, mother,' said Molly, crossing over and kissing her and then Miss Monckton, 'but you surely wouldn't have me plain looking, when you remember what a dear handsome father I had.'

'No,' said Mrs. Maguire dreamily, 'you're a daughter any one might be proud of, Molly. I love you just as you are, and it's pleasant to know that you are so much like your good father, only I'd be pleased to see you with a little more colour in your cheeks, and a little more careful with your clothes.'

Molly pouted her pretty lips, and replied: 'Don't scold, mother darling, it's Christmas. Sure, I'll be dressed to-night in white silk, like a bride; and when

they woo me and flatter me, and dance me almost off my feet, I'll stop and say to myself : " Excuse me, Molly darling ; but your mother says you must be a bit more careful with your clothes." "

With another sweeping curtsy, Molly ran off laughing to the stables, and Miss Monckton said : ' She's a dear madcap ; but who would have her other than she is.'

Who indeed ? For Molly Maguire had long been the darling of two households, both of which had done their best to spoil her, but without success. She had her moods, of course, but without them, she would not have been Molly. She was that dearest of womankind : an Australian bush girl, trained in the simple life in the country, but educated in the city. A self-possessed lady in the drawing-room, but an adept in the saddle, with a clear brain, observant eye, steady hand, and heart of gold. Miss Monckton used to say that there was not very much of her ; but had she been bigger, she might have been vain and conceited. So, although something of a madcap, Molly was simple, loving, and guileless. A mother's girl in the home, a boy's girl in the saddle, and a dear good girl always and everywhere.

Miss Monckton's regret was that there were not more like her.

## CHAPTER V

### RETROSPECT

**I**T is a curious problem, as to what is the mature and proper age, at which a young girl's heart should, spontaneously, awaken to the knowledge of love for the opposite sex.

Molly certainly loved Will immensely, and would have said so without the least diffidence or hesitation, for he was her friend and comrade, and best of chums ; but in view of such an open expression of her affection for Will, it is needless to add that for Molly the supreme affection of a woman for a man was not yet awakened ; and in Molly's case was seemingly not likely to be awakened soon.

She had so much to love. Her life was so full of beautiful objects and sympathetic friends, upon whom the hunger of the heart could satisfy itself. She had so much to call her own, so many people and animals she could pet and be kind to.

The vicar, who was a very true friend of Will Monckton's, held strong views as to the unwisdom of mere boys and girls courting and marrying. He was greatly interested in Molly as well as Will, and knew of the strong affection he had for her ; but he coun-

elled patience. In such a case as Molly's the master passion was less likely to come to maturity in youthful days.

'Sexual love in early youth,' said Mr. Payne to his wife, 'almost always ends disastrously, and it is mostly brought about by the lack of love elsewhere. Misfortune, disappointment, poverty, and unloving surroundings at home age the heart and make sexual lovers of boys and girls before they have learnt the alphabet of that which makes life worth living. Of their very nature, young hearts must find something to love, something to be kind to, and if they do not find it at home, they will look for it abroad.'

Molly had a whole world of things to love, besides her mother, and Tommy, and Will, and a host of friends. She loved Nature and the country, and the beautiful things her bright eyes saw there. The paintings which adorned their home told of her love of art, and how she had learnt to reproduce upon canvas the charm of nature. Molly was too much enamoured of the good and beautiful in life, in books, in music and in nature, to be troubled with that infirmity of modern society—the mental yawn.

'Ah!' exclaimed the vicar, 'was there ever such an age of yawning? Such an age of deafness too—for when the mouth yawns the muscles of the head promptly close the ears. So society, superficially educated and mostly irreligious, goes after exciting pleasures to keep itself from yawning; and the poor young heart, bereft of the innocent things it ought to love, yawns itself into youthful indiscretions, which shrivel up the soul.'

Sarah Monckton was the aunt of Lieutenant Harold William Monckton, who had been called Willie in his youth, and Will in later years. When his mother died he was a strong, big, thoughtful boy of eleven, and two years after, when left an orphan by the death of his father, he was a grave handsome lad, with dark curly hair and hazel eyes, which, not without fire in them, seemed to see more things than do most people's.

At this crisis in the boy's history—for such is the loss of parents—his aunt's mature affection almost made up for the want of a mother's care and father's wise authority. It was wonderful, the love the lone rich woman had for her dead brother's son. And Will, thoughtful beyond his years, did all he could to repay his Aunt Sarah for her devotion to him.

Thus, through deaths and other causes, the two houses became to the children almost one; the elders fraternised, and the servants used the friendly gate to gossip in the evenings, not so much of common family failings as of neighbourly deeds—and of the girl and boys.

At six, Molly was a self-assertive, engaging, but half-spoiled little beauty, until a brother came, named Tommy, who was the cause of endless trouble to her, which sometimes, even with tears, she confided to Will.

' You know, Mother says it's my duty to love the little man 'cause he's my brother; but it's hard to love him when he pulls my doll's hair off in his little hands, and pokes her eyes with his fingers. And he's so strong, and won't let go, and then, of course, I slap his hands and make him; then he howls, and

nurse or mother comes. He's really a very tiresome child.'

Thus Molly, and Will, and Tom, grew up together ; and Will went from school to college, passing into youthful maturity before they well knew what was happening, or how the golden years of youth, so fair and unforgettable, were slipping into the dim avenues of past remembrances.

Then the war in South Africa came, and when barely twenty, the call of the Empire turned Will Monckton's head. It was the only time he had really opposed his aunt's will. She would not hear of his going ; but it was of no use, he had had some military training at college and prided himself on his proficiency, and he would go. At last Miss Monckton consented, and when he had gone into town to join the contingent, Molly climbed into her lap and put her arms around her neck, and they cried together, until they both laughed when Molly sagely said : ' I suppose, Auntie, we'll have to let him go ; indeed if I wasn't so little, I'd go myself and be a nurse, so as to take care of him.'

Will came back from the war a bronzed man of three-and-twenty, who might have been taken for twenty-eight or thirty. Molly was under seventeen. She was a bit shy ; Will had altered so ; but the old affection had not abated, and she listened to his tales of privation, and battle, and endurance, and of the honours he had won, until, like Desdemona, she loved him for the dangers he had passed, and he loved her that she admired and appreciated him ; but it was more the love of a brother and sister for each other at this time than anything else.



It may be guessed that Will and Molly, at twenty-three and seventeen, were on the very border of that enchanted ground where men and women become all the world to each other, and experience those exquisite emotions of bliss and pain, which embrace the heights of heaven and depths of hell : that greatest thing in the world, which in the noblest of the race, burns and stings, and throbs with bliss, and melts in tears, and cries with laughter ; and gives to human existence delight, and dignity, and loveliness.

It may be that Will and Molly at this time were too near to each other, too well conditioned and mutually self-possessed, to be in love. A flash of fire, a rival, some untoward circumstance, some stroke of misfortune, and the great secret might at any moment be revealed. But those who loved them best would wish them to remain a little longer in the paradise of happy ignorance, as were our first parents in that wondrous garden.

That evening at The Poplars, Mrs. Maguire, with Molly and Miss Monckton, received their guests in the big drawing-room. It was a friendly function and most of them were greeted by their Christian names.

'Mother's in great fettle to-night,' whispered Tommy to Will Monckton, as Mrs. Maguire swept graciously forward to shake hands with Mr. and Mrs. Payne, and their two daughters.

Mrs. Maguire was dressed, like Molly, in white silk ; but with flashing diamonds. Although she owned to being forty-five, she might have passed for thirty-five, only that Molly was seventeen. Taller than her daughter, she had the air and deportment of a woman who had been used to good society all her



life; yet she was born on a way-back station, and, as a girl, had been used to riding with only a bag on the back of a bare-backed horse, to bring up the cows for milking. But she had some Irish blue blood in her veins, and breeding tells.

People wondered why she had not married again; but she was too well off as a widow; too cold in her temperament, and too used to having her own way; to say nothing of the fact that, in her own erratic fashion, she had been in love with her husband, the handsome Charley Maguire.

She was a creature of many impulses and not a few failings; but put her into a silk dress, with super-excellent jewellery, to receive half-a-dozen or more of her acquaintances, and she became the incomparable hostess at once. At other times, she would chatter depreciative nonsense about the vicar, and make fun of his wife and daughters, until Miss Monckton, after laughing until she almost cried, would, at last, fairly quarrel with her. Sometimes, when much exasperated, to relieve her feelings, she would mutter lurid words in Irish; but to-night, her voice was sweet and low, and her demeanour such as the angel Gabriel might have worn, when welcoming a sainted spirit into paradise. The vicar was charmed, the men all took to Mrs. Maguire; but his wife and daughters were amazed, for they had heard and seen her otherwise. However, Mrs. Maguire was a woman of resource, and she held her own splendidly on most occasions, caring very little what the women thought of her, so long as she remained a favourite with the men.

‘What are you doing here, Bob?’ Molly asked a

red-headed, freckled youth later in the evening. He had strolled out of the moonlight into the fringe of onlookers in the marquee which sheltered the dancers. 'I thought you had a family gathering of your own at home?'

'I preferred to come and have a look at you, Molly,' replied the young gentleman, who was the Major's eldest son, studying at the Melbourne University, and known as Robert Boswell Smart. 'Can't you give me a dance?' he continued with a saucy smile.

'Not one, Bobbie. We've no programmes; but I'm engaged every dance till eleven, and then we're going to sit down to supper.'

'Let me take you in then?'

'No, my dear boy. It's Will's party and I'm promised; but excuse me, I've only just slipped away from Will for a minute, to speak to mother. Go and dance with Lucy Payne over there, she wants a partner.'

'No fear!' replied Bob. 'If I can't have you I'm off home. I hate to see that Will Monckton hugging you about. There's no standing him since he came back from South Africa.'

'You disgraceful boy!' exclaimed Molly indignantly, 'how dare you say Will hugs me about! He does nothing of the sort. We're chums!'

'Ah, well, you know what I mean, Molly. I beg your pardon, but kindly tell the toff that Dad's coming over to see him in the morning and will be obliged if he won't go out.'

'So that's what brought you over.'

'Nothing of the sort, I came over on my legs;

but the main attraction, as you well know, was your dear dainty self.'

Molly made the young gentleman a mock curtsy, and replied, 'Thank you! I'll tell Will. Now you go back home at once, and make yourself agreeable there. And eat your Christmas supper with your ain folk, and try and be a good boy.'

There was more on the tip of Molly's tongue, for she was by no means partial to the young man, and she resented his reference to herself and Will; but her father and his grandfather were shipmates, so Molly thought it would not do for their descendants to have words with each other on Christmas Day.

## CHAPTER VI

### REEFTON

THE Major was distraught and preoccupied the following morning. He had slept badly, and had no appetite for breakfast. He scanned the newspaper with feverish interest ; but found nothing there about yesterday's tragedy. Evidently the corpse still sat undiscovered in the silence of Gammage's board room.

He would have given much to have been able to tell his wife, and he looked across to her when the others had left the breakfast room with the words on his lips ; but a sickening sense of apprehension choked his utterance. Yet as he had told himself a hundred times, he had not killed the woman.

'No,' said an accusing conscience ; 'but you benefit by her death. You put her into Gammage's office, and with such a weight in the chair, the wheel marks of the castors will show that she came there from your private room. Remember what a hurry you were in, you may have dropped something that will betray you. Your clerk may, as likely as not, know all about it ; borrowed the chair perhaps from Gammage's people, and left the woman sitting in your room, to wait your return.

You are sure to be connected with the affair, some one must have seen you in the city. You are always getting into some frightful mess through that cursed fetish of yours. Why don't you clear out from Melbourne, until the thing has blown over?'

It was pitiable to see the horror, which, at these thoughts, overspread the man's face. It was not from recent guilt; but it was as though this last tragedy had stirred up the memory of other crimes, and for fully a minute his face worked as though some evil inward spasm distorted it.

'I won't face it,' he whispered to himself at last. 'I will get away somewhere into the country until it's all blown over.'

Smart was naturally resourceful. He had been in tight places before, and after a few minutes' consideration a plan suggested itself. He had intended to go over to The Firs, and ask Will Monckton to take a stroll with him, for he was curious to hear the South African story which Will offered to tell at the club; and, further, he had some business propositions he wanted to discuss with him.

Monckton had had some experience as a mining engineer and metallurgist, and had taken a degree at the University, and the Major proposed to use him in a business way in the inspection of some mining property. In the meantime, he would ask Monckton to call at the office on the morrow, and would tell his clerk that he had been called away on business and might not be back for several days.

Monckton's knowledge of the Major from a business standpoint was very slight. Mrs. Maguire and Molly often made fun of his military preten-

sions and officious ways ; but Will's knowledge of the world told him that many a man who was laughed at in society and thought little of by his family was shrewd in business, and apt to astonish people on occasion by what he could do. There was one link between them moreover ; both men were habitually well groomed and dressed. Will was inclined to foppishness, and the Major was spick and span from head to foot. It is astonishing how the having of even one thing in common can make men respect each other.

Incidentally, Will had heard something of the Major's fetish ; but it had never occurred to him to attach importance to it. It was something too close at hand for him to see. Besides, he did not want to be unemployed, and the Major had hinted at good business which they might do together. Being young, Monckton was flattered at the prospect of being associated with the Major in some big mining scheme. Every young mining engineer in Melbourne, in those days, had visions of a new Golden Mile, or Mount Morgan.

Smart arranged with Will Monckton, over the telephone, wrote a plausible letter to his bank, put money in his purse, and, as an after-thought, a couple of ten pound notes extra, to provide against unforeseen contingencies, and started by the mid-day train for Reefton. He would see Jeremiah Rex, the manager of the Black Horse Gully Mine, with whom he had done business, and who knew him well by repute, and would go on next morning by coach to Seldom Seen, and later on to Never Mind. There he would be well out of the

way of letters and telegrams, and might remain, hidden as it were in the bush, for a week.

There was a prospector somewhere in the Seldom Seen country, named Joe Chandler, who had once or twice sent him down samples of sulphide ores, gold and tin. He might find out, perhaps, where he was and look him up. Chandler might possibly tell him something he wanted to know about mining in the Dark River country.

It was wonderful how relieved the Major felt when the last suburban station was left behind, and the train, on an up grade, coughed along through great paddocks of dried up pasture and stopped ever and anon at country stations. He would be out of Melbourne, he thought, during the whole of the Christmas and New Year holidays, as would be half the business men of the city.

Gammage, of course, would be at home, and, as a member of the Upper House and Minister of the Crown, would be well able to deal with the corpse. He knew Gammage of old, and laughed as he imagined his wrath when the gruesome discovery should be made. But it would never become public, if Gammage could hush it up. 'And I'll bet my boots he will,' thought Smart. 'It's not likely that a Minister of the Crown will tolerate a scandal like that getting into the newspapers.'

He felt quite jovial, as he struck a match and lit his cigar. If Gammage had had anything to do with the affair, he'd been euchred, and if he hadn't, it would furnish him with food for thought, until the Major's return.

The train was now running upon a level track



at greater speed. Melbourne no longer oppressed the Major. Gammage and the office were miles away, and he was on his own, for a week at any rate. He began to feel quite young and light-hearted, as the reaction took possession of his mind. Mrs. Smart was of the cold, diffident, kiss-me-not-please class of wives. Husbands of such women are apt to be somewhat erratic when they are out on their own, and it was so with Boswell Smart.

At the next station, a well-dressed girl of about twenty stepped into the carriage corridor. The Major actually brushed past her as he went to get a whisky at the bar. It was Julia Careless, daughter of the publican at Seldom Seen. She remembered having seen Major Smart up that way once before. She had a good memory for faces, but could not recall his name, so she took the seat exactly opposite the one he had vacated.

On his return, the Major, with a pleasant smile, said: 'Madam, this is a smoking carriage.'

'I am used to tobacco, and the other carriages are full,' replied the girl.

The Major bowed, put the window half down, to free the carriage of any surplus smoke, and lit another cigar.

Then he talked and laughed with Julia Careless all the way to Reefton.

He found her quite communicative. She knew Jeremiah Rex and guessed she could find out where Joe Chandler was camped. She had reserved a box seat with Charley Bousak, the driver of the Seldom Seen coach, and if he wanted the other one he had better book it the moment they got in. She in-



formed the Major that she was stopping at Miss Marcon's hotel, which was the best in Reefton, and as the coach started before six in the morning, she would advise him to stay there too. Presently the train slowed down and stopped at the Reefton station.

'Dear me, how quickly the time has gone,' exclaimed the Major. At which Miss Careless blushed, smiled, and said it had.

Reefton was one of the smaller mining towns of the northern auriferous area. After securing accommodation at Miss Marcon's hotel and booking the remaining box seat on the coach, the Major strolled out to have a look around the township and to find Jeremiah Rex.

Reefton lay in a hollow, encompassed by gullies leading from the surrounding hills into the one main thoroughfare of the tiny township. They mostly bore fanciful names, as Wattle Gully, Sailor, Garden, Black-horse, Dead-man's, Charcoal, Specimen, Horse-shoe, Iron-bark, and other similar nomenclature. Up these gullies were irregular tracks or roadways leading to various mines or claims; or in some cases farms or dwellings.

The little cottages and gardens, mostly home-built on half-acre blocks held by miners' rights, were located within a couple of miles' radius; while here and there were the more pretentious residences of some store-keeper, manager, dredge-boss, or engineer.

The Major could see only three modern, two-storied houses. One was the residence of the landed proprietor, and was known as The Grange; another

that of the manager and part proprietor of the Bobby Burns Gold-mine, and the third that of Jeremiah Rex, the portly manager of the Black-horse Gully Gold-mine.

The town made no pretensions to beauty of situation or architectural grace. Its churches and schools, town-hall and post-office, were sprinkled along the main street, or haphazard up adjoining gullies. With one exception, they were mostly squat, ugly buildings, and scattered among them were the gaunt ruins of old-time habitations crumbling to decay. There were unoccupied hotels, a dilapidated Bank building, a couple of defunct two-storied brick mills with lofty chimneys, some unroofed dwelling houses and vacant allotments of land showing the outcrop of old foundations ; all of which revealed to the passer-by the fact that like the big world, of which it formed so small a part, Reefton had a past.

It was from the low hills, however, which upheaved from the hollow through which the creek ran, that this past was most in evidence. From a neighbouring height, the surroundings of the town had the appearance of stretches of newly ploughed ground ; but closer scrutiny showed that the brown barrenness was caused by the whole country having been denuded of its surface soil and vegetation by early gold sluicers ; by whom the shallow alluvial soil had been washed into the creeks and gullies in the search for gold.

Forty years before, Reefton had been a marvelously rich alluvial gold field. A one man's claim had pegged only eight yards by eight, and out of

such small areas, gold to the value of hundreds sterling had been taken. Men had gathered there by thousands, money had flowed like water. Pipes were lit with bank notes, horses shod with gold, and all the vagaries of easily won wealth had been freely indulged in.

With the working out of the precious metal the frenzy passed, and with it most of the inhabitants. At the time of Major Smart's visit, Reefton had dropped down to normal temperature, and its means of living were a couple of mines, some fossicking, hydraulic sluicing, and the dredges which worked the creeks and gullies for the gold still to be found in the tailings left by the rough and ready operations of earlier days.

But the feature of Reefton was the deep mine and crushing plant of the Bobby Burns Gold Mining Company, the roar of whose forty head of nine hundred pound stamps sounded, for a mile or more around the district, like the monotonous beat of ocean waves. The smoke-stack of the mine rose in the very centre of the town, and its battery-house stood up the main street, in close proximity to the principal store-keepers', butchers', and bakers' shops.

Here, where the lofty poppet-heads carrying the winding gear rose in the very centre of the town, the roar of the battery was deafening. In the bar of the Miners' Arms Hotel, a stranger could scarcely hear himself speak. But that battery was the pulsating heart of Reefton, and the prosperity of the place was gauged by the number of shifts during which its hoarse roar was heard, as it

pounded the yellow gold out of the hard white quartz ; for it crushed not only for itself, but for the Black Horse Gully mine. If it was silent in the daytime there was general apprehension. The mine paid, even on the low grade ore obtained from the higher levels of the Bobby Burns ; but every true Reeftonite believed that when the mine was sunk to the two thousand foot level, Reefton would become the queen city of the Southern State.

But it was the Black Horse Gully mine which, after all, was the main support of Reefton. It worked three eight hour shifts six days a week, and employed in various ways four hundred men. The proprietor-manager of that mine was King of Reefton.

Jeremiah Rex was of Cornish extraction and a Methodist of the Methodists. The Major described him afterward to Will Monckton as a short, stoutish, rough-spoken man, with a broad red face, small eyes, a large flat nose and square-set chin. But he had made money and knew how to keep it, and under his autocratic rule Reefton lived and moved and had its being. Not that Jeremiah Rex was a bad man. He was far from it. At the head of his church, he superintended the Sunday School, fixed the amount of the seat rents, and threatened defaulters to the church funds or non-attendants with no work at the mine unless they mended their ways. But he would brook no rival, and in consequence quarrels in the community over Municipal and other matters were bitter and prolonged.

He tolerated other churches in the town, but they must not make themselves too prominent.

He would even make use of them to promote the welfare of societies of which he had control ; but from the Mayor to the policeman, and the post-mistress to the lamplighter, he claimed, and for years received, obsequious deference.

It need hardly be said, that the sayings and doings of Captain Rex (for so he was called, after the fashion of mining men in Cornwall) furnished Reefton with a constant topic for talk. Above ground or below, the opinions and the doings of the Black Horse mine manager and his family supplied an unfailing subject for conversation ; and truth to tell, he and his family furnished ample material for town talk.

This little mining township, by the way, was something of a new experience to Smart, as it would have been to thousands of other people in the Commonwealth ; for the popular idea that an Australian must needs know Australia is a tremendous fallacy. It is a great and wide land : a land of mysterious and awful distances ; and the bulk of those who inhabit it are located in a few big towns, or sparsely scattered upon the Eastern seaboard.

That night, with a full moon shining brightly on the one broad street of Reefton, thronged now with miners and their wives and sons and daughters, who had come in for recreation—or as they laughingly said : ‘ To do the block ’—it seemed to the Major, as he smoked alone upon the hotel veranda that a strange parable ebbed and flowed in front of him.

That broad street was the high road for traffic between the capital of Commerce in the North, and that of Government and Aristocracy in the South, and as the great crushing mill roared and thundered,

and the careless crowd streamed to and fro, heedless of the noise through long familiarity, imperious imagination again gripped the Major's mind, and that one street of the diminutive town seemed to him the inlet and outlet of two eternities.

But it was not for long that serious thoughts possessed the mind of Boswell Smart, for, through Jeremiah Rex, the news of his arrival had gone around the township, and presently the local lawyer, the doctor, a couple of mining managers, and one or two others boarding in the hotel, made his acquaintance, and fixed up a card party with the intention of easing the new arrival of some of his superfluous cash—it seems as though gambling was of necessity indigenous in such places as this—but they did not know the Major. Before he turned into bed, at two o'clock in the morning, he had won ten pounds from them!

As he said 'good-night' to the doctor, he told him confidentially that when he came up the country, mine inspecting, it was usual for him to make the natives pay his costs.

'Don't you think you're rather drunk, sir?' stammered the doctor.

## CHAPTER VII

### GAMMAGE FACES THE MUSIC

ON Friday morning, while Boswell Smart was laughing and joking with Julia Careless on the box-seat of the Seldom Seen coach, Gammage smoked a cigar in his garden, lazily wondering whether he should take a run into town, or lunch at home and write some private letters.

He was strolling back to the house, when a servant came to tell him that he was wanted on the telephone.

‘Who is it, Simpson?’

‘Don’t know, sir. It’s a man’s voice; but he would not give his name. Told me to bring Mr. Gammage to the ’phone at once.’

‘Ah, some one from Parliament House; go and tell them I’m coming.’

‘Can’t be the Premier, or the Attorney General,’ he thought, ‘they’re both out of town. There’s no business doing, must be some fellow at the club.’

‘Is that you Mr. Gammage?’: came a strange voice over the wire.

‘It is, who’s that speaking?’

‘Sergeant Hopkins, of the Criminal Investigation Department.’

‘Well, what the dickens do you want with me?’



‘ Beg your pardon, sir ; but there’s a bit of trouble at your office, and I should like to ask you a few questions.’

‘ Trouble ! what do you mean ? Has the place been broken into or burnt down ? ’

The Sergeant was a youngish man, recently promoted, and unaware of the deference demanded by cabinet ministers from civil servants and other officers of the State. He had just hit upon a theory too, other officers of his department were listening, and possibly it was a case of ‘ the new broom ’—so he took no notice of the Hon. Ebenezer’s question, and began what he intended to be a kind of departmental cross-examination :

‘ Were you in your office on Christmas Day ? ’

‘ What the blazes has that got to do with you ? ’ thundered Gammage indignantly. ‘ Who are you, and how dare you question a minister of the Crown over the telephone ? If the office has been broken into, go and inform the police.’

With this Gammage started to ring off.

‘ Don’t ring off Mr. Gammage, or you may be sorry. Do you know there’s a dead woman in your board room ? ’

The Honourable Ebenezer’s indignation had so far got the better of him, that he lost the word ‘ dead,’ so he bawled back—

‘ Have her arrested then, for being unlawfully upon the premises. Like your impudence to ring me up about a matter of this sort. Ring up the Company’s secretary : 0013 Windsor.’

‘ But the woman’s dead ! ’

‘ Then take her to the Morgue, you idiot ! ’



'I'll do nothing of the sort,' retorted the officer, losing his head entirely. 'The woman has been found dead by the caretaker in your office, and by the look of the corpse, she's been dead several days. It's quite possible that she has been murdered, and I think that it is right, sir, that you should know that Detective Rummage is listening through the other receiver, and hears all you say. Several other witnesses are in the board room, listening to what I say. I think you'd better be careful, sir.'

Gammage did not immediately reply, so the Sergeant continued—

'There's a man here who says he saw you come into your office on Christmas morning, and we think that in your own interests you'd better come here at once.'

Gammage was a good deal surprised by this plain-spoken speech addressed to a person of his standing, so, after one or two more uncomplimentary remarks, he informed the police-officer that he would motor round at once.

'I'll make that beggar sit up for daring to talk like that to me on the telephone. These dashed police think they run the country!'

But it was only now that the seriousness of the situation dawned upon him. He had left his office late on Tuesday, dined with a couple of lady friends in town, and afterwards gone to the club. It would never do to have their names brought into it. Then he remembered something which gave him an unpleasant start. He was the last to leave his flat that evening, and the office doors all stood open as he passed out. The caretakers were busy

sweeping and dusting, and he remembered a woman stopping him on the stairs—the lifts had ceased working—who had a letter in her hand addressed to Major Smart, and asking the way to his office. Gammage had said: 'I believe he has gone, Madam; but his office is on the next landing.' She had replied: 'I'll go up at any rate and leave the letter.'

'This,' thought Gammage, 'might be the woman!'

As for Christmas Day, he could, of course, prove an alibi, as he was at home in the morning and afterwards with his family at church.

'Ah!' thought he, 'I'll ring up Smart, and see what he has to say about it.'

'Is that Major Smart?'

'Oh, he's away from home, is he? When did he leave?'

'Yesterday morning, you say. Wasn't that very sudden?'

'Had a telegram. Ah! can you tell me where he has gone?'

'No sir, Mrs. Smart might know; but she's out just now.'

'Thank you. I'll ring up again.'

'Dashed queer!' was Ebenezer's comment, as he stepped into his car. 'He said nothing at the club about going away.'

When Gammage arrived at the office, he found a small crowd of newspaper reporters, policemen, and the general public in his board room. They had taken photographs of every possible thing about the place, including the dead woman. One persistent press-man actually snapshotted Gammage, as he looked round in anger at the crowd.

'Clear out of this,' was his first articulate speech to the press-men and curious public.

'Now,' said he, addressing the detectives and caretaker, when the board room door was, at last, closed upon the intruders. 'Where did this dead woman come from, and what's the meaning of all this?'

'The discovery was made by John Purdy, caretaker of these offices, at eight-thirty this morning,' replied Hopkins, in a slightly elevated, semi-official voice.

'Oh! John Purdy told you about it, did he? Well, have you asked him whether he has seen this woman before to-day; or whether he killed her, and put her in this room?'

'Was any one with you Purdy, when you discovered this thing?' he asked, turning round to the caretaker, without waiting for a reply from the detective.

'No sir?' replied Purdy, who, being a nervous man, was already shaking in his shoes.

'Have you cautioned this man that anything he says may be used against him in evidence?' was Gammage's next question to the police-officer.

'I have not,' said the officer, shortly. Somehow the bottom had been knocked out of his theory by this unexpected turning of the tables upon himself.

'Well you'd better do so; and one of you ring up the ambulance, and get the corpse taken to the Morgue. Also notify the coroner . . . , and you'd better ring up the Company's secretary, and let him take charge of the affair.'

'As for you, Hopkins, I'm surprised that you did not know better than to allow the board room of a minister of the Crown, in the absence of his staff, to be invaded by a tribe of long-nosed press-men and curious idlers. Get the corpse out of this, and tell the Commissioner to report the death to the coroner in the usual way. If I'm wanted to give evidence at the inquest, I'm afraid it won't be very flattering to the police. I expect the medical examination will show that the woman died of heart failure through the heat, or through climbing up these miserable flights of stairs after the lifts had ceased working. You'd better keep your eye on Purdy; the woman might have been an acquaintance of his. I know nothing about her. . . . Ah, here's the secretary. He'll look after things. I've an appointment at Parliament House.'

With this, Gammage descended by the lift to his motor-car. He had got over the matter, for the present, without saying anything about the dead woman having called to see Major Smart. But how about that letter? 'I'll get some lunch at the House,' he thought, 'and then call back and see Smart's clerk, if I can, and find out whether any letter has been left for him. But wherever can he have taken himself off to so suddenly and why?'

Gammage called again, but learned nothing of any letter, and Mrs. Smart could only tell him that the Major had gone somewhere in the country beyond Reefton, to inspect a mine.

The Mud Major was getting on the nerves of the Cabinet Minister. It was not only his money losses by him; but too many unaccountable events were

becoming connected with him. The death of this unknown woman perplexed and annoyed him. She certainly had a letter for Smart, and he had cleared out of Melbourne without leaving any address or any reason for his sudden departure. Besides, it was not a very nice thing for a minister of the Crown to be mixed up with an affair of this description.

A couple of days after it was actually mentioned at a cabinet meeting, and a scurrilous Melbourne print, in an article entitled: 'Gammage has a dead woman in his office,' asked whether his colleagues hadn't asked him to resign!

Gammage determined to have it out with the Major on his return, and if his explanation was not thoroughly satisfactory, he'd cut him dead, the next time he met him at the club.

## CHAPTER VIII

### JOE CHANDLER'S CHANCE

**I**N the meantime, Boswell Smart had been having a gay time on the road to Seldom Seen.

He had treated Charley Bousak, the coach driver, at almost every public-house they passed, and made love to Julia Careless without let or hindrance. He helped her on and off the coach, and made her take his arm when they walked up the big hill, and kissed her as they stood waiting for the coach to catch them up.

He promised her a dozen things which he never intended to give her, and in sundry ways made himself extremely agreeable.

Julia was a fair match for him, however, for she had met mining men of his ilk before, and she gave Charley Bousak, who was one of her admirers, a reassuring wink, and told him not to hint at the Major's doings to the dad.

'He's promised to give me a pair of thirty-five shilling boots; and I guess he'll want to measure my foot; but I'll make him write a cheque out beforehand, and get it, and send down to town for the boots myself.'

'Well, be careful of him,' said Charley, as he prepared to start his team on the return trip to Reefton. 'He's no good, I'll warrant. I'd like to punch his head!'

There was rare feasting and drinking that night at the Seldom Seen Hotel. The Wooler and others had been on a spree there for a week, and the Major paid his footing by shouting for drinks all round. Later on, however, he kept himself to the more private end of the house, and had a special dinner set out in the large dining-room. He got Julia, her sister Kate, who was two years younger, and Mrs. Careless, to honour him with their company at dinner. He invited the landlord too; but Jim Careless was too busy serving drinks. However, the Major did not really want him, which perhaps he knew, and could very well have done without Mrs. Careless; but she was a shrewd dame, and, in her best black silk, sat opposite the Major at table, with a daughter on either hand.

She had no objection to his paying her daughters broad compliments, or to his ordering the best wines, or other luxuries, so long as he paid for them. Julia and Kate might play and sing to him as much as they liked; but she drew the line at dancing, and at eleven o'clock sent the girls off to bed.

To solace himself for his disappointment, the Major smoked a cigar on the veranda in the warm moonlight, and there arranged with Jim Careless, who came to have a yarn with him about a mine, to send him out in the morning, in the buggy, to Never Mind Creek, where Julia had told him Joe Chandler was to be found.



He did not much expect to do any business ; unless to make a few inquiries about gold mining further along on the Dark River ; but he had had a sumptuous lunch put up, and thought there was a chance that Julia would drive him. He had suggested to her to do so, and to get a quiet horse, and promised, if she did, to send her up a new side-saddle and cloth for a habit, when he got back to town.

In the morning, however, Mrs. Careless caught him with his arm round her waist, in the breakfast room, so she sent a man with him instead.

Charley Bousak heard of this, and other, episodes, on his next trip from Reefton, and registered a vow that he'd upset Boswell Smart in Reefton Creek when he returned. But a new adventure awaited the Major in the lone country of Never Mind Creek, which, for the time at any rate, put Julia Careless entirely out of his frothy mind.

The man referred to as Joe Chandler had been living for about two years on Never Mind Creek, fossicking for gold. It was all snow-grass country up there, and he was six miles away from any road or cross country track.

The loneliness of the life may be imagined ; his nearest neighbour was three miles distant ; but he was a man of queer disposition and said the place suited him. He had a theory that every man has a chance in this life, and that it comes to him sooner or later, no matter what his circumstances, or where he may be. He was working and waiting on Never Mind Creek until he got his chance.

Often for a week at a time he saw no one ; but



he lived his own life, waiting for his chance, and careless as to how the great world managed to do without him. Like many of his class, he was possessed by the visionary hope of striking prodigious wealth in some abandoned shaft or drive; for the banks of Never Mind Creek were honey-combed with old workings, and strewn with the débris of more prosperous times.

The landlord of the Seldom Seen Hotel thought Chandler a bit dotty; but gave him cash for his gold, wondering whether, like other eccentrics, he was saving up the hard earnings of years of lone hand mining, to squander at his pub in a fortnight's spree.

But Joe was not a hard drinker, and, to tell the truth, had made very little more than enough to keep him in tobacco and the bare necessities of life.

In winter the days were short, and the nights very cold. He did not work if it was wet, and never over hard, except on those rare occasions when he struck a patch; but he cultivated a bit of garden, which he irrigated from an old water race. He built himself a rubble shanty; kept fowls, and otherwise made himself comfortable, in view of the long cold winter nights.

He had been fairly well educated in England, in his youth, and had a few books, which he read assiduously. He kept a number of dogs, a few goats for milk, and last, but not least, a diary, in which he wrote down much of his daylight doings and imaginings—and his midnight dreams.

One of the recreations of his lonely life was the

keeping of this diary, which he often read aloud to himself, or to any one who had the patience to listen to it. Yet it was not without its quaint fancies and shrewd remarks; for he lived so near to nature that he could not help seeing and hearing much that it is desirable to know.

He had some original ideas as to the occurrence and formation of gold. One of his beliefs was that wherever mica was found in a leader there was also gold, if you followed the leader far enough. He was something of a philosopher too. He held that even assumed goodness in a man proved that, somewhere in his nature, there was the real yellow metal.

'Mica,' said he, 'is only new-chum gold, yet I have found it, again and again, associated with the genuine article. The world is a better place than people generally allow.'

How Joe Chandler's doctrine panned out in his own after experience remains to be seen.

Fortune is a wilful jade, and rarely comes to men in the way, or upon the paths, prepared for her, and on the day of Smart's visit to Never Mind Creek, Joe was neither well-conditioned in person, nor prosperous in estate.

He had had no luck lately, and Christmas alone in the Bush had made him feel a bit off colour. Possibly he was getting tired of waiting for his chance. However, his green peas were just in, and a good dinner is a sovereign balm for many of the ills of life, so when Major Smart strolled up to his shanty, he was outside, plucking a fowl for dinner.

Smart prided himself on his management of men, and his free and easy way with them.

'Good-day, mate, are you Mr. Chandler?' he said.

Joe nodded his head, looked him up and down, and said: 'I am, sir.'

'Well, I'm Major Boswell Smart, of Melbourne, to whom you sent those sulphide specimens of copper ore, and I've come up on purpose to see you about them.'

Joe nodded his head again more than once, but this time more at the ground than at the Major. He took no notice of the Major's proffered hand, and barely lifted his eyes to look at the speaker. He had a grudge against Smart, for the Major had not troubled to acknowledge the samples, or to answer Joe's letter. He knew very well that Smart was lying, for he had had other information that the ore was too low grade to be payable; so he stood, for a moment, wondering whatever had brought him up there. To Joe, the mere glitter of Smart's personality, the look of his eyes, and the smoothness of his speech classed him at once as 'a grab-all Melbourne mining shark.'

Joe had in his hand a large tin saucer, with water in it, a small quantity of stream tin, and half a dozen colours of gold. He had found it in the fowl's gizzard, and, out of curiosity, was vanning it out into a small steel prospecting dish.

'What have you there?' asked Smart.

'Some colours of gold, and a bit of tin,' replied Joe.

'Ah! struck it rich?' asked the Major.

'Not much,' said Joe. 'It was in the fowl's crop.'

'Queer thing that,' said Smart, who was now all attention, 'there must be surface gold and tin about,' and he scrutinized the ground, as though expecting to see it strewn around in all directions.

'These fowls are not fed much,' said Joe reflectively, as though talking to himself. 'They go poking about the banks of the creek and old workings, and pick up bits of things.'

With this, he deftly vanned the remaining quartz and lighter residue into the dish, and held out the saucer to Smart with about a half an ounce of tin in it, and six colours of gold. The mining man examined it carefully, and handed it back. Joe was about to throw it away.

'Don't do that old man, keep it!' exclaimed Smart. And then, as though struck with a new idea, he continued: 'How much are your fowls worth?'

'From one-and-six to two shillings each,' said Joe indifferently; he thought the question was an idle one, asked through curiosity, and he was afraid that Smart might expect to be asked to dinner.

'Well, look here, mate, I'll give you a half-crown for that black hen over there, if you'll cook her for me, and give us a drink of tea.'

'Right you are!' said Joe.

The fowl was caught, killed and plucked; when Smart said, 'Now clean out the crop, as you did the other one.'

He stood by and watched the operation. The bird's crop contained about half an ounce of black

tin ore, and a tiny nugget of water-worn gold.

'My word!' exclaimed Smart. 'Do the whole of your fowls pick up gold and tin like that?'

'Really, I couldn't say,' replied Joe, who was rather staggered by the nugget, and was puzzling his brains as to where the fowls could have found the mineral.

'I'd like to inquire further into this,' said Smart excitedly. 'You see, that's two with gold and tin in their crops; kill another one, mate!'

Joe looked at him, 'Another two-and-six then.'

'Here's the money,' said Smart, and he put five shillings into Joe's willing palm.

Joe killed a tough old rooster this time which he wanted to get rid of, and the bird's crop panned out no less than three quarters of an ounce of tin and two grains of gold.

'Good man! What's yer full and proper name?' called out Smart, quite carried away with the excitement of a new idea that had just come to him.

'Just Joseph Chandler, sir,' replied Joe, gravely, astonished at this singular discovery; but not seized with its commercial and speculative mining value, as was the Major.

'Well, Mr. Chandler,' said Smart, 'I'm inclined to think that you're a made man; give us your hand, old chap. I'm blest if we don't start a company, to combine mining for gold and tin with poultry farming. I've a bottle of whisky in the buggy, let's get the fowls cooked and have a feed.'

It was late in the afternoon when the Major, a trifle elevated, climbed into the buggy, with the horse's head turned toward Seldom Seen; and

that night, fowls and ducks, and gold and tin, figured largely in Chandler's bewildering dreams.

They had killed two ducks, and, except half a dozen pullets, the whole of the fowls, and in the crops of every one of them had been discovered stream tin, and in most of them gold. The two ducks had panned out exceptionally well.

Mad as the proposal seemed, there were reasons why Smart thought a company might be successfully floated, privately, with a few thousands capital—the bulk of which would go, of course, into the pockets of the fortunate promoters.

A Melbourne lady had recently floated a mine very successfully; in fact it had been largely over-subscribed. Smart and others knew it to be a regular wild-cat swindle; but the confiding women shareholders, knew nothing about that, yet. The idea of excluding men from the list of shareholders had caught on wonderfully with the ladies; they had a board of lady directors, and were very nearly appointing a woman as mine manager. Gammage, who guessed what they were in for, said it would have been much better if they had.

However, the success of the 'Women's Company,' as it was generally spoken of, seemed assured at this time, so Smart thought that if his scheme was not taken up by the ordinary male mining investor, it might catch on with the women, and their money was as good as any one else's. Mrs. Maguire intended to take shares in the 'Women's Company,' but was too late; he would broach the matter to her, and some other of his feminine acquaintances, and see what they thought of it. He felt sure that they

would take it on, as most women had a fancy for poultry, and it would be a kind of domestic mining proposition they would be likely to understand.

The scheme evolved in Boswell Smart's ingenious mind was as follows: He would form a 'No Liability' partnership, to be called 'The Golden Duck Company.' Joe suggested, 'The Golden Goose Company'; but Smart thought the name unsuitable. The Company would combine mining with poultry farming on a large scale. The crop of a goose, reared and fed in that district, might contain—that is for the prospectus—say, tin, 3 oz., gold, 4 grs.; ducks, tin,  $1\frac{1}{4}$  oz., gold, 2 grs.; fowls, tin, 1 oz., gold,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  grs. Poultry farming was, in itself, a paying industry, so there would be little or no risk, and the whole proceeds from the minerals won would be absolutely net.

The following facts, said the Major, would be likely specially to appeal to the feminine mind: 'There would be no wages to pay to miners, no risks or losses on account of strikes; no amounts to pay as compensation on account of accidents; and no heavy bills to pay for cartage. All that would be necessary would be to clean up every few months by killing off a quantity of matured birds, sending the carcasses to market, and the ores to the gold and tin buyers.'

This had been the preliminary talk before dinner, but after they had dined on some of the slaughtered fowls, with green peas and new potatoes out of Joe's garden, and drunk half a bottle of whisky, they formulated a working plan for the new company. †



They would start it with a plant of twenty-four geese, two hundred ducks, and five hundred fowls.

'But this will only be for a beginning,' said the Major, 'it will be a sort of horse-shoe problem, one penny for the first nail and double it each time. Poultry lay eggs, and from these we shall raise additional stock with incubators. That will give a proportionately increased return of mineral output.'

Smart did a good bit of figuring out in his pocket-book after this, the accuracy of which, however, cannot be vouched for. Joe watched him with interest, and was very nearly getting down his diary to make an entry; but just then the Major seemed to have finished.

'Say, for the first four months £250, for the following four months £500, and with a further increased output, say £1,000 for the year. Not a big thing, of course, but a handsome return on a capital of, say, ten thousand shares, paid up to fifteen shillings.'

'But suppose the gold and tin should not hold out?' suggested Joe, who was amazed at the magnitude of Smart's figures, and the ease and confidence with which he manipulated them.

'Don't interrupt me, man,' said the Major, who stopped, however, to pour out another tot of whisky for himself, 'that's a matter for the shareholders. If there were no risks in mining ventures, we should all be millionaires. But I was about to say that there would be certain bye-products to come in: we are about to inaugurate a new industrial departure. Our strain of birds would be



trained with special instincts to fill their crops with gold and tin. Our clutches of eggs will be worth a hundred per cent. more than those of ordinary poultry ; and birds of our special breeding, will, for some time at any rate, bring fancy prices. I will put all this into the prospectus ; I am not sure that I haven't already hit upon a plan for wonderfully improving the breed in this respect.'

'Couldn't you manage to empty their crops at regular intervals, without killing them?' asked Joe thoughtfully.

'That would be a matter for the scientific experts of the Company to consider,' said the Major loftily. 'Anyhow, all you will have to do now will be to look well after the young working stock I shall send up, and keep the scheme dark. I'll see that you get five hundred fully paid up shares when the Company is floated, and maybe a bit of cash, with a good salary as local manager.'

## CHAPTER IX

### THE FETISH AGAIN

IT was a glorious evening, as Bill Boulding and the Major started back for Seldom Seen. The sky had been clear all day, save for a few idle clouds of soft fleecy whiteness, which gave depth and vividness to the overarching vault of blue.

The atmosphere was clear as crystal, and remained so until sunset, which would be upon them in another hour.

They had a trifle over a dozen miles to go, and were now driving through a shallow gully, which opened out upon a well grassed flat. Wild clematis grew upon the neighbouring slopes, and the sward, in places, was wellnigh covered with beds of faintly fragrant golden flowers, almost the size of English wild daffodils. They were there in hundreds. Parrots chattered and screamed overhead in the tall gum trees, and gan-gans and gill and satin birds; while others of smaller kind flitted to and fro among the lower branches.

A white-tailed yellow rabbit scurried across in front of them almost under the old mare's feet.

The country was girt about with ranges, and

was a kind of no man's land, owing to difficulty of access ; but the birds and wild creatures of the forest kept the flowers company, and in the cool evening and dewy morn the atmosphere was fragrant with the aroma of the eucalyptus forest.

But Smart took little heed of the scenery, he had so many other things to occupy his thoughts that evening. There was Joe Chandler's poultry and the Golden Duck Company ; the corpse of the captain's wife in Gammage's board room ; the fun he anticipated having with Julia Careless ; and the news he hoped to receive from the manager of the Silver Streak Mine, to say nothing of a score of other matters he had to do with.

But it was none of these things which dominated his thoughts as they made their way through the fragrant Bush toward Seldom Seen. It was the fetish. He had just remembered that this was the Saturday between Christmas and the New Year. It was a day that had a black mark against it in the Major's history.

It was the day on which an imaginary skeleton, the ghost of a thing which, although underground, was unburied, rattled its grim bones within his head and around his heart. He dared not drink any more whisky, for both he and Bill Boulding, his driver, had already had more than enough. So he mentally fought his fetish, and puffed away viciously at his cigar.

We have spoken of the ' road ' to Seldom Seen ; but proper road there was none, and for several miles there was nothing more than a bridle track. Bill was now following the wheel marks of his

own buggy along the narrow track made by the saddle and pack horses of Joe Chandler.

About five miles further on they would strike an old road, made by miners in the long ago ; but through heavy rains, washing wheel ruts on down grades into yawning ditches, even that road was in places wellnigh impassable. As Bill saw the shadows lengthening, he urged the fat old mare into a faster trot.

‘ It’s a good enough track for a saddle horse,’ he said, ‘ but I would not like to be overtaken here by nightfall, we’d have to camp. And as it is we’ve two or three bits of sidelings and boggy creeks to get over, before we strike the road through the paddocks to the old mine.’

‘ But there’ll be a bright moon to-night,’ said Smart.

‘ Moon’ll be no good before nine or ten,’ replied Bill, ‘ the trees are too thick, and the ridge on the east yonder blocks the light from us. Get up, Daisy ! ’

The mare was trotting along at no more than four and a half miles an hour ; but it was just as fast as it was safe to go. In the grass and ferns through which they drove were old stumps and fallen limbs and other hidden dangers. In places the driver had piloted them in the morning between trees with a very few inches on either hand to spare. They wound zig-zag fashion down into the beds of creeks, where the wheels sank deep into black mud and slime, and over rocky ridges, where several times the Major was nearly bumped out of the conveyance ; but Bill was an expert driver,

or Jim Careless would not have risked his buggy to go through the bush to Never Mind Creek.

They were about halfway between Joe Chandler's place and Seldom Seen, when, after passing through a bit of park-like country, they suddenly came to the top of a steep, rugged hill, which carried a side slope like the roof of a house.

Now, to be pulled by a strong horse up a hill like this, especially when the heavier man is on the high side of the vehicle, is a very different matter to going down the same hill with the heavier man on the low side, and the Major's heart rose to his mouth when he looked down the hill. He expressed a decided wish to get out of the buggy and walk, exclaiming: 'You'll never get down there safely.'

But Bill's bump of caution was not whisky proof, so he did not offer to pull up, to let Smart down; but assuring him that it was quite safe, he started to walk the horse down the rocky descent. He put the break hard down, and locked the hind wheels, until they just skidded down the hill.

The Major's teeth fairly chattered, when he saw that it was only the weight of the big mare which kept the vehicle from overturning when the wheels on the higher side were jerked up by out-cropping rocks.

The end came when they were halfway down the hill. In some unaccountable manner, a short cleft stick got caught in the tyre of the rear high wheel, and fairly levered the buggy over

It capsized, however, with no great violence; for the mare stopped at once; but the vehicle

over-balanced with disastrous results to the occupants. The Major rolled out first, falling over sideways; he rolled over and over down the hill like a log, crashing through bushes, ferns and grass, until stopped by a huge ant-hill, the occupants of which hurried out in thousands to see what was the matter, and fell upon the Major with clashing mandibles.

Although scratched and shaken, Smart was not seriously hurt, for he happened to have tumbled first into some bushes, so the onset of the angry insects soon brought him to his feet, smarting with the pain of sundry bites or stings. But the case was far more serious with Bill Boulding, for holding fast to the reins, the mare and buggy had somehow rolled completely over him, and the first thing the Major saw was the buggy upside down, with its wheels in the air, right on top of Boulding.

It took the Major nearly half an hour to lever the buggy up, and get him from under it. He was ashy grey and unconscious, when the other pulled him out. He came to at last, and found the Major, quite unnecessarily, sitting on the mare's head to keep her down. When he could speak, he declared that his collar bone was broken, and several ribs; but he was able to tell the Major how to free the mare, who, relieved of the Major's person, lay quietly where she had fallen. Her freedom was just accomplished when a coo-ee was heard below, at the foot of the hill, where a corduroy crossing spanned the black ooze of a swamp.

Directly after, a man on horseback rode up to them, who turned out to be the Wooler. He was

sufficiently sober to take in the position, and with a bushman's ready resource, assisted by the Major, soon got the buggy up-ended again. Then he led the mare down the hill and re-adjusted the harness.

It was nearly midnight when the mournful cortège at last drew up at the Seldom Seen Hotel. The Wooler had driven the buggy, in which was seated Bill Boulding, who was groaning with pain, so the Major had had to ride his horse.

The landlord was still up, for he had been anxious for the safety of his horse and buggy, and wondered what was keeping them so late.

But when the ill news was told, Mrs. Careless and others of the household were soon astir, and an hour later a messenger was dispatched on horseback to Reefton to bring up a doctor.

Within a very short time, midnight notwithstanding, the whole of the little township, if it might be dignified by such a name, had heard of the accident to Boulding and the Major, and the Wooler's sensational description of the plight in which he found them lost nothing in the telling.

The buggy was only slightly scratched and the horse and harness uninjured, so Bill Boulding was universally extolled for his skill, presence of mind, and pluck; and expressions of regret might have been heard that, instead of upon Bill, the buggy hadn't capsized upon the Major.

However, watched over by kindly-hearted neighbours, Bill Boulding at last fell asleep, when the household retired to rest, and the Major to his room, to sleep if possible, and if possible forget.

Smart had paid for any drinks at the bar which

the circumstances seemed to need. He had handed over a ten-pound note to bring up a doctor from Reefton. Jim Careless explained that the ordinary allowance for travelling expenses for the doctor was ten-shillings a mile. There were other expenses in sight, for the man might have to be sent down to the hospital, and it was evident that they looked to the Major to foot the bill, so it seemed as though the ten pounds he had won at Reefton would have to be considerably supplemented.

However, eventually he slept soundly, for he was thankful that no one had been killed ; and, on the score of expenses, second thoughts suggested to him that he was not liable ; so he would pay no more, and what he had paid he would somehow get back again, as ' out of pocket expenses,' from the confiding shareholders of the proposed Golden Duck Company.



## CHAPTER X

### SUNDAY AT SELDOM SEEN

THE morning following the accident was well advanced when Major Smart awoke. It was Sunday ; but Sunday, as it is usually observed in Christian communities, was not known at Seldom Seen.

There was no church of any sort within miles of them, and the visit of a clergyman or bush missionary was both infrequent and unwelcome at least to the Protestant portion of the community. Half-yearly, or so, a priest of the Roman Catholic church gathered a few of his own creed together for mass, which was celebrated in a room of the hotel. But, like hundreds of similar Australian hamlets, Sunday was the best business day of the week for the public-house.

There were three doors which led into the bar of the Seldom Seen Hotel ; and out of respect for the day and the law, Jim Careless kept the front entrance, from the road, closed until noon ; although it was not difficult, even then, for thirsty residents to get a drink ; but after noon, the law notwithstanding, the front door stood ajar and the two others wide open.

This was the day upon which the residents of the district gathered for sports, football, and cricket matches. In summer time the big dining-room was usually crowded for dinner, and occasionally, especially on moonlight nights, the day was wound up with a dance in the barn in the evening. This was situated a short distance behind the house, and as Jim Careless was not without a certain respect for mounted troopers who might be riding through to Reefton, the windows, visible from the road, were darkened with wool-bales.

The marvel was where the people came from on Sundays. A traveller to Watchem, the agricultural town, which was the terminus, as it were, of the Seldom Seen Road, saw nothing but a bit of uncultivated hilly clearing, with a weather-beaten public-house, and two or three selectors' homesteads. There was no store nor blacksmith's smithy, and the post office was only a wooden box, tacked, as it were, on to the hotel veranda. For miles around there stretched a wild land of bush and forest, with rugged mountains, rocky gorges, and dreary swamps. Some of the latter stretched along the flats and valleys for miles.

The inhabitants mostly followed the occupation of sheep farming with an occasional turn at mining, and it was a wonder to see the queer localities in which many of them had put their homes. Lured, it may be, by the discovery of some gold-bearing alluvial, or a patch of tin wash, they had pegged out a one man's claim and settled down upon it in a tent. A rough slab kitchen and lean-to were then put up. Presently, a few sheep were added to the mining,

purchased from travelling drovers, or the agent of some neighbouring squatter. Then came a cow or two, and later on a bit of garden was made, and half an acre laid down in orchard. Eventually a small selection was applied for from the Government, and what with mining and sheep farming, the people in the snow-grass country somehow managed to live.

Miles of rough country, interspersed with park-like grazing land, leased at a nominal rental from the Government, were held by well to do squatters, who were mostly at war however, with the selectors over missing lambs, calves, and sheep. But there was not much law business; the squatter was at a disadvantage, and it did not pay. He suffered his losses grimly, and the selectors attributed them to the animals falling down old mining shafts, or tumbling into unprotected tin workings; but it was astonishing how the flocks and herds of many of these selectors increased. The number of lambs were mostly out of all proportion to the flocks, and it was a peculiarity of the district that cows in the way-back country almost always had twin calves.

The country was almost all marked 'Auriferous' on the map, which meant that any one could camp on any part of it for mining purposes, and peg out leases and residential areas, and under certain conditions take up agricultural selections to the squatters' detriment.

But at the time of our story, the old residents of the Seldom Seen district had mostly given up mining as unprofitable. Some of them, like the Wooler (who had achieved a reputation for gather-

ing in wool and fleeces scathless of the law), were getting well to do, and except for occasionalsprees were most exemplary citizens. The alluvial gold of the creek banks was barely payable, the tin was patchy, and the best of the ground within a few miles of the hamlet worked out. But sheep farming paid, and on this and droving, and shearing in the season, the folks generally relied for a living.

Watchem was a very old agricultural township, twenty-five miles further on. It had a population of several hundred; but was very old-fashioned and conservative. The people had so intermarried that the Watchem family likeness had passed into a proverb. The only way to get a start in business there was to marry a native, and even then the people were so conceited that it was doubtful whether they would look at you. The population had been decreasing for some years, and the Seldom Seenites declared that it was for lack of new blood; but there was one thing upon which the whole town prided itself, and that was its cricket. It was a case of Watchem first, and the rest nowhere, and on the Sunday of which we are writing the Watchem Cricket Club was to play the return match with the cricketers of Seldom Seen.

Three mounted troopers passed through about ten o'clock. They seemed in a hurry; but they were travellers, and the law gave them the right to stop and have a drink at Seldom Seen. They brought up the news that a dead woman (supposed to have been murdered) had been found in a Collins Street Company's board room. The Major listened eagerly, and questioned them as closely as he dared.

He was relieved to know that the corpse had been discovered, and determined that he would remain away from Melbourne until the day after the New Year.

The doctor arrived from Reefton soon after the troopers. After examining Bill he decided that his collar bone was not broken, although the muscles of the neck were badly strained, and a couple of ribs were fractured. He very much wanted to have the man taken down to his private hospital at Reefton; but when it was found that the Major refused to pay anything more, he encased him in flannel bandages, and left nature to repair the damage as best she could.

About noon, visitors and cricketers began to arrive, the latter in a drag, but many on horseback. Some of the visitors had ridden twenty miles, and the place was in a ferment, what with eating and drinking and the prospect of the match, which was to begin at half-past one.

Julia Careless, gaily dressed and redolent of Jockey Club perfume, was evidently a favourite with the crowd. She had given the Major the cold shoulder early in the day, for her favourite swain was one of the Watchem cricketers. Besides, the hotel was tremendously busy and Julia was greatly in request. But the Major was too old a soldier to submit readily to defeat. He managed to find out all about Charley Shore, and planned, if possible, to bowl him out with Julia.

He began to tell one and another of his own prowess in the cricket field.

'I'm not much of a fielder,' he said to the Wooler,

'but a few years ago, I used to be a perfect demon with the ball: did the hat trick twice in one season on the Melbourne Cricket Ground. I can bat a bit too.'

'I shouldn't have thought it, Major,' said the Wooler, taking his pipe out of his mouth, and looking Smart up and down; 'but now I take more special notice of you, I see you have summat of the cut of a cricketer about you. I heard Julie say that you were vice-chairman, or something, of a Melbourne cricket club.'

'That's so. I told Miss Careless about it as we came up on the coach.'

'I think I'll tell Storkey Chew about you,' said the Wooler, looking hard at the Major, 'he's captain of our team, you know, and I heard just now that our side's short of a man.'

'Do nothing of the sort, my friend,' exclaimed the Major. 'Really, you know, it wouldn't be fair to the Watchem team for me to play. Besides, I'm only a visitor. I wouldn't mind acting as umpire, if that would help.'

'I wouldn't advise you to do that,' said the Wooler, 'both sides are very keen on this match, and there might be trouble if you gave a decision they didn't like. I'd sooner see you bowling or batting.'

A quarter of an hour afterward, Smart noticed the Wooler in close conference with the captain of the Seldom Seen team, and soon after, they walked over to him together.

'We've lost one of our best men, Major,' said Storkey, 'and you will put us under an immense obligation if you'll play for us this afternoon.'

‘ Really, I’m obliged to you for the compliment ; but I’m feeling a bit shaken with yesterday’s accident, and might disappoint you with my play,’ said the Major.

But others of the team now stood around them ; Julia among the number, so the Major found himself compelled to consent to play ; he’d have to trust to luck, he thought, to carry him through, for he knew little more about cricket than of soldiering and law, although he was vice-chairman of a cricket club.

The match was to be played in the hotel paddock, just across the road. Charley Shore, captain of the Watchem team, won the toss, and decided to send his team in to bat.

‘ Now,’ said Julia to Smart, ‘ you’ll see some pretty cricket ; our men can’t touch the Watchem team.’

‘ I’ll bet you a sovereign to three kisses, that we beat ’em,’ said the Major.

‘ Done,’ exclaimed Julia, laughing, ‘ payable directly after the match.’

‘ All right,’ said Smart, in high good humour ; for he thought Julia was coming round again.

It looked at first as though the young lady was going to win her bet ; for runs came fast during the first hour, and the Seldom Seen men were getting a bit discouraged by the steady scoring of their opponents. Charley Shore was batting, and had collared the bowling. He was knocking the balls of the Seldom Seen men all over the field.

‘ This will never do,’ said Storkey, nervously, to the Major, ‘ it’s a rotten thing to have happened at the beginning of the match. I think I’ll have to put you on to bowl ? ’



'Don't,' exclaimed the Major.

But Storkey Chew was captain, and he insisted upon Smart going on.

The doings of the Major are talked about at Seldom Seen to this day. By sheer blundering luck, he clean bowled Charley Shore's partner, first ball, and later on nearly brained the wicket-keeper; no more runs were made that over, he seemed to have mesmerized the Watchem team, so that they could not play.

Only two runs were made in the next over, and then the Major took the ball to bowl to the batting of Charley Shore. Julia was watching him and she told her sister afterwards that he seemed to take aim, shut his eyes and run. Anyhow, the ball that followed was tremendously fast. Some Watchem men said he threw it; but if so, it touched the ground some distance from the wicket, bounded up, and striking Shore fair on the mouth, knocked out three of his front teeth.

The umpire gave him out, leg before wicket, before he knew what had happened; and directly afterwards Julia's favourite swain, spitting out teeth and blood and maledictions, adjourned to the hotel.

Both teams followed to express their sympathy and get a drink.

The Major was profuse in his expressions of regret; but it was easy to see that both Shore and Julia regarded him with suspicious eyes.

'That ball of yours has knocked the stuffing out of 'em,' whispered the Wooler to Smart, 'you bet they won't want to stand up to your bowling again.'

Of course, as one of the Seldom Seen team



remarked, a few teeth were neither here nor there, it was the fortune of war ; but, as one of the girls said, it had spoiled Charley's mouth for kissing for some time, and there was a difference of opinion as to whether the Major had hit him there on purpose, or not.

But nothing could be proved.

However, Storkey didn't put him to bowl again ; for there was a 'rot' after the adjournment ; the Watchem team collapsed completely, and were all out, for ninety-five, by three o'clock.

The Seldom Seen men were in high spirits, and batted steadily for an hour ; but after that wickets began to fall, and so Storkey sent the Major in to bat. He went in very reluctantly, in his heart anticipating a duck ; but the onlookers expected now to have some more exciting play, and they got it.

Joe Cook, a fast bowler, who had been doing a lot of execution, was resting ; but the Watchem captain immediately put him on again when he saw the Major coming out to bat, and lisped something between his broken teeth that no one heard except Joe.

'Bowl for his body,' whispered the captain, 'and if you can, knock out some of the beggar's teeth.'

It wasn't exactly fair, but Cook fell in with the suggestion : 'That'll be easy,' he said, 'if I hit him in the mouth ; his teeth are as false as his tongue.'

The first ball seemed to be aimed straight at the Major's head. However, he ducked and it went at a great speed to the boundary. The next one struck him on the right leg. It was a fast ball, and the Major felt certain that the bowler was doing it on pur-

pose ; but the crowd only laughed when he rubbed his leg, for any fool might know that his bat ought to have been between his leg and the ball.

The third ball was delivered with terrific speed, a regular vicious stinger. The Major felt like running away when he saw it coming ; but he gripped his bat and held it up in front of him to protect his body. The ball struck it fair in the middle, and it flew back, straight as could be, at the bowler. The Major must have hit it unawares.

'A catch ! a catch !' and 'caught !' were heard from all parts of the field, but the ball was not held. Somehow it slipped through Joe Cook's fingers and hit him a blow on the left eye, which fairly laid him out.

They had to carry him off the field, and the doctor, who was watching the match, examined him, and pronounced it very doubtful whether the man would ever see out of that eye again.

Needless to say that with two of their best men disabled the Watchem team lost the match. Julia Careless proved a defaulter ; she thought the loss of Charley's three teeth, and Joe Cook's eye, freed her from any obligation to the Major.

Storkey Chew, and others of the Seldom Seen team, drank deeply that night, and discussed the Major for hours, without arriving at any definite conclusion. They knew, very well, that it was the Major's bowling that had given them the victory ; but they couldn't congratulate him, for rough as they were, knocking out men's eyes and teeth was a kind of cricket they did not understand.

It was unpleasant too for the Major, as a rumour

had somehow got about that the Watchem men were not the first victims of his random shots. Not a few of them regarded him with suspicion.

There was a dance in the barn that night ; but the Major sat on the veranda of the hotel, talking about something to the Wooler which evidently held his attention. It was about a mineral outcrop, which the Wooler wanted very badly to show him. To kill time, he was much inclined to go and see it ; but he was half afraid, and telling the Wooler he would decide about it in the morning, he went to bed.

He wanted time for thought. He had maimed three more men since his arrival at Seldom Seen, and left a dead woman down in Melbourne, and he was not sure, this time, whether it was his luck, or his fetish. He seemed, somehow, to escape himself ; but how long was this security going to continue ?

He really wanted to be quiet for a bit ; but, for him, things were always turning up.

However, he had three days still on his hands, before he wanted to show himself again in Melbourne.

## CHAPTER XI

### TIMMERING FOREST

THERE had been much hard drinking over night ; but next morning the Wooler was up betimes, as sober as a judge. When he had business on hand, he would keep off the drink for months at a time, and that morning he had business, and might have been seen in long conference with the landlord.

He was arranging to hire a quiet saddle-horse and a dog, as he wanted to take the Major by a short cut through Timmering Forest into the Dark River country, where he knew of something which he very much wanted some mining expert to see.

‘ Better stay and look after your sheep,’ said Jim.

‘ All shorn and the wool baled up, ready for the drays,’ replied the Wooler laconically.

‘ How long are you likely to be away ? ’ asked Jim.

‘ Three days.’

‘ Has he promised to go with you ? ’ was the publican’s next question.

‘ Not yet ; but I’ve talked to him about it, and if I can tell him I’ve a quiet horse for him to ride, and that it’s only a few miles, I guess he’ll come.’

'It's a straight deal, old man, isn't it?' asked the publican, anxiously.

'Course it is!' replied the Wooler. 'I know of something that ought to make the fortune of this district.'

Needless to say, matters were arranged; for anything in the shape of a new find always meant stir, and bustle, and wages, and good business for the public-house: and no one knew this better than Jim Careless.

When a company was floated in Melbourne, to open up a new field, local men were always given the preference as miners. Again and again, in the history of the district, companies had been started to mine there for almost every kind of mineral. Gold, silver, copper and tin, had each had not one turn but many. With the invariable result, however, that after spending their capital upon expensive machinery, big salaries, wages, directors' fees, etc., the companies closed down abruptly, leaving the machinery to rust at the bottom of gullies, or on the sides of steep hills; for the country was so inaccessible and broken, that, once taken in, it rarely paid to bring machinery out again.

The snow-grass country is granite, and probably the most deceptive mining country of any in Australia. Magnificent prospects were plentiful; but there seemed to be no permanence in any of them.

However, as the Wooler explained to the Major, it was not snow-grass country he was going to take him to; but to a place which few, if any, Seldom Seen people knew anything about.

He did not say much to his acquaintances at the hotel ; he told inquirers that he had persuaded Major Smart to go out with him a short distance to look at a swamp where there was tin, which, he thought, would pay for dredging.

It was still early in the day when, astride of a quiet, upstanding bay horse, the Major might have been seen riding down the hill from the hotel. Close to his horse's heels followed a shaggy, half-bred sheep dog, mates with the horse ; it was easy to see that horse and dog knew each other well, and as Jim Careless had assured the Major, knew the surrounding country too, and could smell their way across the Bush better than ordinary bushmen could see it.

'Drop the reins on your horse's neck,' was his advice, 'if by any chance you get lost, and horse and dog together will bring you safely back to Seldom Seen.'

Beside the Major, tramped a tall, rough-looking, square-set man, leading a horse, on which, strapped to the saddle, was a heavy swag, out of which protruded a short-handled shovel, a miner's pick, a short-barrelled magazine rifle, and a steel prospecting dish. Strapped to his belt, in a leather pouch, was a revolver. It was the Wooler, known to a few intimates only as Donald McDuff.

The Major also carried a revolver ; and in his pocket-book a 'Miner's Right.' He was always prepared for contingencies when in a mining country !

The whole of the inhabitants, and the visitors who had stayed over from the cricket match, turned out to see the Wooler and the Major off. They stood in the dusty road, mostly in shirt sleeves and

with pipes in their mouths, watched them down the hill, and saw them splash through the shallow creek by the willows, and turn in, near by, at a pair of somewhat dilapidated gates, common to the sheep country.

But even Jim Careless wasn't sure of their destination ; for the road through those gates branched off, a few miles further on, into half a dozen unfrequented tracks, most of them leading into the 'terra incognita' of Victoria.

It may be explained, for the benefit of arm-chair critics both in and out of Australia that the practically unknown country of even the most closely settled of the Commonwealth States is far larger than is generally supposed.

'A terra incognita in Victoria?' exclaims the railway-travelled explorer. 'Haven't I passed through the country, from Port Melbourne to Wodonga, and seen settlement on every hand? Can't I take down the map, and put my finger on every portion of the State, and tell you its name, and give you its area and population?'

If the Wooler had had to make answer, he would probably have said: 'So long, old man! put your finger upon the Dark River, which you'll find running into the Mitta Mitta, and glance north from that, to the Murray River, and beyond. You'll find no names upon the map, nor will any directory or railway guide give them to you; but the places spoken of in this narrative are there all right, and many others, in a wild broken country, far away from civilization and railways, that might make a new-chum journalist visitor's hair stand on end.'



Reviewers (mostly women in these days), in and out of the Commonwealth, talk of Australia as a thoroughly well known country, explored to the last square mile, and scoff at stories such as this ; but the fact is that Australians themselves born and bred in the country know little or nothing of the lone land to which the Wooler was about to introduce the Major. Places where men die of thirst, and hunger, and sometimes violence, and no man knoweth of their sepulchre to this day.

No sooner were they well out of sight of the pub, than the Wooler re-adjusted his swag, and somehow piled himself, along with it, on the saddle. The horses shuffled over the rough ground at a bushman's jog, and the Wooler lit his pipe and began to yarn.

He wanted to learn a few things about Joe Chandler which he didn't know ; but the Major was not communicative, and parried his questions by asking others.

First of all, he wanted to know exactly how far he had to ride.

'Oh, just a few miles,' replied the Wooler.

'Suppose,' said the Major, 'we call it ten.'

'Call it what you will, it isn't far,' replied the Wooler, 'a mile or two is neither here nor there in the Bush ; we may have to go out of our road a bit, for as you're a Melbourne mining man, I'd like to show you a few things that may open your eyes.'

They were now on a hard, plainly marked road ; not of much use to vehicles however, since it was terribly cut up by old time traffic, followed by the

rush of water during heavy rain. Up hill and down, it led through big paddocks, fairly thick with trees and undergrowth, each one separated by large double sheep gates, roughly closed together by a loop of twisted wire.

'Never get off your horse in the Bush, if you can help it,' said the Wooler, and with that he put his horse side-on to the gate and lifted the loop, when both gates, of their own weight, swung promptly open.

The Major rode through in front, and turned curiously around to see how the Wooler would close them without alighting.

With a sharp quick movement of hand and spur however, he was through in a moment, and the heavy gates, swung deftly back, were caught and closed just as they had found them. He seemed to the Major to move his horse without effort exactly as he willed.

'Do you see yonder old fire-place?' asked the Wooler, pointing to a strange rough ruin, under a clump of gum trees, not far from the road. 'That's the old kitchen of my first camp. I spent a winter just here, mining with a mate. We cooked and fed in the kitchen, and slept in tents. It was a fine life, but bitterly cold that winter: your head ached in the morning from sheer frost-bite, and that in Australia. But you are four thousand feet above sea level here.'

'There's a creek below there, isn't there?' said the Major, looking over to a ribbon of bushes, running north and south.

'There is,' said the Wooler, reflectively. 'When

I first dumped my swag down here, thirty years ago, there was plenty of black fish in it ; but the sluicing has killed them. It was a great place too for lyre-birds, down yonder by the creek. They're pheasants, you know. We used to pot them off in the old days, by the dozen ; they're good eating ; but there was one, a regular mascot, that we never shot at. They're protected by law now ; but who troubles about game-laws up here ? '

The Major had started at the mention of the lyre-bird, as though something had just come to his mind.

' How could a lyre-bird be a mascot ? ' he asked.

' He was our mascot, right enough,' replied the Wooler, ' for we took twelve-hundred and fifty-six pounds' worth of black and ruby tin ore out of the creek alluvial, on the right hand bank ; exactly where we first saw the lyre-bird. It was so fine that we at first thought it was black-jack ; but it was tin, right enough, and we hit upon a new method of cleaning it, and did well there.'

' How long did it take you to get it out ? ' asked the Major.

' About five months. There were only two of us owners ; but we employed a couple of the Seldom Seen chaps on wages. It was mid-winter and bitterly cold, night and morning ; you don't see lyre-birds in this district in the summer. He was a bold, bright, cheery bird. I remember how on those white winter mornings he was always the first to wake us up at earliest dawn.'

" Oh dear ! oh dear ! oh dear ! dear, dear, dear, dear me ! " is the best description I can give you of the first bar of his morning song,' continued the

Wooler. 'As the light grew brighter in the east, the laughing jackass would join him, with a whole lot of noisy guffaws. The lyre-bird would be silent for a time, evidently listening, and then mimic him, until the forest rang with their laughter. I've heard him mock the gill-birds, and the shrill chorus of the cheeky magpies, squabbling over some scrap of food ; but my mate would have it that he could squeal like a rabbit caught in a trap, or surprised by a fox.'

'Ah!' exclaimed the Major, looking at the Wooler as though his words still reminded him of something else in the long ago, 'that's very interesting.'

'During the long frosty nights,' continued the Wooler, 'he and his mate made themselves comfortable on some low branch of the thick bushes near the creek ; but at daybreak he moved his quarters, that he might warm himself upon that outcrop of lichen-covered boulders over there. In winter they catch the first rays of the rising sun. There he "Oh deared" to his heart's content, until it was time for breakfast, which he scratched for under the rank undergrowth, abutting on the creek. He was very tame, and appeared vastly proud of his tail, which he would erect, as though to be admired. He seemed to know that he was a "mascot" and that we protected him, for he strutted about with proper pride, always on the alert to mimic what other birds were saying or doing in the Bush. It was only in the morning and evening, however, that he made himself heard. We lost sight of him and his mate when the spring came, and I can tell you

we sadly missed our mascot, whose cheery voice in the winter had possessed the land.'

Whatever the Major may have thought of the Wooler's fluent description of the lyre-bird, he said nothing, for they had turned off the road and he was following his loquacious companion down a rocky path, strewn with boulders, on the side of a hill, where the horses had to pick their steps carefully, in single file.

This led them parallel with the old bed of the creek, where an extensive view of one of the old hydraulic sluicing mines was obtained. It was not the Major's policy to appear surprised; but the huge desolation of the scene surpassed anything he had before seen, in the way of mining.

As far as the eye could see, were the reddish, cliff-like faces of the old workings. Water, under hydraulic pressure, had swept the red earth down the ground sluices in thousands of tons. Played upon by giant nozzles, great cliffs had been washed away before the deluge of water, which first undermined them, and then carried the overburden and lighter residue away, and strewed it for miles down the flats and creek, leaving the heavier tin ore in the sluices, to be gathered when they cleaned up, and to be streamed again, with more water, through the boxes and dressing tables.

Overhead were the remains of half a mile or more of fluming, raised by sapling stages, in many places forty and fifty feet above the level of the ground. This was to give the pressure needed to work the giant nozzles that had once roared, night and day, like thunder through that great solitude.

The water had been brought, in a five foot open race, by gravitation through the ranges and around the spurs of hills, and carried by rough aqueducts, over gorges and valleys, and, to the eye of one of the great eagles of the district, soaring aloft, it must have appeared like a huge glistening serpent, working its scintillant way in and out among the rocky ridges of the wild desolate landscape.

‘This is the old “King William Mine,”’ said the Wooler. ‘It was floated with a capital of fifteen hundred thousand pounds; they took some hundreds of tons of tin out of it, but it never paid a dividend to the shareholders. Those brick ruins are the old works and stables. The manager’s residence is a partial ruin, yonder, among the trees. There ought to be a bit of fruit ripe just now in the old orchard. When this, and some other mines, were working, some five-and-twenty years ago, there were lively times in Seldom Seen. But in those days, worse luck, tin was only a quarter the price it is now. By the way, there’s a heap of old machinery rusting in the ruins yonder—cost thousands—but it’s scrap-iron now.’

‘But what awful devastation this kind of mining makes,’ said the Major.

‘That’s so,’ replied the Wooler, ‘It’s almost as bad as the dredging. They are destroying hundreds of thousands of acres in this way all over Australia. It’s a great country, is this, for deliberate waste. It’s very different to the old barrow, pick and shovel days, forty years ago, when something like twenty million sterling worth of tin ore was taken out of the creek banks and flats of Southern Queens-



land and Northern New South Wales. The tin miners of those days, at Stanthorpe and Herding Yard, worked on open faces, and wheeled the overburden behind them as they followed up the tin drifts, and left the country as flat as a billiard-table. I hear that they have large fruit orchards on some of those old workings now ; but this hydraulic machinery destroys everything in front of it, and leaves behind it miles of desolate wilderness where nothing will grow except weeds and bush. But we'll have to push on. I want to camp for an hour at noon by the old railway embankment and give the horses a spell. I noticed some good grass there the other day.'

'An old railway embankment !' ejaculated the Major.

'Yes, sounds funny perhaps ; but it runs for miles through the forest a little farther north. Some blooming English engineers thought to carry train loads of tin wash to a river twelve miles away. When they had finished the railway, they found there was no tin in the leases which the company had purchased and no water in the river.'

'Steady, old man !' exclaimed the Major, 'sounds as though you were trying to pull my leg a bit.'

'Nothing of the sort,' said the Wooler. 'There was plenty of water in the river when they started the railway, when they surveyed it at least, for it was a year of floods. And they had a splendid show of tin ore too, but the ground was never properly tested, and when they had built a dozen miles of fairly expensive railway, with a couple of bridges and embankments, at a cost including rolling stock of about sixty



thousand, they found that their mineral leases were worthless. I camped for three months a few years ago when shooting wild horses for old squatter Boulton in one of the old trucks. There are a dozen of them and an old engine rotting on the rails now. It was a hundred and fifty thousand company, all English capital; but it gave a lot of the people about here their first start in life. Half the pig-sties in the district are made out of old railway trucks.'

'You astonish me,' said the Major, 'but what do you mean by "the people about here"? We haven't met a soul, or passed a house, since we left Seldom Seen.'

'We've passed them right enough,' said the Wooler; 'but we're not paying calls this trip, so I haven't directed your special attention to them. Not that they are all desirable acquaintances, let me tell you; there are two madmen's places we've passed, and there's a mad woman, with a son and two daughters, living about a mile further on. We'll call and see 'em if you like?'

'That's enough fooling, Wooler,' said the Major. 'Let's push along to this new find you want me to inspect. I meet enough mad people down in Melbourne without being introduced to any more up here.'

'But our mad people are not dangerous,' persisted the Wooler. 'I hear that they are awfully on the increase in Australia, and no doubt it's the lonely life in country such as this which turns so many dotty, but I'm not given a bit that way myself, and I shouldn't think you are; there's too much of the wild cat about most Melbourne mining men for

them to go mad. With them, it's usually the other fellow that goes mad !'

'You people have all got a nasty down on city mining men,' retorted the Major, 'because we occasionally get the best of you in a deal ; but we are perfect innocents when compared with you. You call us "sharks" and "wild cats" and so on, and yet on your own showing, nothing pleases you better than to take us down. As likely as not, the thing you are taking me to see is some salted proposition, by which (if you can take me in) my Melbourne friends, and I will stand to lose hundreds, and it may be thousands of pounds. Yet you call us names when by some off-chance we can get the best of you. It's a case of diamond cut diamond, and the very things you have been showing me up here prove that it is we city people who mostly find the money to build the railway trucks out of which you country people make good pigsties.'

The Wooler laughed heartily at this, but disclaimed any knowledge of 'salted propositions,' and soon afterwards they reached their mid-day camping ground under the lee of the railway embankment.

## CHAPTER XII

### ' LIKE A JEWELLER'S SHOP '

**E**VEN by old hands in the back blocks, the Wooler was reckoned to be ' a hard case ' ; but he had not been many hours riding and camping with Boswell Smart before he realized that in the matter of what he called ' slimness ' he had met his match in the Major.

Early in the day the Major discovered that the Wooler had omitted to take out a Miner's Right, and had thus placed himself at a serious disadvantage as a prospector. The Major guessed that a good many rough and ready quasi-miners about Seldom Seen thus defrauded the Government of its due, so he refrained from any reference to the matter ; but he chuckled to himself at the simplicity of the Wooler.

With his Miner's Right he could peg out for himself anything the Wooler might be pleased to show him.

But the Wooler was not so very simple ; he knew that the Major knew ; and he guessed, too, what was passing in the Major's mind ; but he avoided any reference to the matter, and determined somehow or other to slip away from Smart and risk a

night ride across country to Reefton, where was the nearest Warden's Office, to make good his deficiency.

None but an expert bushman would have dreamt of attempting it, even with a moon, for there was neither road nor track; but the Wooler's bushcraft was unique.

Thus a war of wits had begun already between these two men, for the Major was all the time wondering how the Wooler was going to manage it, and it was easy for the latter to guess that something unusual occupied the Major's mind, for he expected Smart to 'rouse upon him' for the long journey he had inveigled him into; but the Major jogged quietly along, after their mid-day camp, without a word of complaint.

He asked many questions, however, as to the character of the Wooler's discovery; and told him that if it proved but half as good as he represented it to be, he would take it up.

A few miles after passing the old railway embankment they came to a dismal looking gorge, from the head of which an extensive view of a great unoccupied country was visible. A faintly marked cattle-track tipped over, as it were, into the fearful descent, and the Wooler made as though he was going to follow it.

'In the name of all that's holy, Wooler!' cried the Major, 'you're not going to ride down there?'

'It's the nearest track leading to where we want to go.'

The Major looked down into the abyss and said: 'I'll get off and walk then.'

'You can't possibly walk down!' exclaimed the Wooler. 'It's too rough; you'll have to ride. I've been up and down it a score of times.'

'So you may, but you've not been up and down it with me, and I'm not going to risk my neck riding down there. I expect you occasionally climb a tree on that horse of yours; but I prefer to ride on level ground.'

'There *is* another way,' said the Wooler with reluctance, 'but it's only four miles to our destination if we go down here.'

'How far is it round?' asked the Major, lighting a cigar.

'Seven miles,' replied the Wooler.

'Look here, Wooler!' said the Major, 'I'm getting saddle-sore with all this horse-exercise. Are you sure that it's worth my while to ride seven more miles through this beastly Bush of yours to see this thing?'

'Major,' replied the Wooler, 'I haven't had time to open it up properly; in fact I was afraid to, until I had some one to help me peg it out, and fix up the lease, and so forth; if it isn't gold it's copper pyrites; but I feel sure it's gold, and the little bit I uncovered sparkled in white quartz like a jeweller's shop.'

'But didn't you get a sample?' asked the Major.

'I had a mate with me who was no good, and I didn't want him to know.'

'Oh! that was it, was it?' said the Major. 'Well, lead on, McDuff, we'll take the long way round; if what you say is true, it's worth another seven miles.'

The Wooler rode on, followed by the Major, who in turn was followed by the dog. McDuff was

wondering what excuse he could make to give the Major the slip, and get that Miner's Right.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three and a half hours afterwards, not far from a running creek, and if anything nearer Reefton than Seldom Seen, the Major might have been seen in his shirt sleeves excitedly watching the Wooler, who was hard at work in a shallow shaft.

They had struck gold right enough, and the two men were equally carried away by the lust for the royal metal and the excitement of the hour.

At the Major's urgent request, the Wooler had agreed that they should take fifteen-minute turns in the golden hole. And with this prospect in view, the Major had just stripped off his coat, and with shirt sleeves rolled up stood impatiently ready to take his innings. They had already unearthed a nugget worth fully a hundred pounds.

The whole experience was new and intoxicating to both of them, and they were half frenzied with excitement; for men often lose their senses, as it were, and forget distance, companionship, tired limbs, hunger and thirst, and everything else, when the yellow metal is first sighted in quantity. Only those who have felt the thrill can understand the lure of new-found virgin gold. Half an hour ago maybe a ragged, hungry fossicker; but now, as he fingers the glittering, all-powerful metal, a presumptive millionaire. No wonder that at such times, intoxicated with success and excitement, men will work until they drop delirious and exhausted by the side of their substantiated dreams.

The reef was outcropping from a quartzose spur

running north-westerly from the creek. It had been hit upon by the Wooler twelve months before by pure accident, when he was out with a neighbour looking for some one else's stray sheep. It was quite outside the country in which a geologist's knowledge would have led him to expect to find it, but many things are topsy-turvy in Australia, where gold is often found in granite country instead of basalt, fissure lodes occur without properly defined walls, dykes are often permanent, and coarse gold, masked with iron rust, is occasionally thrown away by new chums for black-jack.

The Major was adding considerably to his practical knowledge of mining and the Bush; but presently he added more, for the Wooler, on being relieved by the Major, said he would go and have a look at the horses, and take them down to the creek for water. He left the Major, picking and shovelling, and sweating like a madman in the golden hole. He had just blundered, with new chum luck, into a fresh pocket, where a show glittered in the honey-combed quartz like a bit of sunshine in a snow-drift, and completely absorbed his attention. He picked out specimens and small nuggets, stuffed them in his pockets, and worked away, scarcely conscious of the lapse of time or the Wooler's absence, until Nip, the dog, came up to him, and for the first time he realized that he was there alone.

He coo-eed, and coo-eed again; but there was no answer. The Wooler had left him—cleared out, hot foot to Reefton, to get a Miner's Right.



## CHAPTER XIII

### COO-EEING CREEK

MAJOR SMART sat down upon an outcrop by the side of the reef and wiped the perspiration off his streaming face; it was very hot, and he was very much exhausted, and half dazed by his adventures, his surroundings, the long ride, and the unwonted physical exertion.

He believed that he had come into the possession of an unexpected fortune, and the first thing he intended to do was to peg it out.

The Wooler had seemingly left him, and without a word of explanation. The Major told himself that he was quite justified in regarding the other's desertion of him in the Bush as a dissolution of any partnership or understanding there might have been between them. He guessed of course that the Wooler had gone off to get a Miner's Right. But that was his affair!

He gathered, from what the Wooler had told him, that he was located on a tributary of the Dark River, and that it was about twenty-five miles across country to Reefton; but he had no—'official knowledge'—that was the way he put it—'of the Wooler's whereabouts.'

'I hope the beggar hasn't taken all the grub,'

was his next thought. 'I'm beginning to feel hungry, after all that spade work, digging gold.' His thoughts were scarcely coherent yet; but he went and had a look at his horse, feeding in hobbles on the flat, and then overhauled the swag and his saddle bags, which the Wooler had left where he had first placed them near a small clump of peppermint trees on a kind of knoll.

'I must have been awfully absorbed over the gold,' thought the Major, 'or I should have seen him go off. Fancy the beggar starting on a ride like that, down gorges, and across creeks, and through scrubs, at sundown. I hope he'll break his neck.'

The Wooler had brought a calico fly with his swag for them to sleep under, and Smart fixed this up between two saplings to keep off the dew. He found plenty of food in the swag, with tea and sugar and two-thirds of a bottle of whisky, so he was not likely to starve. The dog had been following him about, and came to him on being called, wagging his tail. He seemed to know that he and the horse and the Major were now the sole occupants of that lonely region. Nothing seems to crave companionship in the Bush more than a dog, and Nip, who was rather old, and not ordinarily companionable, lay down close by the Major's feet.

The Wooler had taken his gun, but left his small half-axe, and the Major, who had picked it up to peg out the claim with, sat down on the outcrop again and tapped idly upon the rock between his legs. He was not much of a miner, or he would have covered over the golden hole first thing with dead

bushes and litter to hide it from the eyes of curious strangers. Many a man has been murdered in the Bush for the sake of something he has found there and failed to hide. But the Major sat there amid the lengthening shadows absorbed in thought.

He was thinking how he should peg out the claim in the morning so as to attract as little attention as possible. He would get some very old wood for pegs, cut the indication trenches and fill them up with rubbish and leaves; then somehow he'd make his way straight in and register in his own name. He'd give the Wooler fits for leaving him alone like that in the Bush.

Having thus decided, he covered the golden hole with dead branches and litter, and then, still half dazed with his luck, sat down again on the out-cropping boulder, and took from his pockets the nuggets and gold specimens he had.

At this moment the thought of the big nugget occurred to him. The Wooler had placed it in the grass close by under a bush. To look for it was the work of a moment; but it was gone. The Wooler had cleared off with it!

'Ah, the beggar!' exclaimed the Major, 'he's done me over that; but I've got the mine, and I've a good mind to prosecute him for stealing my gold. It would be a lesson to him for breaking the law by prospecting without a Miner's Right.'

Then there came over him an exquisite sense of satisfaction at his success. He thought how this new-found wealth would relieve him of all his financial difficulties, how he could easily carry a couple of hundred pounds' worth of specimens with

him in the Wooler's swag, and float a company that would astonish Melbourne. He might float it for a quarter or half a million.

Full of these great thoughts, he potted away with the head of the axe upon the rock, when a lump of it broke off, and as he carelessly picked it up, his eye caught the glint of something bright and metallic.

'Can't be gold,' he whispered thickly, 'must be mica or pyrites.' But looking at it closely, he found it to be the same quartzose rock, thickly encrusted with the precious metal. He jumped upon his feet, overwhelmed with astonishment; but as he did so, a queer feeling came over him. The sun, glinting through the trees, had touched the distant sky-line, and the long shadows seemed to his excited imagination to creep and crawl around him. He hadn't noticed it before in his keen quest for gold; but now the whole place appeared repulsive and uncanny—the wild surroundings, the utter loneliness, and prodigious wealth!

He was faint for want of food, which perhaps accounted for his laughing hysterically as he ejaculated: "Good heavens, what a find!"

But night was coming on fast, so he placed the broken piece of rock back in its place, stuck a stick at right angles in the ground, that he might readily find it again, and went across to the circle of peppermint trees, where were his saddle and swag. He munched a bit of biscuit, and threw another to the dog, as he busied himself making preparation for tea.

It seemed a convenient clump of trees for a camp,

for they were dwarfed and bushy, so he put his blankets and tucker under the tent-fly. The dew was falling by this time ; but he got a bit of dry bush and some grass, and started a fire. Then he went down to the creek for a billy of water, with the dog Nip, who by this time had become quite friendly, following at his heels. As they were returning, Nip put his cold nose on the Major's free hand, and started to lick it.

' What's up, old man ? ' said Smart, for it struck him as strange ; Nip was not only old, but he was crabbed, and not given to the demonstrative ways of other dogs. When he spoke, however, the dog first looked wistfully into his face, as though anxious about something, and then turned and looked back to the creek.

When the Major reached the camp, to his annoyance the fire was out, and the sticks seemed to be scattered, as though some one had tramped upon them. He thought it very queer, and looked around in the gloom with an uncomfortable feeling ; but drew them together again, and, gathering some dry leaves, bent down and lit them. The leaves flared up, but he had great difficulty in getting the wood to burn, and all the while the dog watched him, as though curious and anxious, and presently shivered and whimpered as the fire burnt lower, and then went out.

Now every bushman knows that some bush wood burns badly, and for sundry reasons a fire made under a billy may not at first burn well ; but when the Major came back, and instead of finding the billy boiling, found the fire out, he was decidedly put out,

for a fire is company in the Bush, and he badly wanted a drink of tea, something to eat, and a smoke.

Suddenly, a little way down the creek, he heard a coo-ee, and instantly the dog came close up to him and growled.

It was not much, in an ordinary way, that the Major really feared in the Bush ; for as he had said in the Club, the Australian Bush is usually a very safe place to camp in ; but he was so strung up with the thought of the gold and other things, that you might have knocked him down with the proverbial feather when he first heard that coo-ee.

At first he thought that the Wooler had come back again, to upset all his gorgeous plans ; but after a few minutes' breathless pause with no further sound, it occurred to him that if it had been the Wooler, he would have called his name and come right on to the camp.

'There's some darned fossicker upon my track,' he whispered to himself. 'I suppose they can smell a new gold field, as a crow a corpse ; but I'm hanged if I'll answer !'

He was quite right, for when a man has struck it rich and hasn't pegged out his claim, he doesn't want to be interfered with.

'Coo-ee ! Coo-ee !' came from down the creek again.

It was growing quite dark, and Smart felt the dog trembling, either with excitement or fear, right against his leg. This puzzled him, for although the dog had been trained not to bark when anything happened, as a usual thing he would growl ; but now, from some unaccountable cause, he seemed frightened.

'Coo-ee!' the cry sounded more feeble, and was shrill, and thin, and pitiful.

'Good heaven!' exclaimed the Major, 'it sounds like the voice of a woman. How can she have got into this desolate place, and what shall I do with her?'

Without waiting further, Smart drew in a long breath and let out a coo-ee which on that still night might have been heard a mile away. Then he waited for an answer.

All was very quiet for some time. He stood listening, perfectly still; but no answer came.

Then he coo-eed, and coo-eed again.

Still no answer!

Presently a faint coo-ee came from farther down the creek. Smart at once answered, and lighting a small bush lantern of the Wooler's, he took the bearings of the camp, as well as he could, for it was now getting quite dark, and started off in the direction of the voice.

He had only gone about a quarter of a mile, when he heard a coo-ee from the camp he had just left. He hurried back as fast as he could, coo-eeing as he returned; but there was no answer, and when he reached his camp, there was no woman, nor any one else to be seen there.

He searched all around the clump of peppermint trees where he had made his camp, but could find nothing.

The major did not sleep a wink that night, for at short intervals, hour after hour, the unearthly cry continued. Early in the night he got his blankets and cleared out from his camp. By the side of the golden hole he laid down his wearied limbs, and,



revolver in hand, waited impatiently for the day.

When the grey dawn at last came, the coo-eeing ceased ; but it took the Major some time to pull himself together. Then he got himself a stiff nobbler of whisky, lit a fire at some distance from the clump of trees where the coo-eeing had been most persistent, made some breakfast, and smoked a cigar.

The dog recovered himself at daylight and barked at a couple of laughing jackasses, so Smart sent him down to bring the horse up to the camp ; for Nip could round up a horse as readily as a mob of sheep. In the meantime the Major pegged out a prospector's discovery claim, one thousand yards square, and, having determined to ride into Reefton to register it, carefully covered up the hole and planted the Wooler's swag ; he kept out the saddle bags to hold any necessaries he might want upon the road. He determined also to send wires to his wife and to Will Monckton, to acquaint them with his whereabouts.

Waiting for the horse, he sat on the golden outcrop and smoked a second cigar while he thought things over. He had searched around very carefully, but could find no footprints except his own. He coo-eed repeatedly, even at the risk of bringing some hungry fossicker or curious stockman upon the ground ; but to his relief there was no answer.

It was a weird, lonely place, a kind of terrace on a hill-side, surrounded by a gloomy forest, and the uncanny feeling came over him again, so he lifted the piece of fractured rock off the golden boulder and examined it carefully before replacing it : he took the specimens of gold out of his pockets, and held

them glittering in the sunlight, so as to assure himself that it was not all some extraordinary dream.

Nip returned very leisurely at the heels of Ranger, and Smart saddled up to get away and register the mine. Still he had a feeling that some one was about, and he did not half like to leave the place. He looked around again and again before at last he got into the saddle and turned the old horse's head in the direction of Reefton.

He had found out by a map he carried with him, that by following down the creek he would strike a road about five miles away, which would bring him somewhat nearer to civilization.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE TABLES TURNED

**A**BOUT four miles down the creek the Major came upon an unfrequented bridle track. Probably it had originally been made by Bush cattle coming down to drink. He saw by his map that it should lead to a road which ran north and south about ten miles farther on, so he decided to make in that direction.

The reader will not be surprised, however, to learn that he went a good deal out of his way, and it was noon before he struck the road.

Half an hour afterward he met a travelling pedlar, who told him that that day being New Year's Eve, the Mining Registrar's office in Reefton was closed, and he decided to turn back again at once, for he had a feeling of apprehension about the safety of the new find.

Once in the Bush again, he took out his revolver and examined it carefully, to assure himself that it was loaded. He even pulled up, and debated with himself as to whether, with the specimens in his pockets, he had not better ride back and sleep at the township, and register the claim as

soon as the office opened. He might take a couple of reliable miners back with him, to work on wages.

He didn't half like the idea of spending another night alone at the claim, for his doubts as to the reality of the supernatural had been rudely shaken. He hadn't a doubt now but that the place was haunted.

However, he rode on, for the coo-eeing hadn't hurt him, and it isn't every day that a man becomes the possessor of a gold mine.

As he crossed the creek again a couple of hours later, Nip growled warningly, and looking down at the damp turf, he was startled to see the fresh hoof marks of several shod horses. They seemed to be making towards his camp. He hurried on, and, on arriving at the claim, to his consternation found himself confronted by three strangers.

They had the golden hole uncovered, and one of them, with a pipe in his mouth, was actually sitting upon the boulder which Smart knew to be veined thick with gold.

'Good day, mate,' said a dark-haired man, 'you're a bit late; we've pegged out, and one of our chaps has gone in to register.'

Before the Major got off his horse, he scanned the faces of the men without speaking; they were well armed and a villainous looking crowd. Their swags and saddles were in a heap close by. The swags were small, and they had no mining tools with them.

As Smart lowered himself out of the saddle, Nip snarled at one of the men, who had pitched a stone toward him. It was done, no doubt, on purpose,

for a moment afterwards the poor brute fell dead with a bullet in his head.

'That's an ugly looking dog, mate,' said the fellow, the smoking weapon still in his hand; 'I can't stand dogs of that breed.'

The other two laughed; but the Major saw that each man had uncovered a revolver. He was boiling over with wrath; but he knew well that his life hung in the balance, so he quietly hitched his horse to a sapling and stood facing them.

'I'm sorry you shot the dog,' he said; 'he's been a good friend to me, and done you no harm; but it's three to one, so it's no use saying anything. Are you chaps miners?'

'Oh, yes,' said the man on the boulder. 'We're all blooming miners—got our Miner's Rights in our pockets. Have you one, mate?'

'It's in my swag,' replied Smart, and then he sat down on an outcropping rock and lit a cigar.

'I suppose you mean to be friendly, and won't try to jump our claim?' asked the smallest man of the three, who had not before spoken.

'I pegged out at daylight this morning,' answered Smart.

'Come round and show us your pegs,' said the man who seemed to be the leader.

The Major hesitated; it might have been a pretext to shoot him as soon as his back was turned.

'I'll show you the pegs, if you wish to see them,' said Smart; 'but I think we had better have a bit of a talk first; you are all armed, and you've shot my dog without any provocation. That does not look exactly friendly, and I'd like to know what

your intentions are before I show you the pegs.'

'Well, we know there's gold down there, and we intend to have it,' said the first speaker.

'I won't quarrel with you over that,' answered Smart, 'because it is evident that if I don't give you the claim you are strong enough to put me out of the way and take it.'

'You're a sensible chap,' said the first speaker; 'we don't want any bloodshed over the business. If you've got shooting irons about you, you'd best keep them covered. We'll take the claim, and as we are not much in the way of mining ourselves, we'll put you to work it on wages. I'll overlook the mining, and Bill and Dandy there will keep camp and see that no one comes about interfering.'

He held his revolver carelessly pointed in the direction of the Major, who replied: 'All right. What's the wages?'

'A pound a day and tucker,' replied the man.

'Right you are,' said the Major.

'My name's Walker,' said the man, pulling out a gold watch and looking at the time. 'It's now about four; you can put in half a day before sundown. By the way, I think you've got some specimens of gold about you; hand them over, and, with them thrown in, I'll put you down for a full day's wage.'

Smart saw there was no help for it, so he quietly handed him the gold.

'Now kindly pass along that pistol of yours,' said Walker; 'we'll look after your personal safety while you're at work.'

The Major looked at him a moment before hand-

ing over the revolver; his fingers itched to shoot him, but he complied with his request quietly; the tables were turned upon him, and all that a man hath will he give for his life.

The three inspected the specimens, and felt their weight with evident approval; they were worth eighty or a hundred pounds if a cent.

Walker then suggested that the Major should at once commence work. 'And look here, mate,' said he, 'no tricks, or it will be the worse for you.'

Smart was obliged to put in nearly four hours' digging before dark, Walker standing over him all the while with his revolver. But somehow the excitement of getting out that pocket of gold made him think little of his danger; they were not likely to shoot him while he was positively shovelling out sovereigns for them. Walker got quite excited over it when some uncommonly rich specimen was unearthed, and would call to Bill and Dandy to come over and see the treasure.

The latter seemed to be cooking something for the evening meal over by the clump of peppermint trees.

By sundown there must have been eight hundred or a thousand pounds' worth of gold at grass, and as Walker took charge of it he coolly handed Smart a one pound note, remarking that he was in the habit of paying cash down to men who worked as he had done and pleased him.

'And now,' said he, 'we're going to tie you up to a tree until morning; you might clear out, you know, now you've got your wages.'



The Major laughed, weary and sore and fustigated as he was, he could not help it. There was a spice of humour about the fellow.

The peril and excitement and hard work—to say nothing of the speechless horror of the previous night—had been so great that Smart flung himself down under some bushes and allowed them to tie him up without remonstrance. They brought him a blanket and tea and food, and then only did he thoroughly recall the weird horror of the previous night, and wondered if the coo-eeing wail of that lost soul was a thing of nightly recurrence.

They had fixed up a camp, in the very centre of the circle of trees, long before sundown. The Major was too far away to hear what they were saying; but they were evidently in high spirits, laughed a great deal, and had a good fire burning. He guessed that they were helping themselves freely to his whisky; but they did not offer him any. He knew too, from what they brought him, that they had helped themselves to his tucker; but he did not care. He swallowed down his tea, rolled himself as well as he could in the blankets, and waited for developments. He heard no coo-eeing, however, and overcome with fatigue, disappointment, and utter misery of heart and mind, fell sound asleep.

He was awakened by Walker, who spoke hurriedly and thickly. 'Did you tell any one of this find?' he inquired.

The Major aroused himself, for he was dazed when first awakened, but in a moment everything came back to him.

'Not a soul,' he answered.

'Do you expect any mates to follow you?' queried Walker.

'No,' replied the Major.

At that instant a gust of wind came rattling down the terrace, and a shrill, weird coo-ee rang up from the darkness of the creek bed.

'Do you hear that?' Walter said, in a half whisper.

'Yes,' replied Smart; 'some one is coo-eeing.'

The man stood perfectly still and listened, and presently another coo-ee was heard. Then, rifle in hand, he crept away into the darkness.

The Major's hands were tied to one tree and his feet to another; but he rolled himself over as well as he could, and looked over to the robbers' camp. The fire seemed black out, and he guessed that they had not slept much, and were well frightened and perplexed. It was over an hour before they came back, and all that time the coo-eeing, at intervals, had continued.

The three of them, armed with rifles and revolvers, sat down close to where the Major was tied, when suddenly a mournful dirge-like coo-ee came from somewhere near the camp they had just left. They grasped their weapons; but none of them moved.

'It's not the police, nor any human voice,' said Walker huskily. 'It sounds like the screech of a half-mad woman; the ghastly place is haunted.'

'Were you camped here last night?' he asked suddenly, turning round to the Major.

'Yes.'

'Did you hear any strange noises?'

'Not a sound,' said the Major, who was now

thoroughly awake. 'Haven't you found out who it is?'

'Not likely,' he answered with an oath. 'We've searched the whole Bush, and had the thing right about our ears. It's nothing human, or we'd have put a bullet through it long ago.'

Another shrill coo-ee came from the camp; this time as though from some woman in mortal anguish. Smart could not help it; bound there to that tree in the dark, he felt the very hair rise on his body.

'God in heaven have mercy on us!' exclaimed Bill hoarsely. He seemed almost speechless with terror, and had a struggle to get his words out. 'Listen to it! It's her voice! . . . It's Emily!'

'Stow that, you dashed fool!' exclaimed Walker with another oath.

The three of them sat there speechless until daylight. They were too amazed and horrified to talk. Only with the dawn did the coo-eeing cease.

Walker gave the Major a nobbler of whisky as soon as it was light, and wanted to put him to work again in the shaft; but the other two swore that they were going to clear out at once from the accursed place.

The Major had to make a start, however, under Walker's supervision; but he was unable to shake off the horror of the past night's experience.

The gold too was pinching out, and, thought the Major, 'What is to prevent Walker from shooting me as I work in this hole as a parting tragedy?' He was much relieved when he heard Dandy bring up the horses, and Walker said: 'You can come out now. Here's your day's wages. You've earned

it. We're off. Another night in such a devil's hole as this, and some of us would go grey.'

Walker made up a parcel of over fifteen hundred pounds' worth of gold, which he put in his valise. He expressed no regret to the Major, and made no apology.

He rode off in front of the others without a word ; possibly he felt a bit ashamed of himself. The last man to leave turned to the Major, and said, with a grin which the latter remembered long afterward : ' I need not tell you not to follow us ; and don't leave this place for an hour, or we'll shoot you. You can have the claim now, and good luck to you. So long ! '

They started off with the gold in the direction of the New South Wales border, turning occasionally to look at the Major as they rode away. Smart watched them until they were out of sight, and cursed them bitterly.

No sooner were they gone, however, than he began to get ready to clear out himself.

There was a good deal to do.

First of all he broke down some of the golden boulder, which luckily had escaped the robbers' notice. The precious metal only ran in one fairly thick vein ; but he was able to secure several pounds' weight of specimens. Then he caught Ranger and saddled up, and with the old horse looking on, dug a hole and buried poor old Nip. Then he hid the tools in some bushes, covered up the golden hole, and everything else which would suggest that men had camped there, and finally, some distance nearer to the creek, blazed two trees

in an exact line with the golden hole and boulder, and then made a rough sketch of the knoll and peppermint trees and other surroundings.

'Any one could find the place from this,' he said, as taking a last look around, he was about to climb into the saddle; when, just then, he heard a coo-ee.

The Major gave a bad start; he had not got over the past night's awful experiences, and feared that the ruffians were coming back again. But it was a new voice near at hand, so he coo-eed back, and a minute or two afterward the Police Sergeant with whom he had chatted on the previous Sunday morning at Seldom Seen rode up.

'Halloa!' he said. 'What are you doing here?'

'Prospecting,' replied Smart; 'but I was just starting for Reefton.' Then he added: 'I'm real glad to see you. Have you met three chaps with fire-arms this morning?'

'Not only met them,' replied the Sergeant grimly, 'but got them; at least we've got two of them, the scoundrels, and the body of the third.'

The Major sat upon his horse in silence, he was dumbfounded at the sudden retribution which had overtaken his erstwhile foes.

'Do you know the near track to Reefton?' asked the Sergeant.

'But how did you take them?' ejaculated the Major, in his excitement not answering the Sergeant's question.

'Why, do you know anything about them?' he replied.

'I should think I do—the scoundrels!' exclaimed

Smart. 'They had me tied up to a tree all last night, and robbed me of a lot of gold.'

'Ah, well; they won't trouble you any more,' said the Sergeant, blowing his whistle. 'We trapped them at the head of the creek, making for New South Wales. I had to shoot the leader, and another is badly wounded. They're three gaol birds, wanted for murder and robbery under arms. We've been after them for a fortnight.'

A party of three troopers had ridden up with led horses, which belonged to the erstwhile bush-rangers. The body of Walker was fastened over the saddle of his horse; one of the other men was evidently severely wounded.

They had met with speedy retribution.

Smart rode in to Reefton with the police by the same track he had travelled the previous morning.

It was New Year's Day.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE WOOLER CAN'T BE FOUND

**H**OW little men know of one another as they casually meet and pass upon the streets of our busy cities!

Judged by outward appearance, they are of similar environment, habits and passions as ourselves; but, well dressed and groomed as they may be, the smiling exterior often masks a whole world of adventure, tragedy and crime which seethes within the man.

As Major Smart, on the morning following New Year's Day, made his way to the city, who would have dreamt of what he had so recently passed through? He had only been away a week; but what a week!

He had dressed with particular care, and at the usual hour started from home for his office. He did not go by rail, however, for he had rung up for a taxi to take him into town. He was going first to his bank, to lodge there something like two thousand pounds' worth of magnificent gold specimens. One of them a nugget valued at considerably over one hundred pounds sterling.

Thereby hangs a tale.



In conversation with the Sergeant of Police, Smart had found out that the men they had captured were wanted upon a capital charge, and that there was a good reward attached to their apprehension. So he easily persuaded the Sergeant, after a handsome consideration had passed between them, to let the incident of the previous day, as it concerned the Major, pass unnoticed.

He also arranged for his specimens, of the value of which the Sergeant knew practically nothing, to be handed back to him. They had been packed up by Walker, who was dead, in a small separate parcel. It was, as the Sergeant remarked, very heavy, but not very big.

The Major got it, however, and it was agreed that nothing whatever should be said at Reefton about the bailing up of the Major, or the theft of the specimens.

'You've got plenty on hand,' said the Major, 'without complicating things by bringing me into it.' So, as the Sergeant had privately received a ten-pound note from Smart, 'in recognition of his bravery in capturing the criminals,' he had agreed not to call him as a witness, and had handed over the specimens of gold.

But, on examining the parcel at the Reefton hotel, the Major had got what he called 'a facer.' He was simply overwhelmed with astonishment at finding among the gold specimens the big nugget which the Wooler had cleared out with.

Smart could not mistake it, for every portion of the gold had passed through his hands; and although there were many other fine nuggets and specimens,

there was nothing approaching this one in size.

It was *the nugget*, right enough ; and the Major was certain that it was not there when he searched for it at the claim, and how could it possibly have got into the robber's swag, unless stolen from the Wooler ?

' They must have met him,' thought Smart, ' and taken it from him, and possibly have compelled him, by threats of violence, to tell them where he had obtained it.'

This solved several problems which had previously perplexed the Major's mind. He had racked his brain, wondering how the three scoundrels had known where to look for the mine, why they had waited for his return, and how they knew that he had specimens of gold in his possession.

This discovery suggested to the Major no end of ghastly possibilities. The Wooler had not been heard of at Reefton. They might have compelled him to go back with them, and show them where the mine was situated ; and then they might have murdered him, and flung his corpse upon some ant-hill, to be picked to the bones by insects and carrion crows. Or they might have tied him to a tree somewhere, and left him to starve to death.

On finding the nugget in the swag, the Major's first thought was to tell the Sergeant all about it, and have a search made for the Wooler ; but on second thoughts, he decided that that would be troublesome, and would bring him into it. He was very anxious to know as little as possible about the Wooler just then.

He arranged in Reefton to have the mine regis-

tered in his own name as soon as the office opened on the following day. He had the gold, and for flotation purposes all that was really necessary. If the Wooler was lost or killed, that was his own look-out. He had the police to prove that they found him alone at the mine, where he had been prospecting.

He sent the horse, with substantial remuneration, back by the coach road to Jim Careless, and a pair of handsome shoes for Julia. It was likely enough that he would be going up there again.

In his letter to Careless he explained that the Wooler had left him to do some prospecting on his own account ; and that he had lost the dog in the Bush ; he supposed the two of them would turn up again at Seldom Seen.

The Major would hardly confess it, even to himself, but for a day or two the Wooler's misadventure baffled and troubled him. He might easily have had a search made for him ; but that might have suggested more than he wanted to be known. His dishonest treatment of the Wooler over the mine had really tied his hands, so he went on his way, regardless of the man's fate or the drawn out agony maybe of his lonely death by starvation in the Bush.

It was a crime on the Major's part, knowing what he did about the nugget, to leave the matter without inquiry or attempted succour ; and such crimes of omission, like those of commission, are apt to rise unexpectedly in judgment against the perpetrators of them.

Whatever the captured criminals might have

known about the Wooler's fate, they said nothing, and after a few weeks he had passed out of the ken of his fellows as completely as if he had been swallowed by the sea.

It need scarcely be suggested, at the present stage of this story, that the Major was Smart by nature as well as name, especially when there was big business on hand.

As soon as he arrived in Reefton, he wired to Melbourne, and to lose no time returned that night to town by a late train.

He had arranged with Jeremiah Rex to do all that was necessary to secure the lease; but wisely refrained from showing him or any one else in Reefton the specimens.

'They'd be crawling all over the Dark River country like ants,' he said to himself, 'if they got the least glimpse of them.'

Moreover, there were only two people in Melbourne to whom he proposed to show those specimens on that morning after New Year's Day: Gammage, and the manager of his bank. He would pledge them both to perfect secrecy.

The specimens would shut Gammage's mouth as to why he had so hurriedly left Melbourne; and, on the strength of such a deposit, the bank manager would not be likely to say another word about his account.

He had seen by the papers that at the inquest held on the body of Captain McDuff's widow a verdict of accidental death, by heart failure, had been returned. So he had no reason to trouble himself further about that matter. However, he

was very curious, and indeed anxious, to know what the Hon. Ebenezer Gammage would have to say. His connection with the woman would be sure, eventually, to come out.

But he would show Gammage the specimens ; that would shut him up.

There is no magic in the world, so far as ordinary people are concerned, like the sheen of virgin gold, and it worked its usual charm upon both the banker and the legislator. The beauty, opulence and value of the specimens was beyond dispute.

Gammage had a whole encyclopædia of questions about the dead woman ready to ask the Major ; but he did not mention one of them when he saw those specimens. His first feverish question was : ' Where did you get them ? ' And when Smart politely refused to tell him, he exclaimed : ' What a splendid show ! Can't you let an old friend in on the " ground floor " ? '

But the Major wasn't going to let the secret of his great find get out in Melbourne. At any rate until he had his own lease fixed up, and others pegged out along the line of reef. He determined to get Will Monckton to go up, in a few days, with some experienced miners, to open up the claim, for he was confident that the pinching out of the gold was only a temporary fault, and nothing of importance. He could mark off such adjoining leases as he thought worth while.

He was going to be a multi-millionaire ! He had only to show those specimens on the Melbourne Stock Exchange, and the Dark River country would be pegged out for miles in all directions within a week.

Certainly it seemed just now as though evil was everywhere turning into gold for the Major. He valued the McDuff concessions in the north as worth half a million, and by the death of the Captain's widow the whole of that great property reverted to him.

It was strange, he thought, that the Wooler's name should be McDuff, but that, no doubt, was nothing more than an accident. If, however, he was related to the McDuffs of Melbourne, it was just as well that he was out of the way.

As he sat in his private office that morning, he felt that he must watch himself, or he would be getting drunk. He had an inflated, self-important feeling. He reflected upon his recent experiences. His sudden flight to Reefton and Seldom Seen had been most opportune. It had resulted in a marvellous stroke of good fortune for him. It was like a fairy tale! The two thousand pounds' worth of specimens were actually in the bank, and as likely as not, in that holiday week he had made for himself what would realize something like a hundred thousand pounds.

Certainly, his journeyings had been fairly full of incident for other people: Charley Shore had lost three teeth and Joe Cook an eye. Walker had been shot dead by the police, and the man Bill badly wounded. Bill Boulding, too, was injured, and the Wooler was lost. It was a pretty long list of casualties for only a week; but as a set off against them, his wealth was increasing enormously, even though mostly through the misfortunes of others. He held those concessions in the north; half a mile

of gold-bearing reef near the Dark River ; a few thousands to gather in from the Golden Duck Company, and sundry other propositions settling themselves favourably ; and to crown all, on arriving at his office, he had found a wire from the mining manager of the Silver Streak to say that they had found the lost lode, and that it was richer than ever.

The Major could not help knowing himself to be a thoroughly unprincipled man, so far as the mining business went ; and yet here was fortune pouring lavish wealth upon him.

There is always a chink somewhere, however, in a bad man's armour, and Boswell Smart's had several such chinks.

One was that he never could leave well alone ; and another that no matter how successful he was, he could not, in mining matters, go straight. It was not sufficient for him to play his cards well, he *must* cheat a bit !

And so, notwithstanding the great prospects he had of reaping golden harvests in half a dozen directions, he determined to waste no time, but write at once to Joe Chandler to push on his preparations and presently to float the Golden Duck Company.

He had plenty of suitable mining propositions for men ; it would be a pity not to provide one for the ladies to invest their savings in. He would buy those fowls at once, and send them up to Joe Chandler, with a view to the early flotation of the company,

But over that Golden Duck Company both Boswell Smart and Joe Chandler fell in.



## CHAPTER XVI

### BECKY BLUNT AND THE CROWS

**I**N a kind of meeting-place of mountains, on the confines of the Dark River country, was situated a lonely farm, whose cultivated paddocks pushed their way right into the interspaces of the rugged foot-hills.

It was the last possible farm for miles, until you got upon the tableland, clear of the broken country.

The farm belonged to a settler named Jacob Blunt, who had been a sailor in his early days. Here he and his wife, a robust, hard-working woman with brawny limbs and a quick temper, had wrested a fertile selection from the hard grip of those mountainous wilds.

Wedged in at the foot of great natural fastnesses, squeezed, as it were, between the broad pastures of better situated farms and rugged foot-hills, Jacob Blunt and his family had wrestled early and late with nature, and foot by foot, up many a forest-covered spur, had forced a way for crops and pastures, until hanging there, as it were, high up the range, upon the very outpost of possible agriculture, a prosperous farm of several hundred acres had come into existence.

It looked down upon the adjacent farm lands as an object lesson to others. The Hanging Farm, as it was called, was allowed by all to be the reward of many strenuous years of resolute toil.

A numerous family had grown up in the old rough homestead, roofed with stringy bark and built of mess-mate slabs ; but what we have most to do with just now is that among the young Blunts were some of the cleverest rough-riders and bush trackers of the district, and three of them were girls.

The eldest of these, a bright strong girl of three or four and twenty, named Rebecca, or Becky for short, was renowned throughout the district for her bushcraft and horsemanship. If an animal was lost in the rough country of the Dark River, Becky Blunt could usually find it. She could track like a black fellow, ride anything anywhere, and by night and day could find her way on 'Tiller,' her pony, up and down rugged mountain paths and amid blind gorges and rushing waters, where good horsemen, even in daylight, would scarcely have cared to venture.

It may be said at once that to Becky the ownership of newly dropped calves, or any other young thing of value, was always on open question. Unknown to any one, she would shepherd them for days, on some dark night bring them down to the homestead, put her father's brand upon them without the slightest qualm of conscience, and by morning light would have them mothered on to some old cow. Nor was much ever said to her, for horses, cattle and sheep might all be found

in a wild state in the country where Becky and her clever pony and cracking stockwhip mostly bore sway.

On the morning of the day after the New Year, when Boswell Smart was preparing to deposit the gold specimens with the Melbourne Bank, Becky Blunt was away early after a young heifer, which had recently calved. The heifer was a clean skin (unbranded), and she had been watching it, with a few others, for days in a cleft of the hills, where there was good feed and water. She meant to have that calf, and wild as it was, most likely the heifer too. The mother love of a heifer for her first calf is proverbial, and Becky proposed to carry the calf by stages so that the mother would follow, until she got them both safe within the Hanging Farm paddocks.

She rode along astride, bare-backed save for a bag and curcingle, her luxuriant red hair tied down under an old straw mushroom hat, trolling a song and occasionally whistling to a couple of dogs that slouched along after her, with an eye upon the trailing lash of her stockwhip.

Presently she came to a cleared space on the side of a spur; here she pulled up, and throwing her leg over the sturdy pony's withers for a rest, cast a keen glance over the adjacent country.

'Dash the vermin!' she exclaimed, as she caught sight of half a dozen crows that were wheeling around in circles high in air some couple of miles distant.

'The wretches have got some unfortunate animal down, and are waiting till it's a bit weaker

to pick out its eyes,' was Becky's comment. 'I'll just ride over and stop their little game; it may be a calf or sheep. It won't take me much out of my way, and it's all in the day's ride.'

She turned her pony abruptly over the steep slippery side of the spur, and let him slide down upon his haunches for fully half a dozen yards at the same time coolly throwing her leg back to its old position. The dogs came slowly after her, always keeping behind until called forward. They had a wholesome fear of Becky's stockwhip, but of other fear knew little or nothing.

Tiller, having scrambled down the steepest part of the spur like a cat, climbed up the other side, and with her eyes still on the birds of prey, Becky made her way to the gully over which they were gathering their blood-thirsty forces.

'There's something still alive near the track to Coo-eeing Woman's Creek,' was Becky's scarcely audible comment. 'It must be something bigger than a calf or sheep, the hungry devils! They'd eat a man, if they found him dead or dying down here.'

The words were scarcely out of her lips when, at a short distance in front of her, she caught sight of the figure of a man tied up to a tree, his head hanging down upon his chest.

She pulled up at once, and slipping her hand into a pocket, drew out a small revolver. Then, motionless, she gazed in all directions through the bush.

Having seemingly satisfied herself that there was no one else about, she rode over to the pinioned man.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, in a clear and not unmusical voice.

There was no answer, so she immediately slid off her pony, and calling one of the dogs, gave him the reins to hold, and again looking cautiously around, went up to the man and raised his head.

She saw at once that he was either dead or unconscious.

It was the work of a moment to pull out a large clasp knife and sever his bonds. He was a good-sized man, but she seemed to lift him with little effort, and placed him with his head uphill upon the grass. Taking off a scarf that was around her neck and shoulders, she put it beneath his head, and partly covered his face with it from the sun. Then she picked up his soft felt hat, and hurried away with it for water. Bringing it back, she moistened his lips and bathed his face.

It was the Wooler, by which name Becky had known him for several years. He was still alive, and that was about all that could be said for him.

Only a man with an iron constitution could have stood the fearful ordeal he had been through, for he had been bound to that tree since Tuesday morning; three nights and three days.

There was a deserted prospector’s hut which Becky knew of, in a lone spot near by among the mountains, and here she and her two sisters, unknown to their parents, for six long weeks nursed the Wooler back to life.

They feared to tell their people, for the sick man had come into collision with the Blunts over some sheep, and the girls did not know what their father

might say, for the settlers bordering upon the Dark River country were a roughish crowd.

It was four weeks from the time Becky found him before they could get any coherent account of what had happened to him, and who had tied him up.

The horse had found his way back, in some mysterious manner, viâ Reefton main road, to Seldom Seen, and the disappearance of the Wooler was talked of throughout the district as another mysterious tragedy of the Bush.

For various good and sufficient reasons Becky and her sisters held their tongues.

The Major heard of the Wooler's supposed death from Joe Chandler, and one regrets to have to write it—but he chuckled.

The mine was being floated for a fortune, and another who might have been a hungry claimant for a share of his growing wealth was removed by death. 'That,' said the Major to himself, 'makes thirteen, and I haven't raised a hand against one of them.'

\* \* \* \* \*

The story told the girls by the Wooler, after they had nursed him through a tedious attack of brain fever, was as follows :—

After he and the Major had proved the value of the gold discovery, the Wooler realized his great disadvantage in not possessing a Miner's Right.

He needed no one to tell him that the Major was not to be trusted. All the time he had been working in the golden hole, a voice seemed saying to him : 'Where's your Miner's Right ? Run away, you fool, and get one, or he'll do you out of it. Look at his beaked nose, his square chin, and mouth shut as

close as a steel trap. He'll get the best of you anyhow ; but bad luck to you, if you haven't a Miner's Right. Throw up your job, and go and get one.'

'If I had suggested to the Major that I would ride into Reefton to get a Miner's Right, he would have objected to my leaving him all night alone,' said the Wooler. 'So I took French leave. My horse was bred at Reefton, so I knew that with me on his back, he'd find his way there all right, even in the dark ; but I had a couple of hours of daylight, and I saw that the Major was sweating away in the golden hole, deeply interested ; so I caught the nag, saddled up, and started off, without his seeing me.

'After dark I gave up trying to steer a course myself, and just left it to the instinct and sagacity of the colt ; he knew his way all right. It must have been quite late that Monday night when he brought me up to a camp fire close to where you found me. I thought at first that I was in luck ; that they were splitters, or prospectors, and that I could stay with them till morning, and then ride on ; but I had walked right into a den of thieves. They bailed me up at once, and searched me, and found a big nugget of gold I had with me, dug out only a few hours before at the new mine.

"Are you a miner?" asked one of them, after they had carefully examined the nugget by the fire-light.

"I am," said I.

"You have discovered gold not far from here quite recently?"



“That’s so,” I said.

‘Then he put a pistol to my head, and on the threat of instant perdition made me tell him where it was, who was with me, and all about it.

‘He had his finger on the trigger, and no doubt would have shot me dead if I had hesitated, so I told him enough to satisfy him; and I thought to myself, “That old Major’ll get a bit of a shock.”

‘In the morning they gave me something to eat and drink, and then tied me to the tree where you found me. Tied me with green-hide! and then got on their horses and rode away.

“If we find that you’ve told us the truth,” said the dark man, “we’ll come back and cut you loose.”

‘That was the last I saw of them!’

‘I waited all that day, and it was an awfully long one, but no one came near me. I think I must have coo-eed, off and on, all through the night.

‘The next day I may have slept a little; but my legs were numbed and swollen with standing up so long, and my wrists and arms were smarting terribly with pain, through my efforts to break the green-hide.

‘Afterwards I must have been for hours in a state of semi-unconsciousness, half delirious, dreamy and raving. I remember seeing long processions of people passing by the tree. I implored them to release me; but they took no notice.

‘I was awakened, as it were, next day by some magpies flying close past and snapping at me, and then I saw a couple of crows perched on the limb of a sapling, not thirty feet away from me. That woke me up, and then for the first time it really

dawned upon me that I had been left there tied up to that tree to die.

‘I seemed then to arouse myself thoroughly for a final effort. I was half mad with thirst; but I called up all my strength of mind, and reminded myself that a few days’ hunger would not kill me, if I could only keep calm. And then, for the first time for years, I began to pray to God.

‘The very first thing I prayed for, was that God would send Becky Blunt to cut me loose.

‘You see, I thought that if any one was likely to be along in this wild place, it would be Becky. So I prayed, again and again, that Becky might come.’

The three girls were all present when the Wooler told his story, and tears stood in their eyes when he said he prayed for Becky to be sent. But Becky smiled at the man whose life she had saved, even through her tears.

The Wooler went on with his story:—

‘Somehow when I thought of Becky, I felt as though there was still some hope, and gave up thinking of death. I tried to coo-ee, but my voice was weak and faint, and then, somehow, I had a fit of thinking, and closed my eyes, as I recalled my early days.

‘I was well taught when I was a kiddy, girls, and had a good mother, and I saw things with my eyes shut that I hadn’t thought of for years and years.’

‘I saw her kneeling down by the side of my bed again in old Glasgow, praying for me when I was a boy. She’s been in heaven for years, dear soul!

For I don't doubt now that there is such a place ; but, as sure as we are here to-day, she came to me, in a shining white dress, to that tree, and eased my wrists a bit, and wiped the cold sweat off my forehead, and pulled the old hat over my eyes as a protection against the crows. And then she kissed me and said—

“ ‘Donal’, laddie, the Lord Jesus died upon a tree to save you, and now bad men have bound you to a tree ; but if you truly repent, and turn with your whole heart to God, through Jesus Christ, He will forgive you even now, and send Becky Blunt to save you. And the sign to her will be the sign of a black cross in the sky.’ ”

‘ I prayed then : “ O God of my mother, forgive my many sins, and send Becky Blunt to save me from this cruel death.” And I remembered nothing more until I woke up in this hut, and the first I clapped eyes on was the girl to whom I owe my life. That's you, my dear . . . Becky Blunt.’

‘ Never mind me, Wooler,’ said Becky, tears still in her eyes. ‘ The parson from Reefton, when he was here last time, a month ago, said : That God once sent crows to feed a prophet of His, named 'Lijah, and no doubt your mother asked Him to send along those crows that morning to guide me to you. I remember they looked like black crosses up in the sky as they wheeled around over the trees. They meant to have you too, the devils !’

There was a long pause, and then Becky said reflectively—

‘ It must be a nice thing to have a mother in heaven, Wooler, when you get a bit old like. Our

mother doesn't talk as though she expected to go there, and she sometimes tells us to go to the other place. The good old parson doesn't often come our way, or we might be better. But I fancy Australian mothers, although they may be good enough in their way, are a bit different to those brought up in Scotland.'

## CHAPTER XVII

### GOLD WAVES ITS MAGIC WAND

**I**T puzzles me,' said Miss Monckton, one evening, shortly after the return of the Major, 'how Boswell Smart came to find that gold mine by himself. I would not have credited him with such enterprise and pluck!'

Mrs. Maguire sat listening with evident interest, 'Tell us more about it, Matilda,' she said.

'It seems such a remarkable thing,' said Miss Monckton. 'He claims to have gone off into the Bush alone, gold seeking; and then he comes back here to Melbourne, with thousands of pounds' worth of gold specimens, and all that. When he asked Will to go up for him, in such a hurry, and take charge, he told him that the mine was on the outskirts of the Dark River country, and that it was a very wild, lonely spot. I hear that the Dark River district is a most awful place.'

Mrs. Madge Maguire had listened to Miss Monckton with a somewhat preoccupied air, and looked around the room, when she had finished speaking, to make quite sure that only Molly and their two selves were present.

'He never found that mine, himself,' she said,

'it's my belief that he's taken some one in over it.'

'How does he say he discovered it?' asked Molly.

'Will tells me,' said Miss Monckton, 'that the Major was up beyond Reefton, seeing an old mining client of his, named Joe Chandler, on some business. He lives some little distance from the new mine; he is a sort of lone-hand miner there, and in addition keeps a number of poultry. He and the Major were out together, having a look at the country, when the Major sat down on an outcropping boulder to rest a bit, and with a geological hammer he had fortunately taken with him, he tapped a piece off the boulder, and exposed the gold.'

'Why,' exclaimed Molly, 'that's the way gold was discovered somewhere near Bathurst, only in that case, the shepherd used to sit on the golden boulder every day, to eat his dinner, and only discovered the gold when his trousers had so worn away the rock as to expose it.'

'Fiddlesticks!' said Mrs. Maguire, who knew something about mining. 'Doesn't Smart say he pegged the claim out himself, after discovering the gold?'

'I believe so,' said Miss Monckton, 'but I didn't hear Will explain exactly how he managed it; but Will should be back, over some business, on Saturday; we'll hear all about it then.'

'The Major must be awfully lucky,' remarked Molly, 'to go out and find a mine so easily as that. Will says that he may get a hundred thousand pounds for it. I think it's wonderful. That old

proverb's true, mother, "It's better to be born lucky than rich."

'I don't believe there was any luck about it,' said Mrs. Maguire,

'Well, mother darling, what was it then?' asked Molly.

'He's taken some one in,' said her mother emphatically.

'I would hardly like to go so far as to say that, Madge,' said Miss Monckton, warmly.

'Look here, Matilda,' said Mrs. Madge Maguire, in her impetuous way. 'He says Joe Chandler was with him at the time; and yet he says that no one knew of his making this wonderful discovery, except himself. Tell me now, what was Joe Chandler doing while Boswell Smart pegged out his lease? Remember, it's a prospector's discovery lease of one thousand yards square. It's all nonsense! he must have had some one with him.'

Miss Monckton shook her head, and Molly smiled at her mother's vehemence; but Mrs. Maguire looked at them both triumphantly, and proceeded: 'You may smile, but I've got the joker up my sleeve. Tell me now, where did the Major get an axe from to cut the corner posts, or a shovel to dig the trenches? He didn't go about the Bush, carrying tools on his shoulder, you bet! As he says he was absolutely alone when he did all this, there is only one conclusion that I, or any one else that knows him, can come to, and that is that the man who was with him, and helped him to peg that lease out, has been, in some way, taken down and possibly spirited out of the way. You may shake your head, Matilda; but I



would not trust one of these mining men any farther than I could see them.'

'We'll ask Will, when he comes back,' said Miss Monckton, who saw that it was useless to argue further with Mrs. Maguire, 'and then we'll know more about it.'

Monckton brought down a quantity of additional specimens on the following Saturday, and reported that the extent and value of the discovery exceeded all anticipations. For several miles along the line of reef the very surface sand, when carefully vanned out in the prospecting dish, showed a tail of gold.

The news somehow got into the papers, for as soon as you commence work on a new gold discovery, you can't keep it secret. In this case, it spread like wild-fire; in a few days Melbourne was seething with excitement, the specimens were shown in a prominent jeweller's shop-window, where six constables were on duty to keep the people moving along, and the name of Major Smart was on the lips of everybody.

Smart was a great man now, a kind of public benefactor; for the papers asserted that there was likely to be a great revival in the mining industry, and that meant an all-round stir in trade. People came flocking in from other States; as the Major had anticipated, the table-land overlooking the Dark River country was pegged out for miles. Reef-ton and other adjacent towns were almost emptied of population, and hundreds of people, most of them thoroughly unfitted for the rough life of a mining field, went up from Melbourne.

It was a latter day repetition of what has

happened in Australia again and again. In some wild spot where Nature sat solitary and alone, gold waved its magic wand, and presto! everything was changed.

Where black fish swarmed, in running crystal streams, and wild flowers bloomed, and the bower-bird danced, and the lyre-bird sang, and wombats and foxes had their lairs, now the furnace blazes, the anvil rings, and all the busy wheels of industry are seen in motion.

Within a week a canvas town, as a mushroom grows, has sprung into being, and in a month or two, the roar of crushing mills reverberates through those one-time solitudes.

A year or two later, a populous city has arisen, its broad streets lined with commercial palaces, shops, and dwellings, and its side-walks thronged with the movement and bustle of a prosperous city's life.

Rugged Nature has thus again and again in the history of Australia abdicated her age-long throne before the magic gleam of gold; and Industrial Art, horny-handed but silken-robed, has ascended into the place of power.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### · THE ECHO GOLD MINE

**T**HE Major was bent on making a big affair of his new gold mine. He had had other leases pegged out before the discovery became known, and, putting them together, he named the property 'The Echo Consolidated Gold Mines.'

The word 'Echo' was, of course, a reference to the coo-eeing episode. But the rush of new life which had poured so abruptly into the place seemed to have either laid the ghost, or drowned its nightly wail in a multitude of other sounds; at any rate the coo-eeing seemed suddenly to have ceased. Several scientific people explained the phenomenon to their own entire satisfaction; but not to the satisfaction of the Major, or any one else who had heard it—or to people resident in the district. The creek bears the name of 'Coo-eeing Woman's Creek,' to this day, so there must have been some weird mystery about it.

There was one strange explanation forthcoming, which may be referred to later in this story; but in the excitement connected with the development of new gold fields, there is little room for ghostly legends, or occult sentiment. That the lure of gold

is the root of most evils, may be illustrated from the history of every gold field of modern days.

'The Echo Consolidated Gold Mines : No Liability,' was floated in London for half a million within three months of the Major's visit to Seldom Seen. The specimens and the highly favourable report of a world-famous mining engineer, whose inspection fee was one thousand guineas, simply took the mining world of London and Australia by storm.

As the reader already knows, a number of miners, with a staff of surveyors under Lieutenant Monckton, had been sent by the Major to open up the reef and prepare for the inspection of the great expert.

The conclusion arrived at by this highly paid individual as the result of his examination of the boring and sinking and other operations was that there was ore enough in sight, within the leases, to keep several monster crushing mills and a cyanide plant employed for a dozen years with a staff of something like a thousand workmen.

When the Major received the wire with this information from Will Monckton, he was rather overcome.

He saw at once that it was much too big a thing for him to try to float himself, and he wisely handed over the floatation to a great mining man, whom Will Monckton had known in South Africa, and who arrived from Europe by pure accident at the very time when the Stock Exchanges of Australia were thrilled with excitement over the discovery.

Sir Reginald Read was a colossus in the mining world. He represented millions, and the few thou-

sands which the Melbourne Stock Exchange would have put up for the flotation were brushed aside by him with disdain.

‘I’ll give you a four months’ option,’ said the excited Major when he was first introduced and had talked the matter over with him.

‘Don’t want it,’ said the great man. ‘We do all our business by cable. That’s the South African way of doing business, and I shall do the same here.’

The Major bowed deferentially as a polite way of expressing his thorough endorsement of Sir Reginald’s business methods.

‘I have been pestered by some of your local stockbrokers,’ said the great man loftily; ‘they want me to go and look at their things, and some of them would like to stand in with us in this flotation; but they’ve got no money. I shut one of your big men up yesterday,’ he added with a smile.

‘How did you do that?’ asked Smart, who was listening open-mouthed to the criticisms of his candid visitor and began to feel somewhat uncomfortable.

‘I asked him how much cash his firm could put up, if I let him in on velvet.

“Fifteen thousand pounds,” said he, as though he was about to buy Australia.

“That’s no good to me, sir,” I said. “The group I represent have three millions available for suitable propositions, and I can’t waste time talking to a man unless he has at least half a million behind him.”

‘With all your brag about being a golden State, Major,’ he continued, ‘your Victorian mining is a hand to mouth, pot-hole sort of business. You want to see mining on the Rand, or even in parts of Wes-

tern Australia. The men who run the show here are most of them, so far as I can see, a bit small-minded. It's my opinion that you've mineral wealth enough in these States to surprise the world ; but you don't know how to handle it.'

It was not nice for the Major to be sat upon in this fashion, for just then he was feeling himself ' a big bug ' in gold mining ; but he made no rejoinder, for he felt that Sir Reginald Read's knowledge and experience gave him a right to speak. He was used to handling big undertakings, and grappling with Cyclopean difficulties, and dealing with large-minded men ; and he had read the Major like a book.

' Just write out an option for fourteen days,' he said. ' I'm arranging for twenty more miners to go up and another boring plant, and we've already got three shafts down a considerable distance, and they are proving the truth of the old adage : " A good mine is good from the grass." ' If I'm satisfied with our expert's next report and the general look of things, this time next week we'll close with you and give you a hundred thousand for your interest cash down.

' There must be no haggling, however, it's just yes or no. I'll fix the whole thing up by cable, and put Lieutenant Monckton in charge, for the time being, until our manager comes out from Europe.'

Like a wise man, Smart, gave the option on these conditions, and within a month the mine was floated in London for half a million, and over-subscribed at that.

One hundred and seventy-five thousand, in cash and shares, went to the vendors, two hundred thou-

sand was placed to working capital, and the balance of the uncalled capital to a reserve fund.

The Major thought afterwards that he had been taken down somewhat by only getting a hundred thousand ; but he did not perhaps thoroughly realize that there were big men in London and elsewhere who had to have ' a cut ' out of it ; and they were not satisfied with less than a big slice of the loaf.

The mine was floated, however, on a good sound basis, and the Major not only got a clear hundred thousand out of it, but no little notoriety and honour as its discoverer ; they nearly gave him a dinner at the club, but somehow behind his back they continued to call him ' The Mud Major.' Money talks more in the social and business world than in the Army.

The Wooler and other Seldom Seen men were taken on later to work at the new mine at eight and nine shillings a day.

After his recovery, the Wooler made it his business to interview the Major in Melbourne, and there was a stormy scene, but the man had nothing he could prove, and nothing to show, and he was comparatively poor. The Major explained to him, very courteously, that the show he had found had petered out, and was only a blow, and that the Echo Mine was an entirely new discovery.

' What did you do with the gold we won that afternoon ? ' asked the Wooler.

' That was all stolen from me, by the three robbers you sent along.' Smart was drawing a bow at a venture ; but the arrow hit the mark.

The Wooler winced at his recollection of that



adventure. He had not seen anything in the papers as he had been ill at the time and knew practically nothing of the facts. The Major thought of offering him twenty pounds as a present ; but he didn't, as it occurred to him that the Wooler must have seen in the papers what he had been paid for the mine, and twenty pounds might appear small !

Just then, the Major's clerk put his head in to say that a gentleman who was in a hurry wished to see Major Smart ; and the opportunity to get rid of the Wooler was seized. The Major's clerk had overheard some of the conversation, and he was almost as smart as his master.

There had been no appeal, on the part of the Wooler, to either the Major's sense of justice, generosity, or honesty. As he told Becky Blunt afterward, when he had heard what the Major had to say and considered how he had received him, he wasn't such a fool as to waste his breath arguing the matter. He had been in the city before, he said, and knew too well the stamp of man he had to deal with. Luck was against him that time, he had lost, and there was an end of it.

Such is a fair sample of the working miner's philosophy, when done out of his own. The Wooler went to work on day wages upon the mine of which he ought to have been a part owner ; but in doing so he only did what scores of other defrauded miners have done before, and will do again.

His illness and no doubt other influences connected with it had greatly changed the Wooler, and, as it was a slack time on his selection, he followed the custom of the district in taking an outside job.

He was known on the mine as Donald McDuff, and was more thoughtful, considerate, and straightforward over business matters than he had been. He seemed also to have mastered the craving for drink, although his friends suspended judgment in regard to that, for he had had seasons of sobriety before. He was, however, undoubtedly very much changed, and although he made no threat of retaliation upon the Major, he had told his story to several people, and was not without advisers and friends. He had found out several things about the McDuffs, and that the Captain was a brother he had not heard of for years. He believed that he had a clue, and he proposed to follow it up; and one of the things he shortly intended was to have a search made among the wills in the Records Office, to see if something he suspected might not be really true.

In the meantime, Seldom Seen reaped very little advantage from the opening up of the Echo Consolidated Gold Mines. A new road was made out to the mines from Reefton, and the old town grew in population and importance every day. Seldom Seen was entirely off the line of route; but a rumour got about that Joe Chandler occasionally wrote to the wealthy Major, and had letters in reply, and that the mining magnate of the Echo Gold Mines was going to start some new industry at Seldom Seen. Thus it came to pass that Jim Careless and other Seldom Seenites came to think of the Major as a kind of little god and Joe Chandler as his prophet.

In the meantime, these two (notwithstanding the Major's greatly increased wealth) were busy over their preparations for the flotation of the Golden Duck Company.

## CHAPTER XIX

### MISS MONCKTON TALKS

THE floating of the big mine gave Will Monckton a good start in business as a mining engineer, and he was now frequently away from 'The Firs,' for a week or more at a time on mining business.

The arrival of the English manager had relieved him of his duties at the 'Echo Consolidated'; but, as a young man whose name had been associated with the names of prominent men and large undertakings, he found himself well in request.

It was not that his financial circumstances really required him to do it; but he took an interest in his work, and he had seen how useless and foolish the lives of well-to-do young men may become when without steady employment and without interest in the world's life, except as it affects their selfish selves.

The result of this was that Molly and Will saw less of each other than they had done for months before.

B.B., as they commonly called Bob Boswell Smart, probably knowing of Will's absence, had of late

frequently visited 'The Poplars,' often calling in a new motor-car the Major had purchased, and taking Tommy, and occasionally Molly, out with him for a ride. No doubt he was prompted in this by his father, who had recently been specially attentive to both Miss Monckton and Mrs. Maguire.

The tales they told on their return, however, aroused the dormant antagonism of Miss Monckton.

The ordinary records of speed, or running over of dogs, or scaring of boys and other pedestrians, were things of small account to Tommy. He told how they had done the measured mile in a minute and a quarter, tricked a stop-watch policeman, climbed a hill of one in thirty-five, and narrowly escaped a spill, when they were all tossed off their seats, as the car, going at forty miles an hour, jumped a culvert.

But their exploits only deepened the aversion of the elder ladies to this aggressive mode of locomotion.

'Give me a good pair of horses to drive in the country or suburbs,' said Mrs. Maguire, 'and a fenced-in track when I want to travel fast by railway. I can't stand either the speed or the smell of these motor-cars.'

Tommy, who badly wanted his mother to buy a car, urged their great convenience for both business and pleasure, how independent they made people of the railways and what a lot of time they saved; but he hadn't fathomed the depth of Miss Monckton's aversion to them. On one occasion she had had a narrow escape of being run over by a fat-faced thick-lipped road-hog, who hadn't the grace to pull up

and apologize ; and she had hated motors and motor-ing ever since.

‘Tommy,’ said Miss Monckton, adjusting her glasses as she took a good look at him, ‘what the world wants is happiness and beauty, and I question very much whether the speeding up of this restless age by motor-car travel is adding to either. If people were all angelic in their dispositions, they might fly as swiftly as the angels or the swallows without doing themselves or others any harm ; but in my opinion the advent of the motor-car is calculated to make the people who use them more thoroughly selfish and careless of the happiness of others than they were before.

‘There is no beauty or sweetness about them,’ continued the old lady, ‘compared with a pair of well-bred horses and a carriage, and you travel so fast by them that the beauty of the scenery you pass is positively lost to view. I question too whether it’s natural for folk to have their eyes shielded by ugly goggles, and their whole personality buttoned up and battened down to resist the wind, and then to be shot like a rocket through the air, holding their breath when they fly past slower vehicles and dodge around terrified pedestrians, fearful of an accident. Some people like it no doubt, just as some people enjoy the thrill of a switch-back railway ; but for beauty and happiness, it’s my opinion that the world would be far better without these dust-raising, evil-smelling, and arrogant vehicles.’

‘Well done, aunty !’ cried Molly, clapping her hands, ‘that’s floored ’em ; and I believe you’re

right too. Next time I go out with B.B. I'll put the dread of my displeasure upon him if he dares to drive a fraction over ten miles an hour.'

'How about Will motoring up to the mine in three and a half hours?' asked Tommy.

'That's all very well in business,' replied Miss Monckton. 'Happiness and beauty don't count much either in trade or mining, worse luck! But because Will risks breaking his neck, tearing up to an ugly gold mine, which, by the way, has blotted out the beauty of primeval nature and will presently defile the atmosphere with the fumes of smelting works and poison the streams with the flushing of cyanide vats, is no reason why we should tear our pleasures to tatters for the sake of motoring across country in record time. A wise man's message to the world at the present day would be: "Go slow, my friends; go slow!"'

Molly clapped her hands again, and Mrs. Maguire joined her, laughing heartily at Miss Monckton's sudden burst of eloquence.

'You're quite right, dear,' said Mrs. Maguire. 'I'm thinking of going up to the station soon, if only to get back to Nature. The afternoon rush in the city is getting upon my nerves. It was bad enough to get to the Central Station before the days of motor-cars; but now the rush is simply awful, for, added to the stream of trams and ordinary traffic, is the noise of innumerable tooting motor-cars, mostly driven by men and women who have no consideration for any one except themselves. Talk about happiness and beauty, it's becoming a question of life!'

‘Yes,’ said Miss Monckton, ‘once a man owns a motor-car he is bound to increase his speed in everything; he can’t help it. He becomes a fast man, in more ways than motoring. He stays out late at night, because then the streets are empty, and he has the pleasure of scorching home in fifteen minutes. In most cases they end up with manslaughter.’

‘Aunty, that’s neither true nor fair!’ exclaimed Tommy excitedly.

‘I’m only giving you my opinion,’ said Miss Monckton, ‘and I’ll add something more to it, and that’s this: The Major was a fool to buy a car, he’s afraid to drive it himself, and B.B.’s certain to kill some one.’

It must not be thought from this conversation that the Major’s large accession of wealth had made any great difference to his family or style of living. Except for the motor-car which the Major had mainly invested in to give Bob a better chance with Molly, the Smart household went on very much the same.

Some of the girls thought it preposterous, that after making such a scoop, their father did not take a rest or go with his family for a trip to Europe. The money had really fallen upon him like a shower of gold; for he had not earned it, nor made it by speculation, nor risked anything of his own to get it. It was what men call ‘a gift from the gods.’

He had now a very large income from mines, bank shares, and other solid investments, for the McDuff northern property had been leased to a syndicate at a good figure. Smart seemed to have sagaciously caught the tide at its flood, and was



being floated on, without effort of his own, to fortune. But there are men, who, no matter how large their outlook and opportunities, cannot be cured of peddling ways. With fortune's tide flowing all around him, the Major muddled along in his old crooked way, with the hope and expectation of some day being worth half a million.

More than one shrewd observer, however, prophesied that the tide would presently ebb, and as likely as not leave him stranded on the mud.

Smart was not yet half as rich as he craved to be. He wanted money, not for what it could do for himself or for his family, but for itself. He wanted it to gamble with upon the Stock Exchange, and to count and gloat over in leisure hours. He told Will Monckton that wealth would never make him a proud man, and that he intended to stick to business and turn over a pound whenever and wherever he had the chance. It was quite possible that when he said this to Will, he had in mind the Golden Duck Company.

That was just the peddling kind of thing which appealed to him, being more within his mental grasp than larger mining ventures. He left those mostly to his managers, but he determined to float the Golden Duck Company himself.

He began to talk about it to Mrs. Madge Maguire and other ladies as a good prospective investment, and the strange thing was that although Mrs. Maguire knew him so well she was absolutely taken with the commercial possibilities of such a company. She herself had known of some remarkable finds of gold and other minerals in the crops of ducks and

poultry in her grandmother's time. There could not be much risk, she said to Molly, as the poultry and eggs would always be there. So the upshot of several conversations was that she promised the Major that as soon as the prospectus was out she'd take some shares.

It need hardly be said, that being a wealthy woman, Mrs. Maguire had a large circle of lady acquaintances, who admired and mostly hated her, but always followed her lead. She had never before invested money in mining; but she determined to let it be known that she would take shares.

She eventually recommended it as a good and safe investment to the vicar's wife, Mrs. Gamage, and a number of other fairly well-to-do female acquaintances. Probably the Major's recent success had somewhat influenced her, for you can't help it—money always talks.

## CHAPTER XX

### A ' WILD-CAT ' SWINDLE

SHORTLY after the Major's return to Melbourne, Joe Chandler received the new stock of poultry. They were birds of a large breed, chosen for bulk and feeding capacity, rather than egg laying, and Joe, who was now receiving a salary, attended to them with assiduous care.

It was thought advisable by Smart to salt them ' the least little bit ' ; but of course only he and Joe knew of it.

The Major had carefully explained to him that there was nothing wrong about it. Said he : ' Every mining proposition must have a gilt-edged look about it, or it would not command attention. Only a fool would think of offering the public the chance to come in on " the ground floor " ; they don't expect it, and always discount every proposition you put before them. The only way to get even with investors, is either to salt your prospectus or salt your mine ; but in this case, we shall do a little of both.'

Joe put all this down in his diary ; but afterwards stopped reading it to the public, and kept it under lock and key.

Chandler was very busy after this. He hurriedly enlarged his poultry yard, erecting high close palings around one portion, the door being kept scrupulously locked, although he was so isolated from neighbours that the precaution seemed unnecessary.

In an inner compartment, to which the poultry had free access, stream tin was scattered, and also a couple of ounces of coarse water-worn gold. The Major had given explicit instructions as to this.

If the truth must be told, Joe's conscience somewhat troubled him, for he had said nothing to Smart about sundry little lots of stream tin which he remembered had got spilled near the fowl yard. He couldn't account for the gold discovered in the crops of the first lot of birds, and he was afraid that the yellow metal might prove too attractive, and some of the birds be found 'salted' over much. However, that was Smart's look-out!

Joe had fully determined to sell out his shares as soon as the company was floated. He was not going to wait until they reached par, although Smart had said that before the first clean up they would have assays made which would send the shares up to a premium.

Several months passed away, and the birds, fed on hard food according to the Major's directions, were in fine condition. Joe's conscience ceased to trouble him, and to go one better than Smart on his own account, he put an extra ounce of gold into the feeding pen, the whole of which soon disappeared. Stream tin had been supplied without measure.

There were forty-eight birds in all: six geese, twelve ducks and thirty fowls, and between them

no less than two and a half ounces of gold and several pounds of stream tin had vanished.

One week-end a wire came through from Smart which was brought out to Joe from Reefton by special messenger. He was to send off three geese, six ducks, and one dozen fowls immediately.

After they had been forwarded Joe felt a bit easy. He had not thought of sampling the stock, and his fingers itched to ring a fowl's neck and see how its crop would pan out. At last he could not sleep for thinking of it—so he decided to tell Smart that a duck and hen had got lost.

He killed one of the biggest fowls and, to his amazement, its crop contained three-quarters of an ounce of tin and exactly two penny-weights of gold. The duck panned out still better, with two penny-weights sixteen grains of gold, and one and a quarter ounces of tin.

'Jerusalem!' exclaimed Joe. 'I'm afraid they'll smell a rat down in the city.'

He got a letter, however, from the Major that day, stating that the dissection of the birds had been a pronounced success. Every one was astonished, one lady had taken five hundred shares, and the company was as good as formed. They talked of floating for ten or twenty thousand, and wanted five hundred acres taken up in leases. The promoters would claim one-third of the shares fully paid up, and three or four thousand in cash. He would try and get two hundred cash for Joe and one thousand shares; but the latter would have to swear an affidavit at once before a J.P., as to the facts and the management of the poultry. A

small party of experts would be coming up to report upon the district and inquire personally as to the methods of management. He was to clean up the place and feed the poultry in future on the banks of the creek, forking in the grain so that they would be seen scratching about under the ti-tree, and not hanging around the house and poultry yard.

Joe was greatly upset by the Major's letter, and wrote back saying that an inspection would burst up the whole thing; but Smart replied telling him not to get his hair off, it would be all right, they had a good show and nothing to fear, and he was coming up himself with the inspection party.

They arrived in due course. There was Blank, a big capitalist, Hing the stockbroker, who was also a bit of a poultry fancier, and Will Monckton, mining expert and metallurgist.

Smart, who was to entertain the party, had ordered a good supply of food and delicacies, with wine and spirits, to be sent out from Seldom Seen to Joe's shanty, and two tents for the visitors to sleep in, so everything promised well. It would be a sort of two days' picnic, he said to Joe, at the company's expense.

All this had been done with a fair amount of secrecy, as Smart said they might want to peg out some additional mineral leases, before the matter got talked about locally. The party was driven out to within three miles of the place. It being explained to them that beyond that there was no proper road for vehicles. The walk made them ready for a good lunch, and as the Major guessed would be the case, except for a bit of shooting, and a casual

look at the country and poultry, there was nothing done the first day.

The following morning Will Monckton got to work, taking samples from the surface, and from some wash which had been uncovered by Joe on the banks of the creek. Blank and Hing looked on, smoking cigars. Joe vanned out the samples in a prospecting dish, which were duly put up and numbered, all showing fair tin with occasional colours of gold. In one surface sample, to Joe's surprise, a small nugget of three penny-weights was found, so the party returned to lunch, the Major quite elated.

After lunch, as they smoked cigars and drank a little of the proposed new company's whisky, Monckton began to question Joe about things: as to his luck as a miner, before he took to poultry farming; what he thought of the district as gold and tin producing; did the wash run into the hills? was the water permanent? to all of which Joe gave seemingly satisfactory answers. Will was taking Joe's measure before coming to the tug of war.

'Now, Mr. Chandler,' said Will, blowing a cloud of smoke, 'you say the over-burden on the flats and terraces averages from one to three feet before you get to the tin and gold-bearing gravels. Do you expect the fowls to scratch this over-burden off?' It was evident that Will was not favourably impressed with the Major's scheme.

Joe stared blankly at his interrogator. It was a facer! He was quite unprepared for such a question.

'That would be a further asset for the company



to work by other methods,' interposed the Major, coming to Joe's relief.

'Well, go on,' said Monckton, good-humouredly.

'You don't suppose we are going to work a deep lead, or sink shafts on a lode, with fowls and ducks,' continued Smart. 'There are hundreds of acres under the ti-tree by the creek where gold and tin are on the surface, and thousands of tons of tailings on the old workings. That's where the fowls pick up the mineral. The proof of the pudding is in the eating; the fowls do pick up gold and tin, as you know by the contents of their crops. You see them scratching around the banks of the creek everywhere; they are down on the flat now, go and shoot two or three, and see how they pan out. I'll bet you a fiver you'll find gold and tin in the crop of every one of them.'

'Yes, that's sense,' said Blank, 'we don't care how they get it, or where it comes from, so long as it's there. Come along, Hing, we'll go and shoot a few. It's surface working that we contemplate.'

'Before you go,' said Will, 'one more question. How are you going to manage about the labour regulations with your mineral leases?'

'Ah, we've thought of that,' said Smart, 'a few of the smaller areas can be taken up on leases, and the rest rented from the Government as prospecting areas, at a nominal sum. Of course, we shall have to employ some labour.'

'He's as cunning as a fox,' was Will's mental reflection, 'but he'll overreach himself if he does not mind.'

Blank and Hing found the poultry scratching

about industriously by the creek, and shot four of them. They panned out better than those sent down to the city, and Will was dumfounded.

'Well,' said he, 'I've heard of magpies having a fancy for bright articles, and of ostriches swallowing spoons and nails; but, if there's no swindle about the thing, these fowls are the most extraordinary collectors of gold and tin ore that I ever heard of. The metals must be here, that's certain; but in my opinion the Company ought to have a six months' working option before it commits itself to what seems, on the face of it, a most absurd undertaking.'

'Show me,' said the Major heatedly, 'where the absurdity, or even the risk, comes in. If you spend a thousand or two thousand in working plant, you have the poultry to show for it . . . a marketable asset . . . and that's more than you can show, in the shape of assets, in much bigger mining ventures than we contemplate.'

However, the outcome of the inspection was a fairly favourable report, signed by all the inspection committee . . . except the Major. It was understood by the others that the Major's signature would be printed with the rest; but the prospectus appeared without it, and instead, printed large, was the name of Harold William Monckton, Mining Engineer and Metallurgist.

'Monckton's name is good enough to put that through,' said the Major to himself, 'and I only appear as a promoter, which suits me well. He'll buck a bit when he sees his name like that on the prospectus.'

The Company was formed and registered within a month, the whole of the shares being privately subscribed, and, through Mrs. Maguire's influence, largely by women. Smart, who was engineering things below deck, assured Mrs. Maguire that Will Monckton absolutely endorsed the report and prospectus; and as Will was up in Queensland, reporting upon a mine, he could not contradict the statement.

Absurd as the thing seemed, it was enough for dozens of people to hear that H. W. Monckton had reported favourably; that Blank had gone in for it, and would be one of the directors; and that Hing & Co. were the brokers. The prospectus was advertised in the papers 'For information only.' Most people read it with amazement: all wondered; many jeered; but it caught on tremendously with the country-bred women folk, who told each other yarns of how their mothers and grandmothers had found small nuggets of gold in ducks' gizzards in the old days, and they wondered that they had not thought of the thing before. Mrs. Maguire put £500 into it for herself, and on the strength of Will's signature, £100 each for Molly and Tommy.

Quite a number of other ladies took shares on the advice of the Major, but few guessed how large a sum he was going to make out of the flotation.

The promoters took one-third of the shares fully paid up, and three thousand in cash. Of this Joe Chandler (named in the prospectus the principal vendor) got only two hundred in cash and a thousand shares; but there are ways of managing these

matters. The leases were secured, and the Company commenced operations.

They started with five thousand young birds, which cost four hundred and fifty pounds. They were divided into ten lots of five hundred each, and roosting sheds were erected for them at suitable centres for a couple of miles along the creek.

At the outset the directors were puzzled to know how to lay out their capital. Joe got the sheds put up for two hundred pounds, and the poultry, with tools and etceteras had cost under six hundred. The flotation expenses, printing, inspection fees, and so forth, had been heavy ; but they had something like three thousand pounds in hand, and over another three thousand to come in from calls, before the contributing shares would be paid up to fifteen shillings, as agreed upon. However, they decided to put up cold stores at once, erect a house for the manager, and a comfortable office and laboratory for the Company's assayer. Even then they were a trifle over capitalized ; but, as the Major said, the fault was on the right side.

It had been decided that the assayer should take monthly samples of the birds' crops, and furnish progress reports ; but it was four months before the first report reached the Board.

The poultry manager gave an excellent account of the health, growth and condition of the birds ; there had been comparatively few losses, and the number of eggs laid and young stock hatched out was very near the estimate.

The mine manager reported upon the nature and extent of the ground being worked by the poultry,

and gave particulars of the trial assays of crops taken from birds in the different workings. There were ten of these. Ducks had been put to work the swampy ground, geese on the grass country, and fowls on the flats. But the cash estimate of gold and tin won to date was only £29 9s. 4*d.*

'I am afraid this is hardly satisfactory,' said the chairman gloomily.

'The increase may be considerably larger next month, when the birds settle down to their work,' remarked a director.

'I hope there are no reserves of ore being kept in hand by the mine manager,' said another director.

It was decided, however, to make nothing public, and await the following month's assay report. This was truly astonishing; the tin yield showed only a small increase; but the gold returns averaged 5 grs. per bird.

'We must get a quotation on the Stock Exchange, and double our working plant,' said the chairman; 'there's really a good thing in it if we extend our operations.'

'Golden Ducks' were, for a few days, quoted—buyers 20s., sellers 22s. 6*d.*, and very few shares to be had. The Major and Joe Chandler sagaciously sold out. They netted 18s. 6*d.* per share, clear of commission.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first clean up, of course, settled the Company. The mineral returns from the slaughter of some four thousand head of poultry were so insignificant that the directors refused to give particulars.

For a short time it was carried on as a poultry farm, and then went the way of all such companies ; but not a few women lost the savings of years, and the more well-to-do, like Mrs. Maguire, vowed vengeance and wrote letters to their lawyers.

## CHAPTER XXI

### MRS. MAGUIRE SWEARS

IN her own way, Mrs. Maguire was as erratic as the Major, and the collapse of the Golden Duck Company unfortunately brought to the surface the most unpleasing side of her character. Her pride was humiliated, for although she would not have admitted it, she had patronized and supported the Golden Duck Company mostly out of chagrin that a Mrs. Larkin had not reserved shares for her in the woman's mining company previously mentioned.

Molly had in some things more sense than her mother, and had all along been opposed to her investing money in mining. The fact that Will was developing into a successful Consulting Mining Engineer kept her from saying as much as she might have done; but she had expressed herself with some warmth about mining speculations for women generally.

'If the thing succeeds,' said Molly to her mother, 'you don't really want the money, and if it fails, you'll fret about it and bite some one's head off. My opinion is that women, especially wealthy women, should never put money into any sort of mining ventures. And that's what Will says!'



Mrs. Maguire's rejoinder was : ' Well, don't say anything more about it, this is a poultry business, as well as mining, and I shall do just what I like.'

There were three people whose heads Mrs. Maguire metaphorically thought now of biting off : they were Boswell Smart's, Joe Chandler's, and Will Monckton's.

Under ordinary circumstances Molly managed her mother excellently. She knew exactly how to humour and flatter her, and, without its appearing, pilot her through such social and domestic difficulties as her disposition got her into with acquaintances and servants ; but Molly feared that ' this wretched mining fiasco ' was going to make a breach in the life-long friendship which had existed between the Moncktons and Maguires. One of the first things her mother had said, when rumours of the Company's possible failure had reached them, was : ' If anything goes wrong with that company, Molly, I'll never let you marry Will Monckton, for I took up those shares on the strength of his signature.'

' I don't want to marry Will Monckton,' replied Molly, with heightened colour, ' but when he comes back from Queensland, I'll ask him whether he worded the report as it appears over his signature. That Major's capable of anything !'

' Another thing,' she continued, ' I don't intend to go out in the car with B.B. any more. I met the Major the other day in Collins Street, and he had the assurance to tell me that he was glad I liked motoring, and that I could not do better than marry his boy. I'd keep single all my life first !'

But the explosion Molly expected and feared

took place one morning when the post brought a letter informing Mrs. Maguire of the winding up of the Company.

By some means Mrs. Maguire had not recently kept herself in touch with the doings of the Company. Her letters were usually taken up to bed to her in the morning; and on the morning in question she came down superbly dressed when the breakfast gong went. She had on a new fawn-coloured tailor-made coat and skirt, and large picture hat, with new boots and gloves to match. She had ordered the brougham to be at the door punctually at ten o'clock.

When Molly kissed her 'Good morning,' she guessed that there was a storm pending, and that it was over the Company; but all she said to her mother was: 'You look splendid.'

Breakfast passed off very quietly, for the housemaid was waiting at table, and Mrs. Maguire kept her in the room. Tommy, who knew his mother's moods fairly well, made no remark as to her appearance, or about her going out, and Molly guessed the cause of his silence; but when, after breakfast, Mrs. Maguire went into the library to write a letter, he bristled with interrogations.

'What's up with the Mater, Molly? she's got her war paint on early to go into town. I asked her where she was going to, and she only gave me a stony stare.'

'You'll hear all about it soon enough,' said Molly. 'The Golden Duck Company's gone bung, and mother's going in to see Brooks the lawyer and some of the directors.'

'She'd better stay at home,' said Tommy, who boy-like was wise beyond his years. 'They'll only send her in a bill for a fiver.'

'She says she'll spend a thousand pounds but what she'll get even with them. She's in the library now writing to Will; fancy what she'll say to him.' At this Molly, who was very much inclined to cry at the thought of what her mother might be writing to Will, followed her into the library.

Opening the door, she found her pacing the carpet, talking to herself, which Molly knew to be a bad sign.

'Those dirty mining people!' ejaculated Mrs. Maguire, stamping her dainty French kid boot upon the obnoxious notice, which had fallen upon the ground as Molly entered. 'I can't write to Will Monckton now. It's not that I care about the money; but that perditioned smug-faced Major got me to recommend it to my friends. Wasn't I a fool, Molly?'

Molly wisely refrained from endorsing her mother's fervid self-condemnation.

'I don't know how I'll look these women in the face, Molly. Like as not some of them, the cats! will say that I was in with Smart, and made something out of it. But I'll be even with them, by . . .'

There had been a ring at the front door, unnoticed by Mrs. Maguire in her anger. But Molly's quick ear heard the servant bringing some one toward the library, and the moment afterward she caught the tone of a voice she recognized.

It was the Hon. Ebenezer Gammage!

‘Mother, mother! here’s Mr. Gammage,’ said Molly; ‘he’s come to see you about the Company.’

But the Hon. Ebenezer was already at the door, and had even caught the substance of Mrs. Maguire’s last utterance.

Mr. Gammage was tall and well proportioned, an agreeable looking man of benevolent appearance; but he carried upon his face an expression of grieved surprise. It might have been caused by the loss Mrs. Gammage had suffered through the Company, or possibly by what he had just listened to from the lips of the exquisitely dressed Mrs. Maguire.

‘Ah,’ he said in his bland smooth voice, ‘I’m sorry to disturb you so early, Mrs. Maguire; but I was going into town, and Mrs. Gammage asked me to call and see you about those shares you recommended her to take.’

‘Don’t say another word, Mr. Gammage. I’m just going in to see my lawyer; we’ve all been taken in most . . . most . . .’

Molly was ashamed. What would Mr. Gammage think, to see her mother so angry, and hear her swear like that! But she crossed over, and linked her arm in her mother’s, while Mr. Gammage became suddenly interested in an oil painting upon the library wall.

‘Hush, mother darling! You look as sweet as a dream,’ said Molly in a loud whisper, ‘but you’ll spoil your appearance and make yourself ill, if you talk like that. The wretches are not worth it.’

‘I can’t help it, child,’ replied Mrs. Maguire, ignoring Gammage’s presence; ‘you know that I’m good and religious, and all that; but if I didn’t say

something, I'd smother. It was that mutton-headed Major that got me into this thing; but I'll go round and see him, and Mr. Blank, and some of the other directors, and as sure as my name's Madge Maguire, I'll give them something to remember, especially Smart and that villain Joe Chandler.'

With that she sailed out of the room, picturesque and furious. It had been raining, and she carried in her hand a silk umbrella that had belonged to her late husband: it had a fairly heavy knob-stick for a handle.

Directly afterward they heard the carriage drive away from the house.

'Sit down, please,' said Molly, when her mother had gone. 'You must excuse mamma, Mr Gammage. I'm very sorry for her; she's worried by these losses, and that her friends should have lost their money too.'

Now Mr. Gammage had quite recently been made a churchwarden, and the Vicar had lately preached a notable sermon upon profanity, which he had described as one of the most common vices of the community, the women being sinners in this respect no less than the men. It had made a bit of a stir at the time, and had also been stoutly denied by the feminine portion of the congregation. Gammage thought that being an official of the church, he was really required to say something, and it would be easy to do so to a bit of a girl like Molly.

'Does your mother often use such language as that, Miss Maguire?' he asked, with a long face.

For answer, Molly laughed aloud, and looking straight at him, said: 'Do you think I'm going to

give my mother away like that, Mr. Gammage ? ’

‘ I asked you a simple question, and you should have answered me,’ said the gentleman, who was nettled at Molly’s answer.

Just then a bit of the Vicar’s sermon came to his mind, so he continued as follows : ‘ There was possibly some excuse for the profanity of Job’s wife ; but I’m puzzled to know why a well-bred, accomplished, and wealthy woman like your mother should use such language.’

As soon as Molly saw what was coming, and that her mother was about to be attacked, she cleared the decks at once, and got all her guns into position. She was not going to let a stranger like Mr. Gammage, if he was a churchwarden, find fault with her mother in their own home.

‘ Did you hold with our contingents taking part in the South African War ? ’ she asked with seeming irrelevancy.

‘ Certainly ; but what has that got to do with it ? ’

‘ I don’t wish to express any opinion of my own,’ said Molly demurely, ‘ but I heard a most cultured and beautiful lady friend of mother’s say that the use of strong language by Australian Society Women dates from the South African War, which gave to Australians wider experience and more force of character.’

‘ What rotten nonsense ! ’ ejaculated Mr. Gammage.

‘ Mr. Gammage, I’m surprised ! ’ exclaimed Molly. ‘ I thought churchwardens never used strong language.’

‘ I don’t usually ; but to hear a girl of seventeen

talking such rubbish is enough to make a man— But it's different for women. You seem to think that most society women use bad language on occasion.'

Mr. Gammage was evidently fishing again ; but Molly stood by her guns, and he did not get much out of her.

She replied : ' I did not say that, sir ; but I fancy that any one might be forgiven for speaking strongly, when a smooth-spoken mining speculator gets his hand fraudulently into your purse. Saint Peter, in his second epistle, said that in the time to come there would be "damnable heresies," and I fancy, had he known about it, he would have used the same adjective to describe other and more every-day frauds ; but mother won't say much to the men she's gone to see. She'll be more likely to hit them with the umbrella.'

' My goodness ! ' exclaimed Mr. Gammage, quite forgetting himself again, ' would your mother do that ? She's getting to be a regular suffragette.'

' There you're swearing again, Mr. Gammage,' laughed Molly. ' You're as bad as mother, and when she's fit, and also angry, she has a very vigorous disposition. I should not be surprised if some of your city mining men have a new experience this morning. They are so used to people taking their losses quietly ; but when mother takes things in the way she has this morning, and feels fit, she usually makes some one pay up.'

Mr. Gammage left ' The Poplars ' annoyed and disappointed. He was rather short for a few days, and had intended to borrow a hundred pounds from



Mrs. Maguire for a week, as a sort of set off against the fifty pounds his wife had lost by the Company ; but the time had proved inopportune.

The Hon. Ebenezer Gammage ought to have been a thoroughly well-to-do man ; he had a good deal of property, but like hundreds of other men prominent in both business and politics and with large incomes, his mania for speculating kept him comparatively poor and often short of ready cash.

‘One can do nothing with these women since they got the vote,’ said Gammage, and stepping into his motor-car, he told the chauffeur to drive to Parliament House.

## CHAPTER XXII

### SOME STORMY INTERVIEWS

**I**T was not for the want of knowing better that, as Molly put it, Mrs. Maguire so often 'let herself out.' After the Vicar's sermon no lurid word escaped her for quite a month ; but the good effect was not lasting.

That famous sermon originated, it is said, as follows : Mr. Payne happened to call one day upon a wealthy parishioner, when, to his surprise, in an adjoining room he heard the lady of the house, a prominent society woman, rating her nephew for being deficient in backbone.

Mr. Payne did not, of course, want to listen—for there was not a bit of the sneak about him—but the lady had raised her voice, and he could not help feeling amused and interested at the way she tackled the young man, who was over six feet.

'Look here, Jack!' he heard her exclaim, 'some one will have to shock you into manliness. It's a burning shame that you did not get promotion last month, and your chief tells me that you would have got it' . . . and she shrugged her shoulders . . . 'only, you know, you can't swear a bit.'

He heard Jack reply : 'Gentlemen don't swear.'

Another visitor came in just then, and gave the Vicar a chance to apologize and get away. His eyes had been opened, however, for he had heard that prominent society lady swear. The outcome of it was, that a few weeks afterwards he announced to his fashionable congregation that next Sunday he would preach a sermon on popular profanity.

The church was crowded, and to look at the congregation, no one would have suspected that there was any need for such a sermon to be preached to them. But the Vicar was a fearless man, of singularly plain speech, and he had found them out.

The following is a small part of what he said to them:—‘It was at one time confidently asserted that no man could drive bullocks in Australia without swearing; it is now stated that in these days of speed and hustling the same applies to men.’

‘I know,’ continued the speaker, ‘that the pressure of modern business life is, for many people, appalling, and I shall endeavour to make full allowance for it in what I say. I was talking to the first engineer of a big steamer the other day, and this subject came up. He told me that some years ago, when he was a second engineer, he heard one day that there was likely to be a vacancy, so, as they entered the heads, he said to the men of his watch: “Don’t any of you fellows say down at the office that you like me: tell them that I’m a blank swearing nigger-driver, and they’ll make me chief.” He explained apologetically to me that to keep the men of a watch up to high pressure mark in a modern engine-room it was occasionally necessary to swear.

It's watch competing with watch, and a full head of steam all through the voyage, and woe betide the engineer who hasn't hustled when he visits the office at the end of a trip.'

'The men gave me an awful character,' said the officer, 'and they made me chief.'

'But it is here,' remarked the preacher, 'where men of principle need to have the courage of their convictions. The man who sacrifices principle for the sake of promotion betrays his trust. One of the old Puritans has said: "Better a crust with God than a banquet with the devil"; but in my experience, uprightness and integrity eventually achieve success, and you may have the banquet without swearing if you will only wait.'

'But,' continued Mr. Payne, 'I am grieved to hear that this hustling applies to other professions and businesses, as well as that of the sea, and that there is a growing belief that you cannot hustle without the use of profane language; and that even in the home circle, in the presence of their sons and daughters, there are ladies who not infrequently swear.'

There were smiles at this among the men of the congregation; it was the women's turn now, and not a few ladies listened with heightening colour.

'No excuse,' said the preacher, 'can be pleaded here. There is no need for hustling over ordinary household management or society engagements. Women have not to drive sweating firemen for hours at a stretch with strained nerves and an eye continually on the steam gauge. Court ladies in the times of the Georges used to swear; but it went out

of fashion with Victoria. Our mothers and grandmothers never swore. Even the men of those days apologized if they let slip a hot word before a lady. Believe me, it would be a blessing to this whole community if some fair coterie of prominent society women would become converted from questionable speech and ways to the old-fashioned ideas of their grandmothers, and inaugurate amongst us a revival of sweetness, gentleness, and love.'

Much more did the faithful but kindly-hearted old minister say in reproof and loving exhortation, and to their credit be it said, not a woman of the congregation was heard to take exception to that very unusual and plain-spoken sermon. Some of their husbands said : ' It was because they were too much taken by surprise.'

But the doings of Mrs. Maguire on that memorable morning await description.

Driving first to the Company's office, she asked to see the Legal Manager, but found that, fortunately for himself, after sending out the notices, he had departed for a short visit to the country. Mrs. Maguire's next call was on Mr. Blank, who had been chairman of the Board. She had a lively quarter of an hour in this gentleman's office, and threatened him that she would go in personally and expose the whole swindle to the brokers at morning call on the Stock Exchange.

' Don't do that, for your own sake,' said Mr. Blank ; ' they'd only laugh at you, and have you put out. It's the Major and your friend Mr. Will Monckton who have misled us over the whole business. I've lost a pot of money over it myself ; you can't

always come out top in mining. But,' he continued, after some hesitation, 'if you want to make good your losses in "Golden Ducks," and happen to have a few hundred pounds available, I can put you on to something that will recoup you in three months for any loss you have made in mining hitherto.'

'You must think women are fools!' was Mrs. Maguire's indignant answer.

'People should not go into mining, unless they can win and lose without making a fuss,' said Mr. Blank, who was anxious now to get rid of the lady. 'If you are not satisfied with things, I would advise you to go and see your solicitor; he'll tell you, I think, that you have no case.'

'I will do so,' said Mrs. Maguire with some asperity.

'Might I ask who your solicitor is?' asked Mr. Blank affably.

'Mr. Brooks,' answered Mrs. Maguire, falling into the trap.

'Brooks, ah, yes, Brooks! a very good man. You go and see him, Mrs. Maguire.'

Blank knew him well, and the minute her back was turned, rang him up on the telephone, to tell him of Mrs. Maguire's intended visit. There are wheels within wheels, and Mrs. Maguire's business was not very remunerative to the lawyer, so Blank received an assurance from Brooks that he would advise the lady that she had no case.

In her impatience to get in quickly to see the man of law, Mrs. Maguire upset an office boy and artiled clerk in the inquiry department, which no doubt annoyed the principal, for after hearing, with

much apparent deference, all she had to say, he somewhat curtly informed her that the law could not possibly touch these people. In fact, that there was no proof that any fraud was intended : and if ladies would go into risky mining ventures without consulting their solicitors, they must put up with their losses. He would serve the directors of the defunct company with a writ through their solicitors, if she wished him to do so ; but it might cost her a thousand pounds, and he could not advise her to proceed.

‘ I’ll think the matter over,’ she said, for she felt certain that, for some reason or the other, the lawyer was putting her off, so she determined to take the law into her own hands. Drawing herself up, with an icy ‘ Good morning ’ she swept, with the air of a tragedy queen, out of the office, to interview the Major.

She was incensed by the way she was being treated ; they had taken advantage of her sex, and no doubt laughed at her up their sleeves : but she determined to bandy no words with Boswell Smart, but simply to thrash him. She was nearly stopping the carriage to buy a riding-whip ; but she looked at the knob-stick of her late husband’s umbrella, and thought that it might do.

‘ Major Boswell Smart,’ she said to the lift man, and looked at her watch.

It was five minutes to eleven. Smart often went on ‘ Change at eleven ; but he’d see no ‘Change that morning, if she caught him in.

She met him outside his clerk’s office door dressed in new grey tweeds.



‘I want to speak to you privately,’ she said.

He turned back at once, feeling far from comfortable at the prospect of the interview, for he guessed that she was incensed about the failure of the Company, and the knob-stick umbrella had caught his eye. But such a thing as physical violence never really entered his head.

‘No, I won’t take a chair,’ said Mrs. Maguire, when they had entered his private office; ‘I want to ask you a few questions.’

The Major stepped back a little, and bowed.

‘You’re a rich man, Boswell Smart, and whether the hundred thousand that came to you through the Echo Consolidated Mine was come by honestly or not is nothing to me; but I want to know what induced you to sell salted poultry shares to a lot of innocent women, to take them in?’

‘What nonsense!’ said Smart. ‘How could any one salt live birds?’

‘There’s no nonsense about it,’ exclaimed the angry woman, raising the umbrella in a threatening attitude. ‘I know you, Boswell Smart! You’re a swindling thief, with all your money and military rank and fashionable clothes; you plunder widows and orphans to increase your ill-gotten gains, you rapacious brigand; but I’ll leave a woman’s mark on your smug countenance.’

It was a definite threat, and the Major stepped backward to put a safer distance between them; but the odds were against him; for behind him, unobserved, was a half-opened deed-box, and the Major fell over it backward, with his feet in the air.

Mrs. Maguire took full advantage of his mishap,

and beat him unmercifully with the umbrella as he lay helpless upon the floor. He fairly roared to his clerk for assistance ; but the door between the two offices was locked, and before it could be burst open the Major's eyes were blackened and his face badly bruised : while Mrs. Maguire, flushed with exertion and victory, had disappeared.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE MAGUIRE FAMILY CAMPS OUT

AFTER Mrs. Maguire had left the lawyer's office, it occurred to that gentleman that, attractive and well-dressed as the lady was, she carried a knobstick umbrella, and her appearance was hostile and bloodthirsty, so he presently rang up Smart, who was also his client, to warn him that Mrs. Maguire looked dangerous, and had already assaulted one director of the defunct company, and that if she called at his office, he would do well to keep out of her way.

'Too late, old man,' was Smart's laconic reply, 'just met her, been busy ever since with soothing lotions and arnica plaster.'

The Major could not take her into court, however, as he would have liked, on a charge of assault and battery. It would have made too much fun for the fellows on 'Change and at the club and up at the barracks, so he satisfied himself with sending a wire to Chandler: 'Look out! there's a female shareholder running amuck. She threatens to lay your wig on the green.'

In the meantime Mrs. Madge Maguire went home

vowing vengeance against Joe Chandler. Her wrath was somewhat mollified in regard to Smart, for she had broken the umbrella over him, and pictured his smug plausible countenance disfigured for the rest of his mining career. She called herself an ass for having incurred another expense, by consulting 'that fool of a solicitor,' and promised that she would be even with the scoundrel Chandler if it cost her five hundred pounds.

It was unfortunate for Joe that he hadn't had much experience with women, and none at all with a capable vindictive female, like Mrs. Maguire, who had lost money in what she described as a salted fowl conspiracy.

He was still living by himself on Never Mind Creek. He had come out well, as Smart said he would, the day they found the gold in the fowl's gizzard.

He was a made man, living in the manager's house that had been put up by the company, and enjoying all the rights and privileges of the leases, on which were the cool stores, laboratory, and roasting sheds, the whole of which he had bought for a nominal sum from the official assignee of the defunct company.

Joe was greatly looked up to now at Seldom Seen as a clever mining man. He rode a quiet horse, and had a snug balance in the bank at Reefton.

Smart's telegram at first gave him some uneasiness; but in a few days that passed off, for he not unnaturally concluded that no woman in her right mind would venture to leave the city to visit that lonely spot.

Before long, however, he had reason to alter his opinion.

Since the burst up of the Golden Duck Company, Joe had been singularly lucky with his prospecting, and had lately struck a leader, carrying fair gold, close by the track to the township, near his place. No one had been along for a fortnight, and one morning, as he was busy with pick and shovel in a shallow trench, he heard the sound of voices, and the noise of a horse and dray.

Now, for sundry reasons, Joe did not wish to discover himself, so he pulled his coat and waistcoat and prospecting dish into the hole, and crouched down to hide himself until they passed ; occasionally peering cautiously over the top, however, to see who they might be. There were sheep running in the country, and he thought that it might be some one from the station with salt.

When the dray came abreast of him, to Joe's astonishment and consternation, he saw that it was from the Seldom Seen public-house, and was driven by none other than Jim Careless himself. It contained about half a ton of luggage, and was accompanied by two women, and a boy who rode a pony. They stopped within a couple of chains of Joe's hiding-place, and then he heard Jim Careless say : ' Joe Chandler's corner peg is just across the gully, there's water handy, and you could not get a much better camp than this, Mrs. Maguire. There's no dangerous timber near to fall upon you ; a fairly level pitch for the tents, and good grass for the pony.'

' And a pretty view too,' said a girlish voice.

Joe Chandler listened with horrified amazement. What could it all mean. These people were surely not going to camp?

Not wishing to be seen, he had to lie quiet in his hole in a most uncomfortable posture. He heard them take the horse out and make a fire. The boy went down to the creek for water, and then a billy was put on to boil.

He heard them chopping down saplings and fixing up the tents, and then Jim Careless said he would go down and see if old Chandler was in, and bring him up and introduce him.

'Stow the introduction,' muttered Joe, whose legs were cramped and smarting with pins and needles.

Soon after, a pea-rifle bullet snipped dangerously near to Joe's head. It was the boy shooting at a bird or rabbit. This was the last straw, so reckless of discovery, he drew himself up, threw some brambles and rubbish over tools and hole, and made off through the Bush.

That evening, at sundown, a boy rode up to his back door on a pony, in company with a large dog. 'My mother,' he said, 'that's Mrs. Maguire, sends her compliments, and wants to know if you would please sell her half a dozen laying hens.'

'Where do you live?' asked Joe sulkily.

'Oh, we're miners,' said the boy, 'mother's name's Maguire, and she and Molly both have Miner's Rights, and we've pegged out a residential area on the other side of the gully.'

'That's on my lease,' said Joe, 'tell your mother she can't camp there.'

'Oh, no, it isn't!' replied the boy, 'it's just half a chain clear of your boundary. Jim Careless showed us the peg. We've cut six inch trenches, and put in proper pegs, all quite regular, and I'm going in to Seldom Seen to-morrow to send down and have it registered with a prospecting area we've pegged out. Mother and Molly know all about mining.'

'How old are you, sonny?' asked Joe, staring at the boy in amazement.

'Fourteen, Mr. Chandler. I'm Tommy Maguire,' said the boy politely. 'How old are you?'

'Is yer mother going to stay long?' asked Joe, ignoring the boy's question.

'That'll depend on how long we take to strike something good and float a company,' said Tommy gravely.

'Does your mother float companies?' was Joe's next question.

'You bet,' said the boy, 'why, she's made a find of gold already, in an old prospecting shaft, back of our residential area. It's a wonder you didn't come across it, working about here. We found some old tools in it, they may have been there for years. Mother and Molly just cleaned it out a bit, and we pegged it right away. That's what I'm going in to register with the residential claim. But how about those fowls, mister?'

'Oh, you'll be moving out of this in a day or two, and won't want any fowls. There's foxes and dingoes about, and a ghost haunts the creek, and it's a very unhealthy place for boys and females. Tell your mother I'll call in and see her in the morning before



she sends you to register anything. It'll cost you ten shillings, and yer mother might want that to help take yer back.'

'You're a strange man, aren't you, Mr. Chandler?' said the boy, coolly. 'Mother was saying that it wasn't good for you to be here alone, and how nice it would be for you to have neighbours, you wouldn't be so lonesome like, but I'll give her your message.'

Now it hadn't occurred to Joe Chandler, shrewd as he was, to connect the new arrivals with the female shareholder Smart had warned him of. He had all the prejudices of the old lone hand fossicker, and bitterly resented the intrusion of this woman and her family. He thought it likely enough that some other males would shortly turn up to join them, and racked his brains to think of some plan by which he might get rid of them.

After dark, he was struck with the luminous idea of giving the new arrivals a scare, so about nine o'clock he crept into the gully near their camp and imitated the yelping of a fox to the life. Afterward he treated them to the howl of a dingo, and was about to repeat the performance and wind up with an imaginative rehearsal of the coo-eeing woman, when suddenly three guns blazed away at him from the other side of the narrow gully.

They were only loaded with No. 5 shot, but Chandler did not know that, and he completely lost his head. He dropped flat on the ground, yelling with fear; 'Don't fire! don't fire! it's a man you're firing at!'

'Clear out, you cowardly skunk,' called out a woman's voice that quivered with anger, and with

that another well-directed volley sent Joe flying for his life. His legs and back pitted with small shot.

Joe did not turn up at Mrs. Maguire's camp next morning, so Tommy was sent over again ostensibly to inquire about the fowls, but in reality to see if the man was seriously injured.

For some days a state of war existed, but without open hostilities. In the meantime Joe did not dare to leave the house, for fear that his neighbours, whom he heard chopping trees and shooting all around the Bush, should break in during his absence.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE WHITE HAND OF A WOMAN

ONE morning, about a fortnight after the events of the preceding chapter, Joe Chandler discovered two men, who appeared to be prospecting, on a small flat right inside of one of his leases.

This was the climax, and down he marched, full of anger, with a couple of dogs at his heels, to order them off.

The men evidently did not belong to the district, for they were strangers to Joe.

‘You’re on my lease,’ he said roughly.

‘Better go down, mate, and talk to the boss,’ said one of the men, nodding to where a lady was, seemingly, examining the bank of the creek, a short distance away. ‘We’re only on day wages.’

Joe stalked over, and for the first time stood face to face with a tall lady-like looking woman, in a tailor-made tweed. It was Mrs. Madge Maguire.

She looked him full in the face.

Joe instinctively lifted his hand to his cap. The gleam of her eyes daunted him.

‘Well?’ she said.

‘Your men are on my lease, marm,’ said Joe.

Mrs. Maguire pointed her finger to where some grain was just sprouting from the black soil of the flat.

Joe's eyes followed the movement of her finger as though he had been suddenly overwhelmed by some frightful discovery. This was none other than the female shareholder about whom Smart had warned him by wire!

'That explains,' said Mrs. Maguire, in measured tones, without noticing Joe or his remarks, 'why the experts found the fowls scratching about on the flat. Joe Chandler, in a conspiracy with Major Boswell Smart, trampled grain in there for them to scratch out.'

Then she looked at him as though she would have slain him with a glance. 'Chandler,' she said, 'I've discovered the whole of the nefarious methods by which you deceived and swindled the public over that Golden Duck Company. Let me tell you,' she continued, lowering her voice, 'that those two men working down there are detectives, Major Smart is in gaol, and has turned King's evidence, and I came on to this lease this morning, on purpose to bring you out to me. Don't say a word, but follow me up to my camp, and possibly I'll give you one chance before I tell the detectives to arrest you and search your house for a diary, in which you have incriminated yourself in your own handwriting again and again.'

It was a cold bracing morning; but the sweat stood out upon Joe Chandler's forehead, as he silently followed Mrs. Maguire up to her camp. He had been reading only the previous evening of the suffer-

ings of criminals who were subjected by the police to the ordeal known as 'the third degree.'

It was a very comfortable camp, and had been carefully arranged with an eye to this interview. Beside the sleeping tents and the kitchen tent, there was a large one used as a sitting-room.

'Molly,' said Mrs. Maguire, as she pointed Joe to a seat, 'tell Tommy that if I or you should coo-ee, he's to fire off his gun at once. That's the signal to let the detectives know that they are wanted here at once.'

'Now,' said Mrs. Maguire, 'what restitution are you prepared to make, Mr. Chandler, to save yourself from judge and jury and a long term of imprisonment? . . . Let me see,' she continued, as Joe sat silent. 'What do you possess besides these leases, and the buildings? How much money have you in the Reefton bank?'

Joe stared at her but made no reply.

'Molly dear,' she said, smiling across to her daughter, who sat with what seemed to be a loaded rifle across her knees. 'I heard you coo-ee very nicely to your brother yesterday; I am afraid that I shall have to trouble you again; and you know, Mr. Chandler,' she said, turning to her victim, 'that will place this matter wholly in the hands of the police, and they have a warrant for your arrest.'

'Marm,' said Joe, looking down at his boots, 'I don't know what to say to you, and I don't own up to anything; but to save your daughter coo-eeing to them there detectives, I may tell you that I have a matter of £1500 odd in the bank at Reefton.'

' Ah, that's better ; we're getting on nicely now. Don't coo-ee, Molly. Mr. Chandler has no wish to have the details of his swindle published all over the country, and it's very cold, and uncomfortable, and disgraceful to be sent to gaol. I believe it was  $3\frac{1}{2}$  oz. of gold you gave the poultry, Mr. Chandler, and an unlimited quantity of tin. It was very clever, no doubt, very clever ; but the shareholders lost thousands by it. I lost several hundred myself.'

' I'll give you a cheque, marm, for every penny you lost, if you'll only clear out and have done with it,' stammered Joe.

' Make a note of that, Molly dear,' said the lady, beaming upon her daughter. ' Of course, I would not think of accepting it, as your uncles and aunts and cousins, and Mrs. Gammage, were also taken in ; but Mr. Chandler's offer will be useful as evidence. They tell me you will be certain to get six or eight years, Mr. Chandler.'

' Then, if you won't make terms, why don't you bring your dashed detectives up ? ' said Joe bitterly.

' Oh, I'll make terms with you, don't fear,' said the lady ; ' but not such terms as you offer.' . . .

' Now these are my terms, Joe Chandler, and remember, they're my only terms : I will allow you £100 to pay your passage to South Africa and give you something to start with when you get there. You will have, however, to sign a blank cheque for me, with a written order to fill it up for the full amount of your credit in the bank. Also a transfer of these leases, and all buildings thereon, and all goods and chattels you possess therein, exclusive of personal luggage and clothes.'

'I won't. I'll go to gaol first, it's robbery!' gasped Joe.

'No it isn't, it's restitution, you swindler!' said Mrs. Maguire, looking Joe straight in the face, with an expression he long remembered. 'It would serve you right if I were to shoot you,' and with that, she turned around as though to get a gun.

Now Joe was an intelligent man, and not of criminal temperament, and he knew himself to be in the wrong. There was, no doubt, ample evidence to sustain a case of conspiracy to defraud; his own diary contained enough to send both himself and Smart to gaol, and the detectives were waiting outside, no doubt with the handcuffs ready to put upon his wrists. Mentally he cursed Smart bitterly; but he showed no sign of yielding further to Mrs. Maguire.

In the meantime, that lady had placed some legal-looking documents upon the table.

'Now, I'll give you just five minutes to sign these papers,' she said, taking out her watch to see the time. 'And I don't care much which way it is, for you will be stripped of every penny of your unlawful gains before they imprison you. You've got your choice. Nothing and prison, or one hundred pounds, liberty and South Africa,' and with that she told Molly to coo-ee to bring up the detectives, to take the man into custody.

It need hardly be said that with such argument and threats, and the detectives waiting outside, the cowed, crestfallen man signed the cheque, letter and transfers. Mrs. Maguire had her plans carefully prepared, the two men were private detectives in her



employ, and they took charge of Joe as if he were actually in their legal custody, and shepherded him until the steamer he sailed in touched the last Australian port.

This was no light punishment ; but the vindictive woman's revenge did not end with Joe's impoverishment and exile from Australia. A woman of her temperament, more often than not, puts the sting of her revenge into a postscript, and therein overreaches herself.

A week after the last Australian land was left behind a steward handed Joe a letter, which he said he had been directed by Mr. Chandler's sister to give him upon his birthday.

Mrs. Maguire was an adept at writing unpleasant letters to people she disliked, and this one read as follows—

‘ YOU SCOUNDREL,—

‘ I vowed to punish you for your dirty poultry frauds, if it cost me £500 ; but instead I've made money by you—never mind how much !

‘ You took me in, with others of the public, by your bogus Golden Duck Company. Now I've taken you in, you wretch ! with bogus detectives and a trumped-up tale about your partner in roguery—I have not done with him yet !

‘ You are a poor man again, stripped of your wicked gains ; but you were properly taken in, for I sowed that grain down on the flat myself. By the way, that's a genuine thing you struck behind our camp, and it might have made you a rich man if you'd gone straight instead of crooked. Take a

woman's word for it : you'll find honesty the best policy in the long run.

' You come back again if you dare.

' MADGE MAGUIRE.'

It was a dangerous man that folded that letter and put it carefully into his pocket. He was about to tear it into little bits and throw the fragments in the sea ; but on second thoughts he did not, for he determined to take the very next boat back to Australia.

' I'll make that woman sit up,' he muttered.

Presently, however, the gossiping steward told certain of the passengers that it was Mr. Chandler's birthday ; and that an affectionate sister had thoughtfully sent him a birthday letter, to be delivered by hand, on the due date.

Joe felt inclined to swear at them, but he had to submit with the best possible grace to their congratulations. It was a day of bitter humiliation for him ; even the captain wished him many happy returns of the day and drank his health.

' It was very kind and thoughtful of your sister,' said a friendly fellow-passenger.

' Yes,' replied Joe vaguely, ' it was dashed clever, the way she worked the whole thing.'

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE PASSING OF MATILDA MONCKTON

THERE are uneventful periods in every life, times when nothing seems to happen ; but, on the other hand, a quick succession of changes will sometimes sweep across life's landscape, altering the whole outlook, in a week or even in a day.

The former condition is the rule of life with most people ; the weeks and months and years flow on with calm, and even with monotonous regularity. It had been so with the Maguires and Moncktons ; but the very week following the deportation of Joe Chandler to South Africa, there came a change.

Mrs. Maguire had been buying up all the worthless scrip of the Golden Duck Company from her female fellow-shareholders, and in Miss Monckton's presence she made a foolish statement about Will, which aroused Miss Monckton's anger. There was not what could be called a quarrel between the two ladies, for although Miss Monckton was very much hurt, she was too old and of too sweet a disposition to quarrel with any one. But elated over having bested Chandler and bought back the shares of her female acquaintances with his money, Mrs. Maguire had said something as she turned upon her heel to

leave 'The Firs,' which had stabbed Miss Monckton to the heart. Probably, she only half meant it; but having said it, she left off going over to 'The Firs,' and managed somehow to prevent Molly also from going over for several days.

A more cruel thing than this it would have been hard to conjecture. Miss Monckton was frail and old, Molly was the joy of her heart, and her daily visits as well as those of Mrs. Maguire were a part of Miss Monckton's life. Molly loved her with a deep and strong affection, and thought it strange that she was prevented from going across to see her; but she was unaware of what had passed between the two women, and knew no more than that her mother blamed Will for having attached his signature to the report.

Two days after this unpleasantness Miss Monckton was taken suddenly ill. Her housekeeper sent over immediately for Mrs. Maguire and Molly; but they found her lying on the bed unconscious, and notwithstanding all that could be done by three doctors, she lay in that condition for several days. The doctors held out no hope of her recovery, and two of them were of the opinion that she would never speak again.

She lay there, as white as marble, dying, as she had lived, at peace with all around her, and, best of all, with God.

It was a heavy punishment for Madge Maguire. The proud, self-willed woman was swept with a passion of grief, as she looked upon the white, sweet, saintly face of one who had been more than a sister to her. Her last words to her had been words of

uncalled for, wicked anger, and in presence of the seemingly unconscious corpse, she poured out impassioned words of penitent sorrow and self-upbraiding, unanswered and to all appearance unheard.

This continued for a couple of days. One and another of her friends, and occasionally the servants, would come in, stand at the foot of the bed and look at her, and whisper to each other of their love and esteem for her, and their sorrow at her death. She seemed to all of them to be dead.

Will had been wired for but no reply had been received. Major Smart, as one of her executors, had been notified of Miss Monckton's illness, and Molly and a trained nurse watched and waited on her night and day. The former would sit looking at her for hours, with tear-dimmed eyes, praying that she might be permitted to speak, and hear, and answer, if only for one five minutes, before she died.

Major Smart called daily, and was seemingly much touched by the sad spectacle. The vicar hardly left the house.

On the third day, Dr. Hugh Macdonald whispered to Molly, 'Watch her very closely now, I think she will die to-night; but probably she will be conscious and able to speak for half an hour before she dies.'

'Dear Lord,' prayed Molly, 'give her strength before she dies to tell poor mother she loves her and forgives her.'

At nine o'clock that night, the white lips called: 'Molly.'

'Dear love,' she whispered faintly, 'moisten my lips again, and send over at once for your mother.'

I've heard all that has been said, and seen all that has happened in this room for days, but could not move nor speak. Tell them not to talk before me. I'm sorry that my dear boy is not here; but God's will be done. He'll be heart-broken that he has not seen me. Tell Mr. Payne, if I am unconscious again, before I die, that I can hear him when he prays, and that it helps me. Molly, be good to Will. Poor boy, he'll miss me.'

'Yes, dear, I'll remember everything you say,' whispered Molly, bravely keeping back her tears.

'If I can't speak when Madge comes,' continued the dying woman, 'tell her I've always loved her and quite forgive her; she didn't mean what she said about our boy. Kiss her for me!'

Molly looked round; silent figures had entered the room, for it had spread through the house that the dying mistress of 'The Firs,' was once more conscious.

It seemed like a miracle to many of them.

Close by Molly, her mother knelt sobbing by the side of the bed; but Miss Monckton saw her.

As though supernatural strength was given her in the very moment of transition, the dying woman raised her thin white hand, and put it lovingly on that of Madge Maguire.

'Dear Madge . . . Will . . . Molly . . . Jesus!' and suddenly the still room was filled with a sense of unutterable awe and mystery. The eternal gates seemed opened, and she who on earth had been known as Matilda Monckton passed speechless, with the unspeakable peace of God, into the presence of her Lord.

The funeral was a costly one, arranged by Major Smart, as one of the executors of her will. There were many sincere mourners at the grave; many of them poor dependants upon her loving charities. The vicar truly described her death as 'one of peace.'

'Peace,' he said, 'which is the blessed privilege of age; peace which is the holiest fruit of conflict; peace which is the still fountain of joy. A peace too deep for utterance, and too full for song. The peace of God, which passeth knowledge.'

With the passing of the funeral, the sense of acute grief also passed, and the sense of loss only remained. The Maguires closed up 'The Poplars,' leaving the house in charge of trusted servants, and went up to their station in the Riverina; but Molly's heart ached and trembled for Will. A second and third wire had been sent to North Queensland; but they had called forth no reply from him. 'How was it that he had not wired?' asked Molly of her mother. 'Where was he, could it be possible that he was ill or dead?'

It was several weeks, however, before any news of him reached the Maguires, and it was sad news when it came. He had been ill with malarial fever, and was still in hospital at an inland town of North Queensland. His letters and telegrams had lain at a post office unopened for weeks.

If the Major felt any grief at all at Miss Monckton's death, it was of a very transitory character; for he at once put up a high fence of galvanized iron between the two houses; stored the furniture, and without waiting for Will's return, or in any way



consulting Mrs. Maguire, he let 'The Firs' to a city publican.

Needless to say, the Major and Mrs. Maguire were not on speaking terms; but it came as a shock to them when they found Smart taking full possession of everything. Except to Will, Miss Monckton had not been very communicative about her affairs; but they knew that she had died a fairly wealthy woman, and they longed for the return of Will to take things out of the Major's hands.

But Smart had also heard of Will Monckton's illness, and a new vista of prospective wealth opened before him. So many people had died to his advantage that he hoped this might be another similar case, and he presumed upon it. He lodged the will for probate, paid the duty out of the funds of the estate, and studied the document carefully, to see if he could not find a pretext for so administering the estate as to secure practically the whole property for his own use. On Will Monckton's return from South Africa, his aunt had made a second will, without consulting her lawyer, in which, while not forgetting Molly and other personal friends, she had left large sums to various charities, and the bulk of her property to her nephew; but everything was left in trust to the two executors, and Smart was hopeful that in the event of Will Monckton's death, he would be able to secure the bulk of it for himself.

But with all the Major's seeming good luck and growing wealth, he was ill at ease. Unpleasant rumours and anonymous letters were continually reaching him. The Wooler was making inquiries

about certain properties in the north which had formerly belonged to a Captain Alex. McDuff. Joe Chandler had just returned from South Africa, practically penniless, and told him how he had been fooled and impoverished by Mrs. Maguire. Smart wanted Joe to burn his diary, but he regarded it as a kind of sacred thing, and obstinately refused to do so, on which Smart refused to give him any assistance whatever. Joe, moreover, went in daily fear that Mrs. Maguire might have him arrested, and was more than half sorry that he had returned to Australia.

Several other matters disturbed the Major's mind. The Wooler had somehow made the acquaintance of the Honourable Ebenezer Gammage, and had told him things which led him to think that the Major had put the corpse of Mrs. Alex. McDuff into his board room. Gammage had taxed the Major with it, and with having obtained wrongful possession of Captain McDuff's property. He threatened to bring the matter up in Parliament, and the result was an open rupture between them. And last, but not least, the Major was being blackmailed (that's what he called it) by Julia Careless.

But on the top of all this, it seemed as though the old thing which had been buried so many years in Queensland was about to come to light again. And he had reason to believe that Will Monckton was at the bottom of it, or had been, before he was struck down by fever.

A marked Queensland newspaper had been sent to him as a registered letter, which contained the following paragraph—

'A strange discovery has just been made of a female skeleton, in an old prospecting drive in the central district. It is supposed that the woman was suffocated many years ago by a fall of earth. Several costly rings were on the finger-bones of the left hand, and a lyre-bird badge in solid gold was found among the clothing. A pocket-book and other articles, which had belonged to the deceased, are also in the hands of the police, and it is expected that the authorities will shortly be able to identify the remains as those of a once well-known mining lady of Victoria.'

## CHAPTER XXVI

### WHO WAS MISS ST. CLAIR?

ABOUT a fortnight after the newspaper notice episode, a gentlemanly-looking man might have been seen in Collins Street inquiring for Major Smart's office. He was evidently a stranger to the city, at any rate in recent years, for he expressed surprise at the number of splendidly appointed vestibules of suites of offices, which graced the thoroughfare.

On inquiry at the Major's old offices, he learned that he had removed to a more private and exclusive portion of the city, near Parliament House, where the brass plates of professional men were to be seen upon the railings and doors of many well-appointed residences.

The office he was seeking proved to be upon the first floor of an imposing building, and the appearance of the handsome suite of rooms in which he found himself told the visitor that he had to do with a man of wealth, although by the look of things not in any very extensive way of business.

A well-dressed clerk took the visitor's card, read upon it: Captain Lawrence Scott, Queensland

Club, Brisbane, and immediately ushered him, with deferential respect, into a small but handsomely-furnished waiting-room.

‘Major Smart,’ said the man, ‘usually comes in about eleven o’clock, and it is now ten minutes to the hour. Will you wait—he may be in at any moment—or would you prefer to make an appointment, and call again later in the day?’

‘Thank you, I will wait,’ said Captain Scott. ‘Kindly let him have my card as soon as he arrives.’

The visitor was a prominent Queensland police official, and Captain Lawrence Scott was not the name he was known by in the Criminal Investigation Department of that State; but it served his purpose, and, for the time being, will serve ours. It was not a part of his plan to disclose his personality to the Major. He needed to be extremely careful, he had a delicate mission in hand, for he was dealing with a very wealthy man and a prominent citizen. It was like skating on thin ice.

Left to himself, the captain looked with a keen glance around the room. He was evidently a man who not only saw things, but observed them. He had been known to put his head out of the port-hole of a war-ship for only a quarter of a minute, and immediately afterwards to write a long and accurate description of the rig, tonnage, and general appearance of half a dozen vessels at anchor, and the number and characters of the occupants of several row boats, as well as of a score of people waiting on the pier. There was not much that was likely to escape him here.

The carpet was of velvet pile, thick and costly, and

an expensive black marble clock, correct to a minute, ticked upon the mantelpiece. Some fine proof prints adorned the wall, and the furniture was richly upholstered. The man was evidently of substance and influence, and would probably be somewhat hard to approach ; but, what was it that suddenly carried the man's thoughts a thousand odd miles away, to where a human skeleton lay on its face, in a cold dark mining drive in Queensland ?

He was looking at a cabinet of mineral specimens, and among them was a dull red sample of sulphide ore marked 'Queensland Cinnabar.'

'That's it,' said Scott, *sotto voce*, 'cinnabar, the matrix of mercury, better known as quicksilver. A specimen obtained in Queensland, no less ! It may be only a coincidence ; but it's strange that a mineral practically unknown in Australia, save in one portion of the northern State, should be found in this gentleman's cabinet.'

'If——' and then he paused. 'Surely, if it was as Monckton suspects, the man would not have been such a fool as to place that specimen in this case, in full view of every casual visitor. But crime would never be discovered but that the cleverest criminals sometimes make mistakes. It's a valuable clue, at any rate,' he thought, 'but it's a pity, a thousand pities, that we have not got the initial of his Christian name. There are so many Smarts. However, we've got the date, 1882, and the £5000 entry, on the 24th of August that year. But here he comes.'

A rich, full, suave voice was making some inquiries of the attendant, he caught the word 'letters,'

and then the owner of the voice passed into an inner room.

‘That man sings second tenor, as sure as I’m alive!’ ejaculated Scott, below his breath. ‘That’s another clue, and one that will hold good for years. It’s singular how men retain their natural voices, when they are comfortably circumstanced in life, and keep themselves fairly straight. And yet plenty of Smarts are second tenors, so it does not do to be too sure.’

As he was still kept waiting, he tried to imagine what the man was like. ‘Not over tall,’ he thought, ‘but well-set-up and dignified. He’s a military man, so he’s sure to be well groomed and dressed. I hadn’t thought that he would be such a swell; it’s a pity that I did not furnish myself with some sort of an introduction.’

He looked at his watch; Smart had been in twenty minutes. ‘I wonder,’ thought the captain, ‘if he’s smelt a rat!’

At that moment the attendant came in, to say that Major Smart would be pleased to see Captain Scott.

He rose and followed the clerk, who, when he came to the Major’s door, stood still and knocked.

‘Cautious man, this,’ was the captain’s mental comment. ‘Keeps his clerk at arms’ length.’

There was a rich, subdued, velvety feeling about everything—carpets, mats, furnishings. Rubber guards secured the occupants against the noise of slamming doors, and the whole exterior of the Major’s new offices suggested repose and wealth. As the clerk stood waiting until he heard at last



the Major's 'Come in,' Captain Scott wondered whether, when he left, he would possess the same serenity as he did now.

He was writing as they entered, and continued to do so without looking up. 'Excuse me a moment,' he said. 'William, give the gentleman a chair.'

The office was so arranged, that, while the visitor's face was in the full light of the window, the Major's was in the shade. It was rather too full of rich furniture, and costly ornaments and appointments. On one side was a beautifully carved book case, filled with legal lore; but the books did not look as though they had been handled much. There were closed cabinets, and some beautiful statuettes; but nothing in the room was suggestive of mining, or legal business. It was really intended to impress a visitor with one thing only, and that was Major Smart's solid wealth.

Scott scrutinized him closely. He expected to have met a much older-looking man; but Smart was clean shaven and well-dressed, with light brown hair and a fair complexion, and he looked younger than he was.

'Now, sir,' said Smart, laying down his pen, and looking over the table at Captain Scott, with a smile, 'what can I have the pleasure of doing for you?'

'Your attendant gave you my card,' said Captain Scott, fencing to gain time.

'He did,' said the Major, 'I see you are from Queensland, but I don't remember seeing your name in the military lists, nor have I had the pleasure of meeting you before.'

‘To my knowledge, we have never met previously,’ said Captain Scott.

‘Then, on what business have you called upon me, sir?’ asked the Major, with less cordiality. ‘You must excuse me, but I am very busy to-day!’ With that he snapped his false teeth together, and as he did so Captain Scott thought: ‘He’s the very man, who, if it served his purpose, would allow a woman to disappear and die, unsought for and unlamented.’

‘Major Smart,’ asked Scott abruptly looking him full in the face. ‘Were you, in 1882, acquainted with a Miss St. Clair in Queensland?’

Such a method of pursuing an inquiry is a favourite one with the police, and will sometimes yield wonderful results. The suddenness of interrogation occasionally breaks through the most cunning subterfuge; but the Captain had mistaken his man. Smart was prepared for such a question, and in this case it was a failure.

He did not answer for a moment, but scrutinized his visitor closely, putting on a well acted air of surprise as he looked him full in the face. Then he calmly asked: ‘What was her Christian name?’

Captain Scott could have cursed his own stupidity; he had missed fire. Or else he was on a wrong scent; but something seemed to tell him that it was the former.

‘I do not know,’ replied the Captain, rather awkwardly.

‘In which of the States is she supposed to have lived?’ asked the Major, feeling his advantage and fixing the other with his eye.

'In Queensland,' replied Scott. 'I mentioned that before.'

Smart looked at him for fully a quarter of a minute and then smiled. 'I can recall no such person,' he said; then, after a short pause, he asked: 'Are you making this call upon me professionally?'

The detective knew that he was beaten for the time, at any rate. He knew well the difficulty, after the lapse of years, of bringing a rich man to justice, and he blamed himself for having been so precipitate. He ought to have waited until he had much more complete evidence; but now he knew his man, and as he faced him, his inner consciousness kept reiterating: 'He's bluffing, but he's your man, all right.'

'I don't mind, sir, whether the visit is professional or otherwise,' said Scott; 'all that I want is to find out about the lady. I am quite able to pay the usual consultation fee.'

'I'm not taking consultation fees,' replied Smart, now openly defiant. 'You knew very well, when you came into my office this morning, that you had no intention of offering me a fee, and that I should not accept one from you. You are, I suppose, a detective, and have got hold of some foolish notion about me, because you have heard that I once resided in Queensland. You have intruded upon my privacy under a false name. I know nothing at all about this woman, and I have no intention of having my time occupied over the matter. Kindly excuse me, I'm busy.' He rang his bell.

'William,' he said, 'show this gentleman downstairs. Good morning, Captain . . . Lawrence . . . Scott.'

‘Curse him; but he’s clever,’ muttered Scott, as he found himself once more upon the street. ‘I’d swear the beggar knew me, and he’s got a second tenor voice all right, and a cinnabar sulphide specimen from Queensland. He’s euchred me this time, I’m afraid; but I’ll have a better hand of cards when I play the game with him next time. It’s not easy to get on the blind side of a man who has money and at one time had training as a lawyer.’

After he had gone, the Major unlocked a cabinet and poured out for himself a full glass of rare old port. He looked pale and was evidently disturbed; but the wine revived him. Then he rang for his clerk.

‘If any one else calls, say I’m engaged, William.’ He was about to add: ‘That man upset me,’ but his habit of caution restrained him.

He was writing to Will Monckton, from whom he had received an important letter, which he found it not very easy to answer.

Will was still in North Queensland, and Smart knew that he had been in the central district, reporting upon a newly discovered lode of cinnabar. He guessed that he must know something, and surmised that it was he who had set the detective upon his track; but whatever Will might have discovered, or heard from others, there was no reference in his letter to the strange death of the late Miss St. Clair

## CHAPTER XXVII

### DISCOVERY OF TREASURE

**I**T seems extraordinary, at first sight, that Will Monckton, above all others, should have been the one to stumble, as it were, into Major Smart's long buried secret in Queensland; but it only furnishes additional grounds for the very general belief that many of the strange coincidences of life are unexplainable except from the standpoint of faith in a higher power. In this case, however, Monckton being a mining engineer, it was in the way of his profession to make the discovery.

It will be remembered that at the time of the flotation of the Golden Duck Company, the Lieutenant had been invited by an influential mining syndicate to report upon a new gold discovery in Queensland; and on his way north he was to inspect an alleged cinnabar lode in the central district.

The terms offered were liberal, and the country one that Will had not hitherto visited; so he promptly closed with the offer, and left for the north, having carelessly and in haste, signed the Major's report upon the Company. He calculated that the trip would take him seven or eight weeks.

But Queensland is a great and attractive country, with its vast table-lands and rolling downs and varied climates. Will was astonished at its progress and material wealth and its stupendous promise ; and as there was no pressing need for his speedy return to Melbourne, he decided to make himself better acquainted with the mineral and agricultural resources of a State which seemed to him to possess the greatest natural wealth, offered the finest field for settlement, and probably would have the most wonderful future of any of the great States of the Commonwealth.

He had been thus engaged for a couple of months, when he decided to run down and see how they were getting on with the opening up of the cinnabar lode, which was situated near a mining field that had yielded splendid returns in former years.

This was some time before his aunt's death ; things were quiet in Melbourne, as the Maguires had persuaded Miss Monckton to go with them upon a short visit to their station. So Will, who was fond of shooting, decided, as he had been kept hard at work up north, to have a few days' rest, take a look at the surrounding country, and, as he had heard that there were lyre-birds to be found a few miles distant from the camp, to take his gun and obtain some trophies in the way of plumage, to bring back with him to Melbourne. With this in view, he wandered off from camp one day to shoot on the other side of some low hills he saw a few miles from the cinnabar workings.

He was somewhat taken aback by what he found on the other side, for it was unoccupied, never-

never country they were in, and wild and lonely at that ; but for a mile or more he saw before him old alluvial gold workings, which evidently had long been abandoned. He hurried on to the creek, and was soon inspecting the place with interest.

He found that the creek had been dammed higher up, and water brought down in races for ground sluicing and puddling operations, and Will imagined to himself the busy scenes which must have transpired there twenty or thirty or more years before.

He was stooping down to see if he could discover any sign of gold in some promising looking wash, when close by, in the undergrowth of the creek, he caught sight of a cock lyre-bird strutting serenely about, quite unconscious of his presence. It was an easy shot, so he stopped to watch the bird's movements before firing, when suddenly his mate appeared, and the two commenced scratching among the loose soil and débris beneath the ti-tree.

Will fired and killed the male bird ; but to reach it, had to grope his way below the dense undergrowth. Picking up the bird, he looked for a place to cross the shallow creek, when his attention was attracted to a single-headed pick, the point driven into the butt of a low tree.

It proved, on inspection, to be smaller than the ordinary miner's pick, and although very rusty Will noticed that it was made of wrought steel, with a polished cedar handle. He laughed as he thought, ' There must have been some swell miners working here in the old days,' when at his feet he saw a small square-shaped piece of discoloured paper, which he had either knocked down from



somewhere, or kicked out from among the dead leaves.

It was a business card, a portion of it torn off. The printing on that which remained read:—

. . . ll Smart  
. . . ng Agent  
. . . herson Street  
. . . Brisbane

and across the top of the card, on the other side, was written in fine clear handwriting, although the ink was almost illegible with age, Miss St. Clair.

Breaking down some boughs of the ti-tree to let in more light, so that he might examine the card more closely, to his astonishment he made a fresh discovery. In a fork of the tree, on a level with his head, half-covered with dead leaves and sticks and the remains of an old bird's nest, was a small parcel. It proved to be a lady's travelling cap, neatly folded up—a rusty bonnet-pin was struck through it, and inside was a gold watch, a heavy neck chain, and a gold bangle, on the clasp of which was a miniature representation of a lyre-bird. He looked carefully about, but could find nothing more, and, having marked the place, returned to camp.

It may be guessed that he was not a little puzzled over this strange find. He did not tell any of the men; but, in his tent that night he racked his brains to come to some reasonable conclusion as to the why and wherefore of this singular discovery.

The watch was a lady's gold keyless English lever, marked 18 carat, and must have cost a fair sum. It had stopped at half-past ten. He shook it gently, and it started and went for a second or two,

and then stopped again. He wondered how many years it was since it ran down ; evidently it had been left in the fork of that tree by its owner, who either could not find the place again, or for some reason or other had been unable to return. The chain was of fine gold, of an old-fashioned pattern, and the bangle was also of fine gold, without mark or initial. Probably both were of Australian workmanship. There was nothing to remark about the travelling cap or rusty bonnet-pin, so he took up the pick and once more carefully examined it. It was too dainty a tool for rough use or hard work. The cedar handle had been well polished at one time, and the fitting of the handle into the pickhead betokened city workmanship. It was the sort of tool that a noble dame might use when turning the first sod for a new railway.

Will looked long and curiously at the things ; but as he did so, the lurid question for the first time floated through his mind : ‘ Had there been foul play ? ’ The treasure trove was probably once the property of some Miss St. Clair ; but where was she now, and why had she not recovered her lost property ; and what about this Smart, who was an agent, and whose address had, in those old days, been some street in Brisbane ?

‘ . . . ll Smart,’ thought Will. ‘ The last two letters of Boswell. Surely it can’t be a portion of an old card of the Major’s ? ’

However, after a good deal of thought, Monckton decided to tell no one and do nothing more until he had further explored the neighbourhood of the old alluvial workings.

Unexpected pressure of business prevented him from continuing his investigations for fully a week ; but somehow the thing worried him, he could not sleep at night for thinking about it. Yet he had ceased to connect the Major with it in his own mind. He had only heard a rumour that Smart had once lived in Queensland, and it seemed so improbable that he could have been that particular Smart, out of the hundreds there must be in Australia, that he put the idea out of his mind. All that he knew was that the woman who had lost these valuables must have known some Brisbane agent, probably a mining agent of the name of Smart. It was very improbable, however, that he would be with her when she hid the jewellery in the fork of the tree. She was evidently alone, and put it there intending to return for it again. The pick suggested that she was a woman interested in mining ; the jewellery that she was in comfortable circumstances ; and the leaving of it in that secluded spot, that she was bent on some errand near at hand, which she expected would entail bodily exertion. Women do queer things sometimes, and get strange notions into their heads, and he wondered whether she might not have tied a handkerchief over her hair and gone down one of the shafts, either prospecting, or for some other purpose known only to herself.

Taking a man with him, after a five-mile walk they reached the scene of his discovery : so after they had boiled the billy and had some lunch, Will set the man, as an excuse, to put in a drive in an old face of wash gravel, while he had a look round.

He had purposely stopped a little distance below the spot where he had found the things, and taking the shovel, he made for the creek and the forked tree. He found nothing there, however, to guide him in his search. The trees and bushes had, no doubt, grown rankly around the place since Miss St. Clair's things were placed there ; so he moved up to some higher ground overlooking the creek and tree and undergrowth, and sitting down, took out his pipe to smoke and think.

' She could not have intended to go very far when she planted her jewellery in that tree,' he surmised. Then he wondered whether there might be any old shafts above in the hill. He had noticed a few faint tracks about, almost obliterated by passing years.

It is strange how long a track once made in the Bush will continue visible to observant eyes.

He scanned the ground carefully around, but found no clue or sign of a track that might lead from the creek-bed to old workings higher up the hill. So, with the shovel on his shoulder, he began to climb up to higher ground, where soon, among some trees at the foot of another fairly steep rise, he caught sight of a mound of grass-grown mullock, and beside it a moss-covered old shaft overshadowed by a tree which grew partly out of the shaft from what had been a ledge some two feet from the surface.

It was not the kind of shaft that a good miner would have put down, but a hole some twenty feet deep, sunk in friable earth and slatey rock on the side of a hill. It slipped on one side, and had

ledges and foot holes to get down by. Just a likely place for a woman to scramble into alone.

Will dropped the shovel down the hole and clambered after it, and at the bottom found a drive, blocked up at the entrance by a fall of earth. He stood and looked at it for some time, deep in thought. He did not want to make a fool of himself, for he knew that it was not a very safe place for a man to break into alone ; but the feeling that there was a tragedy behind the fallen earth in that old drive took irresistible hold of him ; the sides of the shaft were mossgrown, grass and weeds grew in clefts between the rocks, and sturdy creepers clung to the walls.

Evidently there had been no human interference with the place for many years.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### A SKELETON FOUND

WILL went down and brought his man up with him before breaking into the drive. They had to move a lot of earth, and timber up the entrance a little, but after a couple of hours' hard work they broke through. The drive made straight into the hill.

'It does not look very safe in there,' said the man. 'These old workings are mostly dangerous, what with foul air and falls of earth. There does not appear to be a bit of timbering done. I'd try a candle, and if it goes out, come back at once.'

'Well, give me the candle,' replied Will. 'You stop here, and I'll go in and have a look around myself.'

He went in a few yards before he lit the candle. He then examined the roof and walls of the drive carefully. They were of slate and dry, and seemed perfectly safe, so he went on. The air was fairly pure. He stepped slowly along for about forty feet without meeting with any obstacle, and then, at the end of the drive, his worst fears were realized.

On the floor, upon its face, with hands clasped above its head as if in supplication, lay a skeleton.

The remains of a silk handkerchief covered the head, and a cloth skirt and loose woollen guernsey enveloped the bones. Against the foot-wall leaned a single-headed pick and short-handled shovel, and at the end of the drive there gleamed in the candle-light a broad band of bright vermilion cinnabar.

On the ground was a half-burnt candle, which had gone out while the woman lay there suffocating with foul air. On closer examination, Will detected something bulky in the pocket of the skirt, and he put his hand in gently—for he was fearful of disturbing the remains—and drew out a pocket-book. On the finger bones were several costly rings; but the hands were clasped, and he would not disturb them. Samples of ore were lying about, some of which, with the book, he put into his pocket.

Then he stood and looked, long and sadly, at that grim skeleton lying there in gruesome repulsiveness. It was what he had expected to find, and somehow he felt but little shocked by the awful spectacle.

But the air of the drive was heavy, and the candle burnt low, so he turned his steps back to the fresh air and daylight.

He drew a long breath or two on reaching the open, and then said to his man: 'I think we'll cover in the drive again, Trevor; I may have some prospecting done here some day.'

A miner does not usually comment much upon what he is told to do by 'the Boss,' he does it; and the man commenced to shovel the earth back again, only remarking: 'I should think the air's pretty foul in there, sir?'

'Yes,' replied Will, as he assisted him to close



in the entrance to the drive ; but he gave him no further information of what he had seen there, and the man was too good a miner to ask questions, although he seemed rather perplexed at the care with which they were closing up the drive. No doubt he thought that the Boss must have found something good in there, so after closing up the bottom of the shaft, he gathered an armful of rough stuff outside and threw it over the fresh turned earth to blind their interference with the place ; and then they left it.

Will knew that his first duty was to inform the police of the tragedy which had thus come to his knowledge ; but to do that would be to make it public, and publicity would put the criminal, if crime it was, upon his guard.

Another thing ; to make it public immediately would be possibly to lose possession of the important find of sulphide of mercury which it contained, and which might prove as valuable as a gold mine. There was wealth, if not fortune, in the drive guarded by Miss St. Clair's skeleton, and the lease of it would have to be secured before he gave information to the police. Then, too, thoughts of the Major and his possible connection with the tragedy crossed and recrossed his mind. He would examine the pocket-book, peg out a fifty-acre lease, and register it, and then visit Brisbane to see if he could not identify the Smart of the business card and discover if he knew anything about the tragic end of Miss St. Clair.

His examination of the pocket-book in camp that night, however, altered his plans. It told

little more about the lady herself, for no owner's name and address were endorsed upon it. The entries were very irregular, and mostly referred to moneys advanced to some one as wages to miners; but there was one entry which burned into his mind. It was a single line: 'August 24th, 1882'; then in brackets, small print, were the words: 'St. Bartholomew'—a reference, of course, to the calendar. Then on the same line: 'Mr. Smart, trust  $\frac{a}{c}$ , £5,000.'

This was the last entry in the book, and Will naturally concluded that it must have been soon after that that she had died. Smart was evidently the mining agent referred to, and a casual examination of a directory revealed a Macpherson Street. The only definite evidence, however, which the pocket-book supplied was that a Mr. Smart had received £5,000 of Miss St. Clair's money a few days before her death, which had occurred either by accident or violence in that fatal drive.

There was no proof that Smart had misappropriated this money; no proof that he had any knowledge of the manner of Miss St. Clair's death, or personally anything whatever to do with it. 'In fact,' argued Will, as he turned the matter over in his mind again and again, 'the Major may not be the Smart at all.' But the thought that troubled him was a hazy memory floating in his mind that he had heard Mrs. Maguire say that on the death of his father the Major had returned from Queensland with a considerable sum of money.

What if that money were Miss St. Clair's five thousand pounds?

The following day it rained heavily, and Will Monckton knew that any footmarks which he and Trevor had made about the shaft would be obliterated.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE LYRE-BIRD CLUE

**W**ILL MONCKTON found, as have other busy men, that one thing leads to another ; so it was a week before he found himself in Brisbane City, the capital of Queensland.

There were three things he wished to do without delay. The first was to register the ground on which was the drive where he had discovered the skeleton. For he preferred, on second thoughts, to do this at headquarters, rather than locally in the interior township, where the publication of his application would have made the whereabouts of his find public property. The second was to give information to the police about the finding of the jewellery, and, afterwards, of the skeleton. The third, to find out as much as possible about the Smart who in 1882 was in business as a mining agent in Macpherson Street, Brisbane.

It did not take him long to put in his application for the mineral lease ; but having to wait until the following day to pay the fees and receive a receipt, he decided to spend the afternoon in making inquiries in Macpherson Street about the mining agent ; and put off calling upon the chief inspector

of police until the following afternoon, when he would have paid the fees and secured a provisional agreement in the matter of the mineral lease. In doing this, there was in his heart a sincere wish that he might discover some other Smart, or something that would exonerate the Major from any connexion with the tragedy.

Will Monckton was not gifted with the faculty of adroit investigation ; he had not the instincts which go to make a good detective. Spying upon others or elucidating mysterious happenings was not congenial to him, and he did not want to discover anything that would incriminate the Major. ' Besides, it certainly was not murder, and if Boswell Smart had the five thousand in his possession in trust, and on its being unclaimed had made use of it, what good could come of an exposure after all these years? If he were found to be the man, the best plan would be to acquaint him in some way with the discovery of the skeleton of Miss St. Clair, and leave him to refund the money, if he had it, to her relations.' Such was the trend of Will Monckton's thoughts, and the wish that was father to them was that his inquiries might prove abortive.

Twenty or thirty years is a long time in Australia, where changes in the community are far more frequent than in older lands. Mining men are mostly a restless and itinerant class, excepting the lucky ones who find wealth ; and even these rarely spend their money in the locality in which they have made it.

The oldest resident of the street had never heard of a Mr. Smart being in business there as a mining

or any other agent ; and after a wearisome afternoon Will gave it up as a hopeless task, and decided to go and call upon some old Melbourne acquaintances then living in South Brisbane.

It was a joy for Will to look into the faces of old friends again, and to feel the grasp of hearty welcome that was given him.

There were three attractive girls in the family—known among their intimates as the three Graces—but they had booked seats for a concert that night, and had promised to join a party of friends.

‘Perhaps Lieutenant Monckton will go with you, and take my seat,’ said Mrs. Tolmer, ‘you know I only half promised to go, and I ought not to leave the boy, he is not so well to-night.’

So it was arranged that Will should form one of the party.

It was a full-dress concert, got up by a leading musical society, and on looking at the programme Will’s attention was at once attracted by the emblem of the society, printed in gold on the head of the first sheet. It was almost a counterpart of the golden lyre-bird on Miss St. Clair’s bangle.

Early the next day Will called upon the Hon. Secretary of the society, and after complimenting him upon the success of the concert, inquired whether a Miss St. Clair had at one time been a member.

‘I believe so, Mr. Monckton,’ replied the secretary, who was a man well advanced in years, ‘but it is many years ago. I fancy that she must have left the State, or be dead.’

‘Could you find out whether she was a member

in the year 1882 or prior to that date ? ' asked Will.

After a search through an old register of the society, the answer was, ' Yes, for three years up to 1882.'

' May I ask now,' said Will, ' whether in that year you had a member of the name of Smart ? '

This question was asked haphazard ; but the reply fairly took away Will's breath.

' We had two gentlemen of that name who were members,' replied the secretary, smiling, ' I remember them well, and I see by the register here, that they both severed their connexion with us in the end of 1882, that is, their subscriptions were last paid for that year. There were several things which fix them upon my memory. One was named Maxwell Smart, who was a basso, and the other, Boswell Smart, who was a second tenor. They were both interested in mining, and both very friendly with Miss St. Clair, who, I heard incidentally, was from Victoria, and a lady of some means——also very much interested in mining. They were all of them good singers. I heard, if I remember rightly, that Mr. Boswell Smart was a Victorian, and in 1883 returned to Melbourne. Maxwell Smart was a big dark man. I do not know what became of him ; but he must have left Queensland about the same time.'

Will thanked the genial secretary with much cordiality, he had now ample information ; but the position was one of singular complications. Which Smart was it that had Miss St. Clair's business in hand, and received that £5000 from her ?

When individuals in ordinary life find themselves



up against a stone wall, as it were, as was now the case with Will Monckton, they either call in skilled assistance to help them, or they turn their back upon the whole thing. Will would very gladly have done the latter, and have given the Major the benefit of the doubt. He would never have attempted of himself to have asked Smart: 'Did you, at one time, know a Miss St. Clair in Queensland?' He knew that he must have known her; but he could not have brought himself to have asked him: 'Did she entrust you with five thousand pounds?' Smart might turn upon him—as he would have every right to do—and ask: 'What business is that of yours?'

But the skeleton in that drive, and that band of red sulphide of mercury, altered everything. He had no alternative but to give information about that skeleton to the police. Relatives of the dead woman were no doubt to be found, who had probably mourned her mysterious disappearance for years. They ought to know.

If there had been any way of escape by which Will could have kept his discovery secret with a clear conscience, he would, at this time, have sacrificed the probable value of the cinnabar lode for the sake of the Major; but the circumstances of the case were too strong for him, and after having received the registration of the ground he fortified himself with a good lunch, and then called to see the chief inspector, who was known to him casually.

On sending in his card, he was courteously received, and the inspector listened to Will's story of the discovery with close attention and interest.

The lieutenant had brought with him the whole of the treasure trove he had found belonging to Miss St. Clair, including the pocket-book, and these were examined very carefully by the official. Will made no secret of anything connected with the matter, and explained frankly that he wished to make some inquiries himself, and secure the ground, before giving information to the police.

It was the information given by the secretary of the musical society, however, which specially interested the inspector.

‘Remarkable thing, that there should have been two Smarts, both with Christian names ending in “ll,” and both mining men.’

‘It is very remarkable,’ replied Will.

‘You are going back to the mine I presume, Lieutenant Monckton?’ said the inspector.

‘Yes,’ replied Will, ‘I would like to go up tomorrow, as I ought to put a man in charge of the claim.’

‘It would be quite safe for another week, would it not?’ suggested the inspector.

‘Safe for another twenty years, I expect,’ replied Will.

‘And you have shown these things to no one, and not told a single individual?’ asked the official.

‘You are absolutely the only one to whom I have told anything about it,’ said Will.

‘Good,’ replied the inspector, ‘then we’ll keep the whole thing secret until I can find out all that there is to know in Brisbane, and we will have the evidence ready for the inquest. Could not you go up and do what you have to in the north, for

a fortnight, so that you would not need to go near the place again, until I have made a careful inquiry into the matter ? ’

‘ Yes, that would suit me very well, ’ replied Will. ‘ There is a steamer leaving for the north to-morrow. ’

‘ That will give me a few hours to inquire in the city about this Maxwell Smart. Come in and see me in the morning at ten, and I will tell you then how we are getting on, and whether we have made any useful discovery. By the way, how do you reach the conclusion, with any certainty, that the name of this lady was St. Clair ? ’

‘ The name is on the card, ’ said Will.

‘ Yes, but that might belong to any one. The name is not in the pocket-book, and the handwriting in the pocket-book does not correspond with the handwriting on the card. I’ve examined them closely. ’

‘ But they knew each other, and all three of them belonged to the musical society. ’

‘ That is so, ’ replied the inspector, ‘ but I want to find the criminal, and I cannot secure a conviction unless, in some way, we can identify the skeleton. You see, what we want is evidence that will be accepted in a court of law, and unless I can get hold of Maxwell Smart, I think I shall have to interview your Major Boswell Smart, down in Melbourne. ’

Will called in at ten the next morning, but no trace of Maxwell Smart had been discovered, so it was agreed that the matter should be kept secret, while he visited the north on the business of the mine.

Within a week, however, Will was lying in hospital in one of the northern towns, smitten down with malarial fever, which had probably been contracted before his visit to Brisbane.

## CHAPTER XXX

### STONE WALLS OF CIRCUMSTANCE

THE hospital is the first public institution to be established in a new mining township. None so poor but will willingly contribute something towards its erection and support, for in the midst of heat, dust, and flies, it is the one and only asylum where the sick miner can look for proper medical attention and nursing—to say nothing of the refuge it affords from the residential discomfort and talk and excitement of a new mining field.

As soon as Will Monckton realized that he was in for a bout of fever, he arranged his affairs and entered himself as a paying patient at the hospital of the township nearest to the mine. He did not write to Melbourne, for he was afraid of frightening them, and he hoped that it would not be for long. He had been down with fever in South Africa, and knew that there was no help for it. Business and pleasure, in such a case, had both to stand aside, until restored health brought back the power to think, and speak, and do.

Circumstances, like stone walls, will, at such times, close around the whole sphere of a man's

activities. Every open door of life is suddenly closed. Letters and telegrams lie unopened, business must wait ; for disease, which is an out-birth of the emergence and principles of hell, has to be fought with all the knowledge and skill and determination of modern medical science, and there must be no intrusion, no interference by any one ; the conflict is to the death, and must be waged so as to give the patient every possible chance to recover.

Thus it came about that no reply was received in Melbourne to the urgent telegrams which told of the illness of Miss Monckton and her subsequent death and burial. At this time Will lay between life and death, for complications had set in which the hospital doctor found it difficult to diagnose and impossible to understand. Will's pulse was weak and rapid, his temperature very high, and his mind had passed from a state of excitement to delirium. He became confused as to his personal identity and his whole environment. He thought himself an army officer in South Africa. Some one had shut him up in a cave with a skeleton, and the walls all round were hung with red. He was regarded by all as a criminal, and the man who could exonerate him refused to speak.

While he was thus tossing in the throes of delirium and fever, message after message was wired up by the chief inspector ; but he, too, had to stand aside and wait. One day a local police-officer was allowed to enter the ward and look at him. Will was raving about South Africa, and the

report which the officer wired down to his chief satisfied that official that, urgent as this matter appeared to be, it would have to wait Lieutenant Monckton's recovery.

The position was no doubt a very uncommon one. There was no one, so far as the inspector knew, who could locate the 'drive,' containing the skeleton except Will Monckton, and he was absolutely incapacitated through sudden illness. But the inspector was not only upon his mettle to find out whether there had been foul play, and what had become of the five thousand recorded in the pocket-book; he was irritated that at that particular juncture he should be compelled as it were to sit down idly and wait. The delay was opposed to all his principles of action; the inquiries he had had made in Brisbane had elicited nothing of any value as evidence, although he had gone to considerable trouble over the matter.

Will Monckton had told him a good deal about Boswell Smart's affairs, and he was impatient to interview this great man in Melbourne; but he could hardly do so until he had disinterred, and examined the skeleton for himself. At last his impatience got the better of him, and in view of Monckton's protracted illness, he determined upon a plan, the abortive result of which the reader already knows.

It was he who secured the insertion in the newspapers of the paragraph which was sent to the Major. Will was now much better, however, and able to write; but he was not strong enough to travel, so the inspector had followed up his anony-



mous registered letter with the personal visit, in an assumed name, the very unsatisfactory outcome of which has been reported in a previous chapter.

It had, however, strengthened the chief inspector's preconceived ideas as to the Major's guilty knowledge of Miss St. Clair's death; but had not furnished him with any real evidence that might help to incriminate a man of wealth and influence, such as Boswell Smart evidently was. The whole case was, to the chief's mind, intricate and perplexing. If he attempted, on the evidence he had, to take action against a man like the Major, he knew that a clever criminal lawyer would simply tear his case into tatters. Nor was he at all sure that the Major's calm denial of any recollection of Miss St. Clair might not be true. Well-to-do men oftentimes have marvellously short memories, if you ask them to recall something that happened twenty or thirty years ago. There was nothing for it but to wait for Lieutenant Monckton's complete recovery, and then, under his direction, to exhume the skeleton.

In the meantime, the inspector took a detective named Dixon, who was at the head of the Criminal Investigation Department, into his confidence, and placed all the circumstances of the case before him.

'It may, of course, have been only an accident,' said the chief inspector, 'and if she went up to the mine alone, as seems to have been the case, to make or to verify some discovery personally, the fall of earth and subsequent suffocation may have been a simple mishap, quite unassociated with crime.'

'But,' said Dixon, 'what of this £5000 entered

as having been paid to Smart, in the pocket-book. Who has this money now? And how about Boswell Smart's reputed return from Queensland in 1883 as a well-to-do man?'

'Yes, £5000 supplies a motive for wrongdoing all right,' said the chief, 'it's a pity that we cannot trace it through the books of one of the banks.'

'I have seen to that,' replied Dixon, 'and had it looked up, both with Maxwell's and Boswell's accounts; the bank people grumbled a good bit over the trouble, but no trace of any £5000 could be found.'

'Well,' said the chief inspector, 'the present evidence is insufficient to prove either the committal of a crime, or that this Major was the Smart that acted as agent in Brisbane for Miss St. Clair. There is no proof that her agent was ever on the mine, and the only suggestion of fraud is this missing five thousand pounds. There is nothing more to be done except to exhume the skeleton, and see if any further clue can be obtained by an examination of the remains.'

Monckton was now a good deal better, and the exhumation was arranged for the following week; but he had a slight relapse, and the doctor would not consent to his taking the risk of the journey, so Trevor was instructed to conduct the police party to the 'drive' where were the remains discovered by the lieutenant.

The party included a Government medical officer, who carefully examined the position of the skeleton, as it lay in the drive. His opinion was that death was caused by suffocation, and was purely

accidental. Will was a witness at the inquest; but no reference was made to the memorandum found in the pocket-book, nor to the supposed loss of £5000. The verdict of the coroner was 'death by suffocation, through a fall of earth,' and he commented, at some length, upon the foolishness of people going alone into these death-traps, which were to be found on abandoned mine workings all over the country.

No mention was made of the discovery of cinna-  
bar in the drive, or of the lease that had been taken up by Will Monckton; the jewellery, including the three rings, was directed to be advertised, to see if any relative of the unknown deceased would claim them; but the general public took very little interest in the matter, for the story, as it appeared in the newspapers, did not in any way associate the woman's death with crime. But, as is not infrequently the case, there was a good deal known to the police which could not well be included in the evidence; for, before submitting evidence to a court of law, it must be known exactly what it is and what it is intended to prove.

The police had found an old telegram in cypher, in the bottom of the skirt pocket of the skeleton. It had been sent from Brisbane, on August 29, 1882, addressed to Miss St. Clair, Royal Hotel, Allandean, Queensland, and was coded as follows—

'Ewig fpatuojv fiaq ov vtusv vpuodda. Evamuvashpod  
uoz po ldum.  
Vtonma fooh ta fmoh. Hpiwaem zafov. Eet uoz zafpon.  
Vsant.'

This was evidently an ordinary code telegram,

such as is in common use among mining and commercial men, and is usually made by substituting one letter of the alphabet for another, in regular sequence.

Will had gone down to the Maguire station on the Riverina as a convalescent, for rest and change immediately after the inquest, for after hearing of his illness, Mrs. Maguire wrote him a most affectionate and motherly letter, urging him, as soon as he was strong enough, to come down at once, and she and Molly would nurse him back to health and strength. Will had his man with him, and somehow, in the hurry to get away, the chief inspector put off showing him the telegram. Probably he thought that it was something that he might keep to himself until he had deciphered it. Anyhow, Will journeyed to the New South Wales Riverina, without knowing anything about it.

The chief inspector determined, now that the skeleton was decently buried, not to hurry himself over things; but to probe, if possible, the mystery of the two Smarts, and the five thousand pounds, to the bottom. And he naturally first turned to the coded telegram; for he felt certain that it contained information which would throw light upon the case; but he spent hours trying to read it, using every combination of letters he could think of, unsuccessfully. The last word was no doubt the signature, and in the number of its letters it answered to the name 'Smart,' there was an a in the middle, and a t at the end; but every combination, and every rule he could think of or discover, broke down when applied only to this one

word. As for the body of the telegram, that was absolutely undecipherable by any arrangement of the letters that he could imagine. Usually, the key to unlock a coded telegram could be found by a careful analysis of the vowels which it contained ; but the vowels in this message answered to none of the ordinary rules by which they were supposed to be made intelligible.

He had typed copies of it made and handed around to some of the smartest men of the force ; but it served only to disorganize and unsettle them for their ordinary duties. Encyclopædias were searched, to discover all that is popularly known about cryptography ; but although the force added thereby to their general knowledge of the subject, it brought them no nearer to the deciphering of the message. It was tried with key words and without, and one man sat up all night, taking letter by letter of the alphabet, reading backwards and forwards, until his head and eyes ached with the strain, and his wife feared that such bewildering application might bring on brain fever, but the solution still evaded him. It was brought under the notice of college professors, who jauntily proposed to decipher it in the luncheon hour ; but the secret message to Miss St. Clair continued a secret.

The chief inspector had by this time wellnigh given it up as inscrutable, when he thought of Monckton, and wrote sending him a carefully-typed copy of it, and asking him if his knowledge of such things would enable him to suggest a key word, or letter, or any other guide, by which the telegram could be deciphered. He did not tell him how the

whole Queensland police force had failed to read it ; but asked him to send a wire if he could discover the key ; but not to make it so plain as to be understood by every one who might read his telegram.

Three days afterward he received the following wire, signed Lieutenant Monckton—

‘ Keep five unchanged, go by sea, and ’bout ship.’

The chief inspector read the telegram, re-read it, walked around his office, and then sat down, still looking at the mysterious message, and at last ejaculated : ‘ Well, I’m hanged ! ’

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE SECRET CYPHER

**E**VEN clever people, sometimes, cannot see things.

No outsider, unaware of the coded message to Miss St. Clair, could possibly have made sense of Will Monckton's telegram to the inspector of police ; but to him, it should have been as plain as a pikestaff. Yet he failed to see it.

'What in thunder,' he ejaculated, 'does Monckton mean? Keep five unchanged, go by sea, and 'bout ship.'

Just then Dixon came in, and the chief handed him the telegram. 'I can't make head or tail of it,' he said, 'but I haven't studied it carefully. I daresay it's plain enough, if one gave it a little thought. What do you make of it?'

It would have amused Will Monckton vastly, if he could have seen Detective Dixon just then.

As he first read the message, he pursed his lips ; he read it again, and frowned, at the same time twinkling his eyes ; a third time he read it with the forefinger of his left hand covering his lips, and a self-contained judicial expression upon the upper portion of his face. Then he said to the chief inspector—



'I wonder how Lieutenant Monckton found it out, and in so short a time, too.'

'But do *you* understand it?' asked the inspector.

'Pardon me, sir,' replied the detective, as though still thinking some portion of the message out. 'I think I'll write it down.'

A minute afterward he handed his superior officer a slip of paper which read as follows:—

Keep five unchanged, go by sea, and 'bout ship.  
The 5 vowels, Start at C. Turn words back  
to front.

'Yes, that looks all right,' said the Inspector; 'now how do you apply it to decipher the message?'

'Let us first take the alphabet,' said Dixon, writing it down rapidly upon a sheet of paper.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

'We have to keep the five vowels unchanged,' he said, so we will first write them down thus:—

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
A E I O U

'Start at c is the next direction, so, as a is already underwritten with the same vowel, we begin by putting c under b, which, passing over the vowels, gives us this:—

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
A C D F E G H J I K L M N P O Q R S T V U W X Y Z B

'The coded message received by Miss St. Clair was as follows:—Ewig fpatuojv fiaq ov vtusv vpuodda. Evamuvashpod uoz po ldum. Vtonma

fool at fmoh. Hpiwaem zafov. Eet uoz zaſpon. Vſant.'

'Now transpose each word, and you have the message ready to translate by the key. Thus :—

'Giwe vjoutapf qaif vo vsutv addoupv. Doph-savumave zou op mudl. Amnotv hoof at homf. Meawiph vofaz. Tee zou nopfaz. Tnasv.'

'A bit complicated, but a clever cryptograph, not likely to be readily discovered even by an expert,' continued Dixon.

'But what about the reading of the message?' said the Chief, who had been following Dixon with no little interest.

'That will be easy enough now; you call it over to me, and I will give you the corresponding letter from the key,' said the detective.

'G i w e,' called out the Chief.

'Above g is f,' said Dixon, 'the vowel i stands; that's fi; w is under v, and the vowel e, of course, stands good. The first word of the secret message, then, is "Five."'

'Very good,' exclaimed the Chief Inspector, who partly guessed what was coming, for the next word had eight letters in it. 'I will now give you the four first letters of the next word: v j o u.'

'The vowel stands,' responded Dixon, 'so that gives us "thou" for the first four letters.'

'T a p f,' called out the Chief.

'"Sand,"' replied Dixon as he picked out the corresponding letters.

'Then the first two words of the telegram are "Five thousand,"' said the Chief. 'I will write that down.'

It will readily be imagined how this reference by the message to the entry in Miss St. Clair's pocket-book excited both the officers.

'Take the next word,' said the Chief, "'q a i f.'"

"'Paid,'" called out Dixon. "'Five thousand paid.'"

'V o,' read the Chief.

"'To,'" responded Dixon.

'V s u t v,' said the Inspector, and awaited the translation with special interest.

"'Trust,'" answered Dixon.

'A d d o u p v,' said the Chief quietly, for this was the last word of the first sentence.

"'Account,'" replied the detective.

'Then the translation of the first sentence,' said the Chief, as he wrote it down, 'is: "Five thousand paid to trust account."'

The two looked at each other for fully a quarter of a minute, and then the Chief said: 'Then this agent acknowledges receipt of this woman's money. What an awful pity that we could not decipher this before the inquest! But let's go on, there's a big word starting the next sentence:—

'D o p h s a v u m a v e.'

"'Congratulate,'" replied Dixon, spelling out the word from the key.

In their impatience to read the message, the two officers had now come close together, and seeing that the three next words were short ones, Dixon read them from the telegram form, and translated them as follows:—Z o u, "you"; o p, "on"; mudl, "luck."'

"'Congratulate you on your luck,'" said the Chief as he wrote it with the former sentence. 'Then this agent had not only received £5,000 in trust

from Miss St. Clair, but he also knew of her discovery of the cinnabar lode.'

'Go on, please,' said Dixon excitedly.

'A m n o t v h o o f a t h o m f,' read the Chief Inspector.

Dixon was getting more expert at it now, and translated promptly: "'Almost good as gold.'"

'M e a w i p h v o f a z,' read the Chief.

"Leaving to-day," translated Dixon.

'T e e z o u n o p f a z,' was the last sentence.

"See you Monday," called out Dixon; 'and now for the signature!'

'T n a s v,' said the Chief.

'That reads, "Smart,"' exclaimed the detective in triumph.

'So in plain English,' commented the Chief, 'Smart, on August 29, 1882, wired to Miss St. Clair, at the *Royal Hotel*, Allandean, from Brisbane, as follows:—"Five thousand paid to trust account. Congratulate you on luck. Almost good as gold. Leaving to-day. See you Monday."'

'The question now is,' continued the Chief thoughtfully, 'which of these two Smarts sent this telegram: Maxwell or Boswell? For whichever one of them it was, he kept the £5,000; he knew of her disappearance, and almost to a certainty of her death in that drive.'

'I wonder,' said Dixon again, with seeming irrelevancy, 'how Lieutenant Monckton knew the secret key of this cryptogram. I'll swear that he never found it out in the few hours which intervened between his receiving the telegram and wiring back to you.'

'I'll write to him,' said the Chief, 'and see.'

## CHAPTER XXXII

### OBERON STATION

THERE are stations and stations in Australia, and as many varieties of them as there are of most other things ; but the difference between an up-to-date sheep station and the way-back cattle-station, which has been so much written about in popular fiction, is as great as that which distinguishes a high-class city dressmaker's establishment from a saw-mill.

A modern sheep station produces and manipulates a delicate and costly material, with ordered processes that work with the regularity and smoothness of a well oiled machine ; while the other reeks with sweating beasts, and hides and tallow, and rushing mobs of mustered cattle, and galloping horsemen and cracking stockwhips, and long hard dusty rides through wild and often only partially watered country.

The latter features the wild rough Australia of the past, which is being pushed farther and farther back into the 'never-never country,' while the former is the outcome of what Science has taught Agriculture in modern days. It is not for us to decry the rough old squatting period, which created

the stalwart resourceful bushman of the Southern Continent ; but first work is always rough work, and on the foundations laid by hardy pioneers there has arisen a new order, with whom Science, machinery and intellect hold sway.

Mrs. Madge Maguire was as proud of her station as a peacock of its beautiful tail. For money making it was a veritable gold mine ; but more than that, it was a splendid monument of her late husband's enterprise, and she never wearied of pointing out its many excellencies to visitors.

The property was only some fifteen thousand acres ; it was all freehold, within easy distance of a railway station, and was arranged and managed with such forethought and skill as made it the envy and admiration of the country-side.

The late Charley Maguire, in the early days, had imported a pure-bred Vermont merino ram from a famous American stud at a cost of one thousand guineas ; and elsewhere, at what people then regarded as monstrous prices, he had bought a number of imported pure-bred Lincoln ewes. Other high-priced animals were added, and the outcome of it all was great flocks of a special breed of sheep known as the Oberon strain, which not only cut heavy fleeces of high-priced wool, but produced animals which commanded big figures in markets outside Australia. No rams were, on any account, sold within the Commonwealth ; for it had been the aim of Mrs. Maguire's late husband to produce something that should not only be super-excellent, but unique and exclusively his own.

The lady's manager, Mr. Moore, had been reared

upon the station and trained under the late owner ; and if he had himself owned the property he could not have been more interested in its working and success. Every detail of the business was at his fingers' ends, and the many employés working upon the station looked up to him as one worthy of fullest confidence and respect. No shepherds or shepherds' dogs were kept on 'Oberon' to knock the sheep about ; but the whole property was divided by fences into numerous paddocks, many of them laid down with artificial grasses, which radiated from the large central wool shed. If any animals showed signs of sickness, they were at once drafted into a hospital paddock ; and so complete was the system of management that people came from far to see how things were done on the station. This was only one of Mrs. Maguire's properties ; so it is no wonder that Major Smart thought it good policy to try to arrange a marriage between his son Bob and Molly Maguire.

The big stone house, built in the midst of gardens and shrubberies, was on the high bank of the river, clear of floods, as was every acre of the station, and from the upper windows were views of distant hills and cultivated scenery, for the place was surrounded for miles on the west by vast wheat paddocks and fertile farms. In harvest time it was a wondrous sight to look from Oberon House over miles of standing corn waving like a great golden sea as the wind swept over it.

Within the residence water was everywhere laid on, lifted from ever-flowing wells into elevated tanks by powerful self-regulating windmills. The gardens



and orchard were irrigated from the river. The many rooms of the large house were lit with electricity, and from the telephone in the hall they could ring up either Sydney or Melbourne. Mrs. Maguire had built a picture gallery and ball-room in one adjoining the billiard-room ; and in no particular was there any difference between the station homestead management when the family were there and the household management of the Maguires' big residence in town. Molly was of opinion that there was more style about things in the country, what with afternoon calls and house parties, and the longer time that they had in which to dress for dinner ; and when Oberon was full of visitors, it was as brightly lit and gay and attractive as any house of equal size in Melbourne.

Oberon Station was only one of hundreds of similar country residences in the settled districts of the Commonwealth.

It seems necessary to emphasize this, as the average reader, led away by the common descriptions of station life met with in books, may find it hard to conceive the refinement and luxury of the average sheep-station homestead. In some respects Oberon was no doubt unique, for order and cleanliness were very prominent virtues under Mr. Moore's management ; he had proved how well they paid, and in consequence the whole place had benefited by the absence of flies and other obnoxious insects, which are mostly the accompaniment of carelessness and dirt.

It was the after-dinner hour, a few weeks following Will's arrival, and all were gathered on the

broad western verandah of the house which overlooked the river. It was the favourite summer after-dinner meeting-place. The sun was near its setting, but harvesting was in full swing upon the distant wheat paddocks that filled the western landscape. The strippers and harvesting machines worked as long as it was light, and voices and sounds frequently reached them from the distance. A cod-fish occasionally jumped from the water in eager pursuit of some smaller fish or tempting insect, and the muffled throb of the engine of a motor-boat could be heard to the north, coming down stream. It was a scene of restfulness and peace.

Will Monckton, with Mr. Moore and Tommy, were standing watching the distant harvesting, the last through a powerful pair of field glasses. It was four months now since the death of Miss Monckton ; but Will showed no anxiety to go to Melbourne to see 'The Firs,' which had now become his property, or to interview the Major. The lassitude which follows malarial fever still clung to him, and Mrs. Maguire had just been advising him to take a sea-trip, as the best thing to set him right.

'Where would you have me go?' asked Will, as he lit a cigarette and settled down in a big wicker chair.

'Go? Why, go to South Africa, and come back by the next boat; you could do the return trip in eight weeks or less.'

'I'll think about it,' said Will, who was watching Molly, who had taken the glass from her brother, and was looking across the plain at an object he was pointing out to her.

'What is it, Molly?' asked Will.

'There's a car coming, with a cloud of dust behind it, being driven at a furious rate. Tommy says it's B. B. ; but there seems to be a lady with him.'

The whole party had now risen to their feet, for the car was swinging around to the bridge road and was evidently bound for the station.

'You're right, Tom,' said Molly. 'It's B. B., and his sister Etty with him. The idea of their putting in an appearance after dinner like this. We'll have to put them up, mother, they can't go back to the Boltons' to-night.'

'I cannot think how their mother allows them to scamper over the country in such a fashion,' said Mrs. Maguire ; 'the Major never did look after his family ; but Bob seems to do exactly as he pleases now. Is it at Albury they're staying, Molly?'

'They're at the Boltons,' replied Molly ; 'that's a long way this side of Albury. They rang me up on the telephone yesterday ; but here they come.'

'Hallo, Bob!' was Molly's greeting ; 'and you've Etty with you, too. Why didn't you come in time for dinner?'

Will watched Molly closely, for he knew of the planning and scheming that had been going on in the Smart family to bring these two together. Somehow he felt so old and staid since his illness, that with the suspicions which had entered his life about the Major, it was as though a dozen years had been added to his age. Molly seemed changed too, he thought. She was more reserved and diffident, and although kind to him and attentive to his wants as a convalescent, was far less free and caressing in

her way than of old. But Bob was evidently to her no more than Bob had ever been, so Will felt relieved. He was beginning to fear that he had been away too long, and should have written to Molly more often.

'How's the pater and mater, Bob?' asked Will.

'All right, thank you, when last we heard about them. We were all awfully sorry to hear of your illness up north. You don't look too well on it now; but you ought soon to buck up here. We wanted to see you; that's mostly what brought us over, and also, by the way, there were two telegrams for you at the post-office. They were going to ring up and see if they should send them over, but I said that I would run across with them myself. We did it just under the hour, and are thinking of going back by moonlight. It'll be as light as day presently, and it will be a jolly run through the wheat paddocks. But here are the telegrams.'

As Will took the telegrams, Molly, with Etty Smart, came up to him, hand in hand. They had been schoolgirls together, and country hospitality is more hearty than town. She was trying to persuade her to remain over night.

'We've the motor-boat down at the landing,' said Molly, 'and we can all go for a trip down river to the township. It's harvest-moon, and going to be a perfect night. You persuade her, Will, to stay.'

'You'll have to talk to Bob,' said Etty, who was a bright girl of sixteen. 'He runs the show . . . I mean the motor-car.'

'Oh, he'll stay,' said Will.

While the young people were in the dining-room,

having something to eat, Will read his telegrams. The first was from the Chief Inspector, and was as follows :—

‘ Have read message ; but how did you find key so promptly ? ’

The second gave him no small surprise ; it was signed ‘ Maxwell Smart,’ and read : ‘ Calling to see you at Oberon to-morrow morning.’

‘ Dated from Goulburn,’ said Will to himself ; ‘ he’s evidently on the mail train. He must have heard about me in Brisbane. I wonder if he knows much ? ’

He showed both telegrams to Mrs. Maguire, who was evidently in his confidence : all she answered was : ‘ I told you so.’

‘ I’ll go with you down the river,’ said Will, ‘ and, Bob and Etty, you’d better stay and sleep here to-night, they all want you to, and come with us in the boat. It will suit me splendidly ; for I want to send an answer to one of these wires.’

The message he telegraphed to the Chief Inspector in Queensland was as follows :—

‘ Knew it at sight. Belongs to the Major. Uses same code in business now.’

‘ That’ll give them something to think about,’ said Will mentally. ‘ I won’t say anything about Maxwell Smart ; they must know of his arrival, or he could not have found me out. He seems to have dropped

somewhere from the clouds. It looks as if there were a storm brewing for the Major. When the police get hold of a thing, they keep it moving.'

The girls made Will occupy the most comfortable seat in the boat, as he was an invalid, and Molly sat beside him, with Etty on the other side. Tom and Bob contented themselves with keeping a look-out for snags, and assisting the man with the engine and steering. Mrs. Maguire had excused herself, so with jests and laughter, they started for the run to the township.

It was one of those dreamy summer nights made for enjoyment, when moon and stars, in Austral skies, as in the Orient, bend enamoured over the earth, as though to teach animate creation how to love. The girls sang soft tuneful melodies they had learned at school, and the boys imitated the call of night-birds and cry of nocturnal animals, laughing when their skill called forth an answer from the bush. In places the river banks were lined with willows and other trees, and Molly's hand and Will's would now and again coyly touch each other; once they would have grasped with a friendly grip; but now they touched and then withdrew. Will was hesitant and nervous, and Molly, awakened, was as frightened as a fawn.

That night, in her own room, Molly cried, and called Will hard and selfish. She did not know whether he was not too old and staid to care for a laughter-loving girl like Molly Maguire. Why could

not people always keep young and happy? But Molly was growing more serious, and the whole current of her thoughts showed that she was not quite heart-whole.

As for Will, he told himself repeatedly that there was no other woman in the world for him but Molly Maguire; and yet he not very wisely determined not to speak, or take further steps to win her, until this business with Boswell Smart was settled, one way or the other; but there were disclosures coming which he had not reckoned upon, and possibly he counted too confidently upon the loyalty of a young girl's love.



## CHAPTER XXXIII

### MAXWELL SMART'S STORY

ON his arrival the following morning, Maxwell Smart was shown into the library.

Will expected, from the description given of him by the Secretary of the Brisbane Musical Society, to meet a rough dark man ; but when he entered the library, to his surprise, there rose to greet him a gentleman whose hair was as white as snow.

Monckton was so surprised that for a moment he faced his visitor in silence.

'Lieutenant Monckton, I presume?' said the gentleman in a full deep voice ; 'you received my wire, I hope.'

'Pardon me,' exclaimed Will, 'are you Maxwell Smart? I am greatly pleased to see you ; but I expected to meet some one different from you.'

'You expected me to be dark, with almost black hair,' said Maxwell Smart, smiling.

'That was certainly the description which Mr. Finch of Brisbane gave me of you,' said Will frankly.

'Ah! but I've lived for fifteen years in New Guinea since then, and the experiences men pass through there turn many a black head grey.'

'Let us sit down,' said Will. 'I was very pleased

to receive your telegram—I cannot tell you how pleased, for I had given up all hope of ever meeting you ; and even now I can scarcely hope that after so many years you can throw much light upon the matter of which, no doubt, you have read or heard.’

‘ I believe that I can tell you all you want to know, and perhaps more, about the late Miss Dorothy St. Clair and Captain Alex McDuff, and also Boswell Smart.’

‘ You surprise me,’ ejaculated Will, who was fairly staggered by this announcement.

‘ There is really nothing astonishing about it. You know that we belonged to the same Musical Society ; well, I lived for several months at the same hotel with them, and we were on very friendly terms. As for McDuff, it was his schooner that, for years, brought me my stores, and carried away my produce from New Guinea, and it was I who gave him an introduction to Boswell Smart. Not that I wanted to do so ; but Smart was the only man I knew in Melbourne, and McDuff worried me to give him an introduction.’

‘ Did you know of Miss St. Clair’s death while you were in Brisbane ? ’ asked Will eagerly.

‘ No, I could not have known of that, or her body would have been searched for on the mines ; but I knew of her disappearance, and I knew that Boswell Smart knew something more than he would tell.’

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Maguire entered.

‘ Introduce me, Will,’ she said.

The men had both risen, and Maxwell Smart was introduced.

'Mr. Smart,' said Mrs. Maguire, 'there's tea, coffee, wine and a snack to eat in the breakfast-room. Bring your friend in, Will, and have something to eat before you spoil your appetites by talking. It's hours since breakfast, and Mr. Maxwell Smart has had a long ride.'

Over fragrant tea and coffee explanations were entered into. Mr. Smart was introduced to Molly, and they found him to be a travelled gentleman, and in no way related to the Major.

'I left Brisbane,' he explained, 'near the end of 1882, toured the Southern Colonies, and visited the West; then I went to Europe. I had done well in mining, mostly in North Glanmire and Golden Crown shares in Gympie; but I was never a mining agent, nor had I ever an office in Macpherson Street. My plan was to visit the mines, get to know something about them personally, and then invest. I went into the Golden Crown and took up several thousand shares before they touched the blue slate. It was in that mine, and in the Wilmot Extended, that Miss St. Clair made so much money; but she brought a fair amount of money with her from Ballarat, when she first came to Queensland in 1880. I went in for rubber afterward in New Guinea, and did well. I am on my way back to England now, to spend the rest of my days where I was born, if I can stand the climate.'

'You heard about me, I suppose, from the Chief Inspector of Police in Brisbane?' suggested Will, after a pause.

'No,' replied Smart. 'I saw an account of the inquest, and read your very remarkable evidence,

and I was bound to see you after that. I called at your hotel in Brisbane ; it was from them that I obtained the address to which your letters were being forwarded. I knew Miss St. Clair, and naturally wanted to see you. After her disappearance I called upon a relation of hers in Ballarat ; that was in '82. I think the good lady was her aunt. She told me that there were some other relatives at Bendigo. She was much distressed over the disappearance, and advertised for her in the Melbourne papers. She wrote to Boswell Smart too ; but he replied saying that he knew nothing about her.'

There was an embarrassing minute or two after this ; a servant had entered, as Mrs. Maguire had rung the bell.

'Let us go into the library again, where there are both cigars and cigarettes,' said the Lieutenant. As they passed out together, he gave Mrs. Maguire a significant glance, for he knew that she very much wished to hear what Maxwell Smart had to say.

Will himself preferred to have another listener to his visitor's story, for he had already found out that Maxwell Smart proposed to leave Adelaide by the mail steamer in about a fortnight, and sooner if necessary, for he had no intention of being detained to give evidence in a criminal case against his namesake. Yet he was more than willing to submit all the facts to Monckton, and the latter thought that it would strengthen his position to have another to hear what he had to say, and Mrs. Maguire had a singularly good memory for gossip.

Closing the library door, he drew a comfortable arm-chair forward for his guest, and placed

cigars, cigarettes, and matches on a table near by.

'Help yourself, Mr. Smart,' he said; 'I would recommend the Havannahs if you are a good smoker.' After a pause, he continued: 'Now I want to ask you something. The lady of this house has been a widow for some years, and has known me ever since childhood; in fact, in many ways she has been a mother to me. I should tell you, perhaps, that the Smarts, Maguires and Moncktons have been shipmates and friends for two, and in part three, generations. You may guess, from things which have already been dropped, that we neither admire nor trust Boswell Smart; he is a rich and influential man; but if he has defrauded or wronged any one, we are willing to help if possible to put it right; but we will not be parties to any public exposure or criminal action. As you are going to England, you will be out of the way of everything, and it is those who remain in Australia that will have to do, or help to do, what Justice requires.'

'That is very true,' said Maxwell, lighting a cigar; 'but proceed, there is something more you wish to say.'

'It is this,' said Will. 'I would like Mrs. Maguire to hear all that you have to tell me; so that when you are gone I may have some one to advise with, who could help me to remember, and if necessary, corroborate what I may say about this interview.'

'I think, Lieutenant, you are very wise,' said Maxwell, 'and I shall be pleased to take both Mrs. Maguire and yourself into my confidence. The long and friendly relationship which has existed between your families really gives her a certain right to share

your knowledge and confidence, and the lady herself is so evidently capable and well informed, that she would be a valuable adviser and coadjutor in the matter. Pray assure her that it is my desire that she should hear personally what I have to say.'

Mrs. Maguire was most gracious; she liked to make a good impression, and her presence and conversation had done that with Maxwell Smart; and a few minutes afterwards she and Will Monckton were listening with eager interest to their visitor's story.

'When first I met Boswell Smart in 1880 in Queensland, he was a bit pressed for money, so I lent him three hundred pounds for three months on the security of some mining scrip, which he assured me was worth at least five hundred pounds. We were staying at the same hotel, and I did it more as a friendly act than as a piece of business. I had several thousand at the time lying in the bank for investment, and as I was new to Queensland, I thought that if I did him a good turn, he might put me on to something worth while. A fortnight afterwards I inquired of a sharebroker, and found that the market value of the scrip was about fifty pounds.'

Mrs. Maguire shrugged her shoulders and looked across at Will. 'They were Golden Crowns,' she said; 'he told me about that.'

'I don't remember what they were,' continued Maxwell, 'but when settling day came, the scrip was worth thirty-five shillings per share. He sold two hundred of them and took up his bill. I remember that when he paid me he said: "I was on my last dollar, Maxwell, when you lent me that three

hundred ; but it's better to be born lucky than rich ; as the old proverb says. I am glad that you have not suffered by me."'

'What did he mean?' asked Will eagerly.

'I asked him, but he said: "Oh, never mind!"'

'Shortly after that he took an office in Macpherson Street, and I wanted a place to write, and offered to join him, and pay half the rent ; but he refused to share the office with me. When I expostulated, he said: "It would be all right for me, old man, but perhaps not for you." I found out afterward that pretty well every person he did business with somehow came to grief. I have often wondered how I managed to escape.'

'Have you ever thought out a reason for it?' asked Will.

'I've thought it out often enough, but never arrived at a conclusion about one of the strangest things I ever met with in a man.'

'However,' he continued, 'it was just at this time, when Boswell was on his feet, and quite an attractive, well-dressed man, that Miss Dorothy St. Clair came to Queensland from Yictoria. She brought a letter of introduction to Boswell Smart. She was a fine, handsome, dashing sort of a girl, about six and twenty, the only daughter of a lucky Ballarat miner, and seemed to have plenty of money, and astonishing foresight or luck. She brought a maid with her, and stayed for some time at the hotel, and got very friendly with both of us ; she said that she took to us through the similarity of our names ; but Boswell was her favourite.'

'What year was this in?' asked Mrs. Maguire.



‘The end of 1880,’ said Maxwell. ‘She took a cottage after that, and furnished it in style, and Boswell went to live with her. She wanted me to go too, but something prevented me. She gave capital little dinners, and used to entertain a good deal. I remember her telling us one night that she had a singular dream in her girlhood about a mine . . . a mine of red mineral in a Queensland mountain, worth as much as gold. She said that it was that dream of her girlhood that induced her to come to Queensland.’

‘Good heavens!’ exclaimed Will, ‘what a remarkable thing. She found it—and it cost her her life!’

‘Yes,’ said Maxwell reflectively, ‘but she was wonderfully lucky. I remember an old fellow came down from Gympie. He was in the hospital with a sort of jaundice, and was down on his luck. He held eight thousand shares in the Wilmot Extended, and they were making penny monthly calls. You know, Mrs. Maguire, Gympie was a regular working man’s gold field; some of the mines made halfpenny fortnightly calls, and men would be working on one mine and paying calls into another; sometimes backing their fancy, until, although earning good wages, they denied themselves and their families the very necessities of life; but when gold was struck, many of them would become quite well-to-do. They were stirring times, believe me!’

‘But to go back to my story, this chap was well-nigh broke, and he begged Miss St. Clair to take five thousand shares off his hands for £5, as he would only have to forfeit them, not being able

to pay the calls. They were in blue slate then, and he was confident that they would strike gold under three months. Well, she gave him £50 for them, and that enabled him to pay up the calls on the remaining three thousand. She was only asked to pay two penny calls when they struck gold, and a few months afterward she sold out at two pounds three shillings per share. It was after that she made Boswell Smart her business agent, and they were always together, and people thought he would marry her ; but he did not, and for a very good reason, although it was not generally known even in Melbourne . . . he'd been married before.

‘ She had a fine voice, and was really a very attractive woman, and I used to pity them both, for they were evidently in love with each other ; but Boswell was reaping some of the wild oats he had sown in his youth. We all belonged to the Musical Society, and I used often to go to the cottage to practise. I called there one night, and found the front door open. We were very free and easy, and I was going in, when I heard a sound of some one crying, and then I heard a kiss. I stepped back on to the mat outside and glanced through the French-light into the room. Boswell had her in his arms. That was the last time I saw her alive. Within a fortnight after that she had disappeared.’

‘ And do you mean to tell me that Major Boswell Smart ought not to be compelled to explain what he knows about the death of this woman ? ’ asked Mrs. Maguire indignantly. ‘ Why, that piece of evidence alone would be enough for a magistrate to send him to a jury.’

‘ Let Mr. Maxwell finish his story,’ said Will, who was also very much moved at what he heard.

‘ She and Boswell Smart left town together the following morning,’ continued Maxwell, ‘ and he was away several days. I thought he looked upset when he returned, and when I inquired after Miss Dorothy, as I used to call her, he said she was looking after some miners she had at work prospecting. My own belief now is that she was then dead ; but a few days after he told me that he had had a letter from her saying that she had gone back overland to Victoria, and did not intend to return.

‘ I thought it strange that she should have left her cottage and furniture, like that ; but I put it down to some quarrel or misunderstanding that they had had. However, I was very busy getting ready to leave myself, and I only heard that, as her agent, he had advertised the cottage for sale. I believe he sold it furnished as it stood. I left then for the Southern States and the Old Country, and was astonished on arriving in Melbourne to read a paragraph in the newspaper to the effect that a Miss Dorothy St. Clair had disappeared. I wrote to Boswell Smart at once, but received no answer. Of course it may have come after I left.

‘ Well, I was so upset over it, that I ran up to Ballarat and found out a relation, an aunt ; but, as I have said, she had been the only surviving child, and both her parents were dead. I found out, too, that she had had an elder brother, but he was dead, and had left a widow and one daughter, fairly well provided for, in Bendigo. I’m a careful man, and don’t like to assert things that I cannot absolutely

prove, but I feel *almost* confident that Boswell Smart knows more about Dorothy St. Clair's death than he owns up to, and that he also knows a good deal about her money.'

'Well, you may be *quite* confident,' said Will, in a harsh voice, very unlike his usual tone. 'Did you hear anything about an old telegram being found in a pocket of the skirt which covered the bones of the skeleton?'

'No,' said Maxwell; 'there was no mention of one in the papers.'

'The police found it,' said Will; 'it was in cypher. In the selfsame cypher which Major Boswell Smart now uses. Here is a copy of it. Notice, it was sent from Brisbane, addressed to her at the *Royal Hotel*, Allendeau, on August 29, 1882.'

Maxwell Smart read the copy, and then, in his excitement, stood up and read it again aloud:

'Five thousand paid to trust account. Congratulate you on luck. Almost as good as gold. Leaving to-day. See you Monday. Smart.'

'Then she wasn't dead when he came back; but he must have known about the discovery of the cinabar.' Maxwell stood there, staring at the words of the telegram as though dazed; and then, dropping into his chair again, exclaimed: 'He may have murdered her!'

'I don't think he did that,' said Will; 'but he certainly knew where to look for her. With criminal intent, he left her lying dead in that drive, where she was suffocated, and with that guilty knowledge, possessed himself of her property, and left Queensland for Victoria.'

Mrs. Maguire had listened, with white lips, to the latter portion of Maxwell Smart's story. 'It's no wonder,' she said in a low voice, 'that he has such awful dreams. His wife told me one day, some years ago, that he had sat up in the bed the previous night with his hands to his throat, as though he were choking. He could not get his breath and seemed suffocating, and he was still asleep. She shook him and threw water on his face before she could bring him to consciousness. When he came to, he gasped out, "It's frightful, I've had it several times before. I dreamt that I had swallowed a bunch of keys."' '

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### HOUNDS THAT HAD SCENTED BLOOD

MAXWELL SMART looked at Mrs. Maguire, and nodded his head, as much as to say : ' I'm not surprised,' but after a minute's pause, he continued—

' I could, of course, tell you a great deal more ; but this will explain a good deal of what you wanted to know. This telegram, however, is conclusive ; if the police have that in their possession, Boswell Smart won't be long out of gaol.'

' I am not so sure about that,' said Monckton, ' the chief inspector of Queensland police has already seen and interviewed the Major, and he owned up to me in Brisbane that the Major completely bowled him out. You're the man the chief inspector wants as a witness ; but they can't find you, and you don't want to be found.'

' That's so,' said Maxwell ; ' but he ought to be brought to justice, and made to refund his ill-gotten gains.'

' I don't believe you know half,' said Mrs. Maguire, scowling at the very thought of a certain Duck Company ; ' punished indeed, he ought to be hanged, only that would disgrace his family and all associ-

ated with him, and that we can't afford. Why, my late husband's father, and the lieutenant's father, and his father, were all shipmates. We could never hold up our heads again !'

Maxwell smiled, he was beginning to know Mrs. Maguire better, and he did not exactly recognize such a relationship as she did ; but Will Monckton was restless to hear more.

' Will you tell us what you know about the Major's business transactions with Captain McDuff and his late widow ? The captain was lost at sea, and the widow died in the precincts of the Major's office. By the way, I hear that the Hon. Ebenezer Gammage asserts that she died in his office, and that it was the Major who moved the corpse into his board room, where it was discovered ; but you can't depend upon him, you know what members of parliament are ; they'll not move in any matter likely to give the other side a chance of asking awkward questions at election meetings.'

' I know nothing of what has happened in Melbourne,' said Maxwell, ' but I can tell a strange story about Captain McDuff and his discoveries in the Northern Territory, only there's not time to-day for more of it than specially concerns the Major. I read of the singular death of Mrs. McDuff from heart failure. I believe, by the way, that the late captain has a brother, living at a place called Seldom Seen in Victoria ; if he is still alive, he's next of kin, and should come into a tidy bit of property.'

' I met the man,' said Will, ' on the " Echo Consolidated Mines ; " he is known at Seldom Seen as " The Wooler," he told me that it was he who originally



discovered those mines ; but Boswell Smart did him out of it.'

'I can quite believe it,' said Maxwell hotly—'it's damnable—pardon me Mrs. Maguire, but it stirs my blood to think of the way people have suffered, and been cheated and despoiled to make this man rich—I understand that he is now worth something like half a million, and if the truth is known, I expect that not a tenth of that great sum has been made by him in honest business, and not a twentieth by personal exertion either of hand or brain. But he ought to be compelled to make restitution. There are relations of Miss St. Clair, who ought to have had her property, and the captain's brother and his wife's people ought to be provided for.'

'He is trying now to get the better of the lieutenant here over Miss Monckton's property,' said Mrs. Maguire grimly.

'Oh, I shall put him straight over that,' said Will, 'as soon as I feel strong enough to tackle him.'

'You'll let him rob you right and left, that's what you'll do,' reiterated Mrs. Maguire, 'I'm about the only one that ever got satisfaction out of him.'

'How was that?' asked Maxwell Smart, with interest.

'Oh, I thrashed him with a stick ; but that's a thing of the past. I did not get any money out of him.'

'Well, there's one thing I will do, before I leave Australia,' said Maxwell, 'I'll find out Captain McDuff's brother, and the Victorian relations of Dorothy St. Clair, and then see Boswell Smart

personally, and if possible, frighten him into making some reparation to the people he has robbed and otherwise injured.'

'Robbed,' said Will, 'no doubt that's the plain English of it, and look here, sir, I'm heaps better than I was, and I happen to know a lawyer in Melbourne who is not only long-headed, but as straight as a die. I'll come down with you, and we'll see if we can't clean the Major's slate for him. It's my opinion that many of these get-rich-quick chaps would have more peace of mind and do less harm in the community, if some one took them by the throat and compelled them to disgorge.'

'That's the only way to deal with the Major,' exclaimed Mrs. Maguire, who felt that she could keep quiet no longer. 'I've often wanted to shake him or shoot him for his mean despicable ways. He's not like a man who loses with others through misfortune. Other peoples' loss is always Boswell Smart's gain. Not a man or woman has died, that he has had anything to do with, but he has somehow benefited, and I don't suppose the law can touch him; these people who know how to rob and cheat within the law, are the most dangerous to the community.'

'It's my belief though,' said Maxwell Smart, 'that the law can and will touch him, if not for a criminal offence, in the civil courts; and I'd like to see him cross-examined by a capable barrister. I fancy there would be some revelations. My goodness, if men were in some occult way put under compulsion to tell out all they really know,

what revelations there would be! And if some power could force men to restore what they have wrested unfairly from others, what big estates would be burst up; and how many who are now rich would be made poor! But this is only talk, the world will go on much as it is until the Millennium, and all that can be done with it is to make the best of a bad business. What we have in hand now is to get the best we can out of a bad man, without taking him into the police court.'

The result of this interview was that the following day Lieutenant Monckton and Maxwell Smart went by train together to Melbourne.

In the meantime the Major had read an account of the inquest in a Queensland paper with much satisfaction. He felt that a load was taken off his mind. He noted that nothing was said about any property or money which the dead woman might have had. His name was not brought in, so evidently nothing had been found to connect him with the woman or the tragedy. He had carefully destroyed everything, so far as he could, that might implicate him, and evidently with success. The verdict of the court, of accidental death by suffocation through a fall of earth, was the only one that could be entered on the evidence, and Boswell Smart for some time held his head higher than ever; was more scornful of less fortunate people; believed more in the power of money; laughed at his fears of the old fetish with its skeleton—now decently buried by order of the court—and exulted in his invincible good fortune. He decided, now that this was settled, to complete preparatory arrange-

ments he had entered into for the purchase of a large city property, extending between two of the principal streets. It would cost him nearly two hundred thousand; but his scheme was to create a great new city thoroughfare, to be known as the 'Smart Arcade,' and he calculated on a return from rents that would reimburse him for his whole expenditure in five years.

His castles in the air of becoming fabulously rich, seemed to be getting strong foundations under them. He thought of many incidents, however, which, if he could have struck out of his past without losing the proceeds they had brought to him, he would gladly have obliterated. But his usual reply to such uninvited thoughts was: 'A man must take risks to make money quickly.'

But his exultation was of short duration, for if the wicked flee when none pursue, how much more when glimpses are caught of shadowy forms that follow at a distance! Quite a pack of sleuth hounds was on the Major's track, and in the silent night watches, while others slept, he often awoke with a start, as though he heard the deep baying of hounds that had scented blood. He trembled and went hot and cold by turns when he reflected that quite half a dozen people must now be upon his trail, and a new voice had lately joined them. It was not the Brisbane police, for he knew that, and it seemed to have grown fainter in the distance; but this new voice he seemed to dread more than all the others, it was that of one he had not seen for seven-and-twenty years, and he heard it with icy terror. He had many a time wished that he was dead. Others had

died. He had gone to New Guinea. Why could not he die? Surely he must be dead!

He had a strange experience shortly after this. He was looking from the window of his office in the afternoon; when, standing upon the pavement opposite, he saw a man talking to a well-dressed lady-like girl. They turned as he approached the window, and seemed to be looking up, as though speaking about him.

'My God!' he ejaculated, 'I must be going mad. No, it's Maxwell Smart and Dorothy St. Clair, dressed as they used to dress in Brisbane, seven-and-twenty years ago.'

They turned and walked down the street; his eyes were glued to the window-pane. 'The same walk!' he ejaculated. 'No one walked like her!'

Then he turned into the apartment and laughed strangely, and called himself a frightened fool. 'It's pure coincidence,' he stammered out. 'How could they be the same after all these years? Had she lived, she would be a woman now of over fifty years, and he would, of course, be very different to what he was when I knew him. I've heard of such things happening before; but it's strange that I should have seen Maxwell with her. It must have been an optical illusion; these things are sometimes quite unaccountable. I am staying too much indoors and letting things prey upon my mind; I must go out more. They can do nothing in Brisbane, for they evidently have no evidence, and it's nearly thirty years ago. Who was it that said: "We make our own spectres, and clothe them with our own fears?"'

He got his hat and gloves and gold-headed cane

and told his clerk that he would be back in half an hour, if Mrs. Smart should call with the car for him. 'I have some business down in Swanston Street,' he said.

It was nearly four o'clock, and he found the usual gaily-dressed afternoon crowd of fashionables upon the block. One and another lifted his hat, and ladies smiled and bowed, as, with a military gait, the Major strode along the pavement. He was a prosperous man. But turning into Collins Street he nearly called out aloud, for right in front of him were the two he had previously seen. The man had dark hair and could not be mistaken. He lifted his hat, and gave him a curious smile of recognition as he passed. The girl also looked at him, coldly and curiously. She lifted her gloved hand to adjust her veil, just as she confronted him, and on her wrist there shone brightly in the afternoon sun—a gold lyre-bird bangle.

The Major's eyes seemed starting from his head, as he swung himself around to look after them, then he staggered and was about to fall, when a gentleman who had watched the whole scene rushed forward and caught his arm. It was the lieutenant-colonel of his own regiment, in mufti; he was also a prominent city lawyer.

'Call me a cab, Morson,' said the Major. 'I'm taken ill.'

One was just passing, and he was helped into it.

'Tell him,' said the Major, 'to drive me to my address in Toorak.'

Colonel Morson looked after the cab as it drove away; but as he turned upon his heel and saun-

tered down Collins Street, he might have been heard to say to himself: ' Poor old Mud Major, the shock was a bit too much for him. Money can do a lot for a man ; but even money may come to a place where it has to draw the line.'



## CHAPTER XXXV

### CLEANING THE MAJOR'S SLATE

**H**ARVESTING was nearly over in the great wheat fields of the Riverina, and once more Christmas had come, and with it the anniversary of a Saturday when Boswell Smart had stood, for a few moments only, confronting a band of cinnabar and a corpse, in a drear hillside mining-drive in Queensland.

He had hankered after the mineral ; for there might be thousands in it ; but he had fled horror-stricken from the place, for he feared the awful thing, which, with hands clasped in supplication, lay upon the earthy floor. It was due to him that so heavy a fall of earth had blocked the entrance to the tragedy, and it was no wonder that Christmas was ever afterwards a time of apprehension and ill-omen ; or that his fetish filled his brain with menace and alarm.

But of all the Christmastides, none, to his imagination, had been so threatening as that which now confronted him. Which may explain his complete collapse at the strange apparition which had met his view in Collins Street.

On the evening of that astonishing episode,

Colonel Morson, who was Will Monckton's lawyer-friend, rang up to inquire how the Major found himself after his indisposition. A servant answered that he was in bed attended by a doctor.

Now Will Monckton had naturally thought of Colonel Morson as one capable of giving valuable assistance in bringing the Major to book. He had, for years, been a friend of the Moncktons, was a thorough gentleman, a clever lawyer, and a sworn foe to that 'slimness,' to call it by no harder name, which had characterized the Major's dealings with people generally—far more than has been recorded in this narrative. He regarded him also as an obstacle to the advancement of the regiment, and after a confidential talk with Will, and an interesting interview with Maxwell Smart, had agreed to assist them in their project; provided it could be carried through without publicity or legal proceedings. It was to be a case of 'thorough,' but without creating a social scandal, or leaving the issues in any way in doubt.

At an informal meeting in the colonel's office it was decided to employ a reliable private detective to watch the Major's movements, as the colonel was of opinion that his suspicions would now be thoroughly aroused.

'In which case, you may expect some unlooked-for developments,' said he, 'for it would be very unwise to under-estimate either Major Smart's skill or resources. He has seen Mr. Maxwell, and also Miss St. Clair, and knows that a new element of danger to himself has entered into the business.'

'How came you to think of that most astonishing

impersonation ? ' asked Will Monckton of Maxwell Smart.

' It was pure coincidence at first,' replied Maxwell. ' I had gone up to Bendigo to find out what I could about Miss St. Clair's brother's widow and daughter, and was walking down the Mall, when I received as big a shock as I ever had in my life. I was confronted, there upon the pavement, with the very double of Dorothy St. Clair, as she had been twenty-seven years ago in Queensland. I knew, of course, that it was not the Miss Dorothy who was dead ; but I assure you that for the moment I was no longer in Bendigo, but back in Brisbane. I was the Maxwell Smart of some thirty years before, and this was our Dorothy St. Clair, aged twenty-six. I knew that it must be her brother's daughter, and it was at that moment I conceived the idea of giving Boswell Smart a similar shock to that which I had myself experienced. I went straight up to her, and lifting my hat, extended my hand and said : " You are Miss St. Clair ? " She took my hand with some reluctance, and replied, " You have the advantage of me, sir ? " " I am an old friend of your family," I replied, " and I knew you by your astonishing likeness to your aunt, who died in Queensland." Well, the upshot of it was, that I found out where she and her mother were living, and got quite friendly with them. I let them know enough about the money that should come to them to win them over to my project, and took Mrs. St. Clair and her daughter to Ballarat, where we discussed matters further with the other surviving relative, who had received Miss St. Clair's jewellery from the police ;

on giving an undertaking to produce it in court if called upon to do so. We borrowed the jewellery, and Mrs. St. Clair and her daughter came with me to Melbourne, where I bought a black wig, and the rest was easy. Boswell Smart received the shock of his life when he met us face to face in Collins Street. He saw us, too, before that, opposite his office. I was about to take Miss St. Clair in to see him, when he came to the window; and I thought of another plan. If I felt it so much, imagine how he must have felt after all these years, to confront us together. I am not surprised that he is ill.'

'I am not so confident about the reality of his illness,' said the lawyer; 'the shock will not last long when he thinks the thing over. He will know that it was some remarkable likeness; and impressions of that sort are very short-lived. We'll have the house closely watched. Anderson will have to be given *carte blanche* to employ assistance. In the meantime, we must think out every detail of what we propose to do. It's diamond cut diamond now. You had better get down Donald McDuff from Seldom Seen, and we will have a conference in my office, say four days from now.'

'Let us have it at 'The Poplars,' said Will. 'Mrs. Maguire asked me to bring you all out, and she will give us dinner beforehand.'

'All right,' said the colonel, 'but include Anderson among your guests.'

'I'll see to that,' said Monckton.

For sundry reasons business was banned until four days after, when, dinner over, the five confederates met at Mrs. Maguire's hospitable table

at 'The Poplars.' With the colonel and Will and Maxwell, there were also present Donald McDuff and Eugene Anderson, the private detective. Mrs. Maguire, as an interested party, had also been invited to remain.

'We look a formidable body,' said Maxwell Smart, gazing around the table, as he cracked a walnut. 'We surely ought to be able to deal with one individual easily enough.'

'You are dealing with more than one individual, Mr. Smart,' said Anderson.

'In what way?' asked Monckton.

'Mooney Peglar was in to see the Major yesterday morning, and he remained there three hours.'

'And you draw certain deductions from the visit?' suggested Colonel Morson.

'Certainly I do,' said Anderson, 'would you like to hear them?'

'Of course,' was the general response.

'Well, first of all, Major Smart is not so ill as the newspapers report him to be. He is like some of our prominent politicians, who are taken ill when they want to be quiet, and exclude callers while they prepare a speech, or think out some plan of campaign. Second, Mooney Peglar is not the family lawyer. If the Major was ill, and wanted to alter his will, or give instructions about business or property, he would have sent for Brooks. Mooney Peglar is the cleverest and most unscrupulous criminal lawyer that we have in Melbourne. The Major is foxing to put us off the scent. His illness is a blind.'

The detective stopped at this, and took a sip from his wineglass, and lit a cigar.

'Well, go on, Anderson,' said Colonel Morson, 'you have not finished.'

'By yesterday's Brisbane mail,' continued the detective, 'the Major received disquieting news.'

There was a breathless pause at this announcement.

'Ah, and he sent for Mooney Peglar,' said the lawyer. 'Very good, now can you tell us what it was?'

'I can,' replied Anderson. 'It was a letter from the Brisbane Police Department, asking for information regarding the estate of the late Dorothy St. Clair, of which one Boswell Smart was trustee.'

'What reply do you think Mooney Peglar advised him to send to that?'

'To let his wife, or secretary, write to the department, to the effect that Major Smart was ill in bed, and that the doctor forbids them to place any matter of business before him until an improvement is reported.'

'There is still something more, Mr. Anderson,' said the colonel. 'You are doing remarkably well; but I think I can forestall you with the climax of your really valuable observations.'

'Do so, sir,' said the detective.

'Last night about nine o'clock,' said the colonel, 'muffled up so as to be unrecognizable, Major Smart paid a brief visit to his office, which was lit up, with his clerk waiting for him.'

'Just so,' said the detective, smiling; but he

evidently was taken aback. 'The long-headed solicitor, straight as a die,' had scored.

'What is the next thing to be done?' asked Will Monckton of his friend.

'Serve him with Donald McDuff's writ in bed to-morrow morning,' said the lawyer.

'And how the mischief,' exclaimed Maxwell Smart, 'are you going to do that?'

'We shall have a make-believe doctor ready, five minutes before the arrival of the ordinary physician, who will be shown to his bedside and serve him with a writ for £50,000 and then retire,' said the detective.

'It is a bit risky, Anderson,' said the colonel, 'he does not know it himself. Dr. Temperly tells me that his heart is seriously affected, and although with care he might live another ten years, he may go off at a moment's notice. It was touch and go with him the other afternoon in Collins Street. I never saw a man taken so completely aback. When I caught him he was trembling like a child. If he had fallen, I believe it would have been his end. But we must not have him die until he has signed the two documents of which I intend to read drafts to-night. I should not be surprised if signing them kills him, or at any rate hastens his death.'

One document was the last will and testament of Major Boswell Smart, and the other was a deed of gift. Both were, however, practically couched in the same terms. Boswell Smart knew nothing of either will or deed; they had been drawn up with the utmost secrecy in Colonel Morson's office, and as far as could be discovered, they made full restitu-



tion to each and every person whom the Major was known to have either directly or indirectly defrauded. The satisfaction of the deed of gift would leave the Major a comparatively poor man, although his family would be well provided for in both cases. Will Monckton and Colonel Morson were appointed the executors. But the question now was how to get them signed. Once signed, they had no fear of their being disputed afterwards, for Major Smart would never have dared to face an inquiry in a court of law.

It was finally decided that the Major must somehow be waylaid with the documents in his own office, and that if necessary, force should be used to secure his signatures.

The following morning at five minutes to eleven Dr. Temperly's knock was heard at the front door of the Major's mansion, and Dr. Temperly's double placed hat and cane upon the hall table, and, led by the servant, followed up the heavily-carpeted stairs to the Major's room. He was met at the door by the nurse.

'Has he passed a good night?' asked the supposed doctor.

'He slept all night,' replied the nurse.

'Ah! not very much the matter with him?'

He walked straight over to the bed.

'Good morning, doctor,' said the Major.

'Good morning, Major Smart; here is a bit of sticking-plaster for you.'

The Major took the blue document thoroughly bewildered.

'It is served upon you on behalf of Donald

McDuff, Major.' At this the doctor put his hand over his forehead, lifted his wig, and revealed the countenance of a perfect stranger.

It was Detective Anderson.

'Call a policeman, and have this impostor arrested,' screamed the Major to the nurse.

'No necessity, nurse,' said the detective blandly, 'I'm an officer of the Crown, and have had to serve the Major personally with a writ.'

'Tell them to telephone for Mooney Peglar,' said the Major, and his head fell back upon the pillow. 'Curse them!' he exclaimed, 'the Wooler never did that without some one helping him.'

That night in the first-floor room of a house exactly opposite the Major's town office the five gentlemen waited, with Mrs. Maguire and Miss St. Clair. The room was dimly lighted, and hour after hour they waited, until the city clocks struck ten. A light then made its appearance in the hall, and afterwards in the Major's first-floor apartment. A stir of expectation pervaded the room. Mrs. Maguire whispered to Miss St. Clair: 'He must be coming.'

Ten minutes afterwards, a taxi stopped at the door; a muffled figure descended; the door opened without knocking, and the taxi drove away.

'You had better give him a quarter of an hour to get out his papers, and settle down to work. He himself is doing a bit, on his own, to clean up the slate,' said Colonel Morson.

Twenty minutes after Anderson rang the electric bell, and Mrs. Maguire, who was watching from the window of the opposite house, saw the light immediately go out in the Major's room.

'He's afraid, the coward,' she said below her breath. Just then the colonel came in and sat down by the window beside her.

'Then you're not going with them?' said Mrs. Maguire.

'No,' said the colonel, 'they will do better without me.'

It was some time before the door was opened. When it was, the clerk found himself confronted by two uniformed policemen. They pushed their way into the hall, followed by the party from the opposite house. One of the policemen put his hand upon the shoulder of the clerk and said: 'We have called to interview Major Smart, and you will remain here, until the interview is over.'

'Major Smart is not here,' said the man.

'We know all about that,' replied Anderson, uncovering a bull's-eye lantern. 'You have the electric light on these premises, which is easily switched on and off.'

One of the detectives remained below with the clerk, and the whole party went upstairs.

When the electric light was switched on, the Major was found, ghastly white, seated at a large writing-table, which was covered with papers and documents.

Monckton thought that he would have fainted when the uniformed policeman appeared, and went to the back of his chair to support him. It would have ruined everything if he had become unconscious, or worse still, if he had died.

'Brace yourself up, Major,' said Monckton, 'and be a man, it's your last chance.'

‘I have to read two documents, Major Smart,’ said Anderson, in a clear precise voice. ‘They have been drawn up after careful deliberation, by one of the foremost lawyers of the city. They do you and your family no wrong; but they endeavour to put you right so far as certain other people are concerned, and reasonable restitution is to be made to the parties referred to. One is a deed of gift, to be put in force three months after date, should you be then living, and the other is a will which will take effect should you die before that time. In the event of your refusing to sign these documents, the law will have to take its course. I will now read them.’

‘Don’t, don’t!’ said the Major, who was looking with fearful eyes at Maxwell Smart and Miss St. Clair, who stood together by the doorway. ‘Don’t read them. Put those two out of the room,’ he said, pointing to the doorway, ‘and I’ll sign anything if that will keep me from seeing them again.’ Will raised his hand to them, and they silently withdrew.

Not another word was spoken, as amid breathless silence, Boswell Smart took up the pen.

‘Is this going to put things straight, Will?’ he said, ‘I was trying to do something of the sort myself to-night. I’ve heard the fetish call, and am going home to die.’

‘It will put things right with your fellow-men, so far as is possible,’ said Will Monckton, who was greatly moved, and surprised at the Major’s words; ‘but I don’t know about God.’

‘Ah, God! God!’ he ejaculated. ‘That’s some-

thing more to be attended to ! But where am I to sign ? ’

He did not read a line of either document ; but attached his signature to them in a firm, clear hand. They were witnessed by Anderson and Will Monckton.

‘ Good-night, Will. Good-bye ! I’m glad,’ he muttered. ‘ Send up my clerk when you go downstairs ; but tell him first to ring for the taxi to take me home. See that those two are gone. I don’t want to meet them again.’

He told the nurse on his arrival home that he was all right, and asked her not to wake up any of the family ; but in the morning she found him in bed, quite dead. The doctor said he must have been dead some hours. His closed hands were pressed upon his throat, as though he had died in some agonizing dream of suffocation.

‘ Let us be thankful,’ said Mrs. Maguire, ‘ that before he died he was permitted to make restitution. It’s not given to every one to do that.’

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE MAGUIRE TOWER

'DEATH ends all in law' was an axiom which Will made free use of when closing up the Major's affairs after the funeral. The man had sinned, and suffered; but previous to his death he had made restitution; for if it was not done of his own initiative, it was done with his willing consent. The man was sick with fear when he found himself confronting eternity.

By the will the Wooler was made a wealthy man; but notwithstanding this he told the Lieutenant privately that when he got the money his old way of life at Seldom Seen would still suit him best; and that he would like to have half the money go to the building and endowment of a hospital at Reefton.

'You may think differently when we pay you over the cash,' said Will, 'and some one else may come along to share it with you.'

'We'll put up the hospital at any rate, and the rest of the money can wait,' said the Wooler.

To Mrs. Maguire and Molly the death of the Major was like the removal of a great menace, for they were always afraid of what he might do next.

They went up to Oberon directly after the funeral,

away from the scenes and associations connected with the Major's life.

Will took away the high fence between the houses, and restored to The Firs and The Poplars their old-time appearance. The servants were brought back, and The Firs re-established as it was before Miss Monckton's decease.

In connection with the Major's business affairs there was much to be done; properties had to be sold and assets realized; and the time slipped quickly by, Will spending his week-ends mostly at Oberon.

There Molly was being courted and sought after by half a dozen eligible young men of the district, whom she had dazzled and allured by her beauty and sweetness; but Will still said no word, and made no sign.

He was a most thoughtful and affectionate brother to Molly, and that was all. Mrs. Maguire began to feel thoroughly annoyed with him, for she knew that Molly loved him more than any one of the gay crowd that, for her sake, visited Oberon. And she knew, too, with a woman's intuition, that Molly was dearer to Will than all the world besides. It may seem strange; but Molly appeared less guileless and unaffected in the country than she did in town. Will did not see that to hide her own feelings from him, womanlike she was acting a part. She would not for the world have allowed him just then to guess the strength of her affection for him. So the house was gay with visitors, and Molly the gayest of the gay, and autumn passed into winter, and winter trembled with the new life of spring, and the Maguires still remained at the station.



'Molly, I want you and your brother to ride into town this morning and do some business for me,' said Mrs. Maguire.

'That's awkward,' ejaculated Tommy. 'I promised Mr. Moore to go shooting with him on the run.'

'I'll ride with you,' said Will to Molly. 'And I can see the avenues you talk about. My visits to the township have always been by river, it will be a new experience to go by road.'

'It is a very pleasant ride,' said Molly. 'Suppose we start directly after lunch.'

'That'll do grandly,' said Will. 'I have some letters to write, and can post them in the town.'

Probably our best pleasures come to us unexpectedly, or if expected at some unlooked-for time. It has been said that great men never know how or why they do things. They do them because the time has come when the thing ought to be done. It was just so with Will in his love for Molly. He felt assured that without trying to force things, there would come a time that would be the opportune season to speak, a time when he would feel obliged to speak; he had not hitherto felt that the time had come, nor had he any intention of proposing to Molly when they rode that midday together into Oberon township; but the breath of spring was in the air, which ever sings of hope and love. And during the ride it was as though a revival of tenderness for each other had unconsciously taken place.

Everywhere was the activity of spring, and the fresh sweetness which life and activity always bring

to body and mind. It was the joy of life that throbbed in their veins, life that was young and beautiful, pulsating with future possibilities.

‘Let us canter now,’ said Molly. ‘The horses are impatient to enjoy themselves.’

There was no need for whip or spur; a loosened rein and encouraging word, and they were off, covering the ground with free, elastic strides.

They drew rein where the great avenue of English oaks commenced, nearly a mile from the township.

‘This avenue,’ said Molly, ‘began to be planted about thirty years ago by the school children of the township. Papa suggested that they should do it, and gave them the trees. You’ll see that they grow older and bigger as we ride along; every year a certain number have been planted, until this great avenue has grown. This is Maguire Street; it’s the principal street of the township, and in the centre of the place we shall come to the Maguire Clock Tower, which was built with money papa left to the town in his will for its erection, and also the clock. After we have been to the bank we might leave our horses and go and look at it.’

‘Yes,’ said Will, ‘I’d like to see it; but it’s very strange, Molly, that I never heard of this tower before.’

‘I expect,’ said Molly, ‘that it’s so old to us, that we don’t think to talk about it. You haven’t been at Oberon much, and you were away when the tower was opened. It’s called the Maguire Tower, and cost, with the clock, about £2,000; it was a fad of papa’s, but mother sees to it now, and keeps

everything in good order. She takes a lot of interest in the town.'

Will Monckton's thoughts, as he strolled over to post his letters, while Molly did her business at the bank, was of the quiet good which is being done unobtrusively by so many people in every community.

He and Molly left their horses, and walked round the central square of the township to view the clock tower. Will estimated its height at about 150 feet. It was built of red brick with white stone facings, in six stories, with a high-pitched roof and corner pinnacles, and stained glass windows lighting the lower stories. A flight of broad stone steps led up to the one large door.

Will read the inscription upon the marble tablet, and then said: 'What a magnificent view there must be from the top.'

'Yes, you can see for miles around over this flat country,' said Molly, 'and you can see Oberon House and the river.'

'Let us go up,' said Will. 'Who keeps the key?'

'The watchmaker across the way winds the clock up,' replied Molly.

A few minutes afterwards Will unlocked the door, and he and Molly stood inside.

Will had been told to close the door, lest boys or others should follow, and only when he had done so did he realize how completely he and Molly were alone.

'Come on,' said Will, 'I'll go first.'

There were over twenty steps to the first landing, and Will turned at the top to reach out his hand to Molly, to help her up.

It was such a dear little hand, and her heightened colour made her look so lovable, that he could have told her there and then how he adored her.

Perhaps she saw it in his eyes, for she said hurriedly: 'I'm not a bit tired, Will; you go on. I want you to see the works of the clock when it strikes.'

'What is this square well for?' asked Will, as he mounted to the next landing.

'That's where the weights hang,' said Molly; 'they are very big, and very heavy, and I expect very ugly; but they keep the clock going.'

On the next landing they found the bells hung. There were three great bells of different sizes, two for the chimes, and one to strike the hours. They had counted over eighty steps by this; but once more they climbed upward into the clock-room, where the great works were encased in polished mahogany and glass.

'See here,' said Molly, 'this small dial shows the position of the hands of the four great dials outside. In a minute it will chime the three-quarters past two.'

They sat in one of the great window-seats which faced the works of the clock and waited for the big fans to spin round that started the wheels which liberated the striking weight. There was a click and a buzz, and it seemed as though the whole tower trembled as the steel wires pulled upon the great hammers, and the chimes pealed from the bells, first over the whole township, and then across the river, and then through great fields and paddocks for miles over the country-side.

Somehow, when the great fans began to spin round, Will took Molly's hand as though for safety, and it stayed there . . . stayed there until the shameless clockworks buzzed again, and the great bell struck in sonorous tones upon the biggest of the bells the hour of three.

'Molly,' said Will, as he kissed her for what was supposed to be the last time, 'we must ride back and tell your mother.'

'But,' said Molly, 'there are two more flights of stairs to climb, and you haven't seen the view.'

East and west, and north and south, Molly and Will, hand clasped in hand, looked over that great expanse of fertile country, clad in verdure.

'Is it not beautiful?' said Molly.

'Beautiful,' replied Will. 'The world never looked so beautiful to me before, Molly. It's a paradise now I've got you.'

'Well, dear, we'll have to hurry down,' said Molly, 'or that dreadful clock will be striking again.'

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### A TAIL OF GOLD

THE bracing mountain air of Seldom Seen, which it was a pure delight to breathe, was fragrant with flowering wattle.

After a long hard winter the breath of Spring had brought the perfection of climate to the highlands of the Southern State. For miles around wattle blossom crowned the ridges of the lower hills with gold, and filled ravines and valleys with beauty and fragrance. The eucalyptus and wild clematis were also coming into flower.

It was the return of that season which is everywhere identified with Hope: the only heritage of so many people in this mundane life.

Joe Chandler had dropped into his old life again at Seldom Seen, and was just as poor as he had been before he first met Boswell Smart. He was now located upon a residential area of one acre only, which, by virtue of Miner's Right, he held from the Government at the cost of half a crown a year. He was living a few miles further up the stream, however, to get away from the stir and traffic of the 'Good Fortune Gold Mine,' which he had discovered

in former days, and which Mrs. Maguire had taken from him.

On the whole, however, he was little changed. He would sometimes say to the Wooler: 'In such a climate as this, a man might live to be a hundred.' But he felt the pinch of winter, and many a time thought of the comfort some of the money he once had would have given him now. But, if only a poor lone-hand miner, he was a philosopher, and the Wooler was his friend.

This friendship had been brought about through Becky Blunt, although not exactly of design or with her knowledge. The Wooler's improved circumstances had helped to smooth over his disagreement with the Blunts, where he was now a welcome visitor, and he thought little of a cross-country ride of nearly thirty miles, to have a yarn with Becky. He had to pass Joe's shanty on the way, and always called in to see the lonely and eccentric man. It was said that notwithstanding the disparity between their ages the Wooler was going to marry Becky, and Joe Chandler told him, 'She'll suit you to a T.'

Joe had inhaled deep first-draughts of the sun-chequered morning air; for, long before the monarch of day himself appeared, his banners waved to herald his approach above the distant skyline. Joe had porridge to make, potatoes to peel, and a dozen household duties to perform before he had his breakfast; and down by the creek that morning there awaited him a small heap of very promising wash dirt, which had cost him several rough, tiresome journeys to get down. It was late when he had carried the last load to the creek, and this



morning he was going to cradle it ; but he would wash some first in the prospecting dish, to see how it was likely to pan out.

He had not spoken to any one, save his dogs, for a couple of days, and like most folks who live much alone, talked occasionally to himself. He was in a philosophic mood this morning, and having eaten his breakfast, went down to the creek to start work. He had carried down his tools and now took off his coat and rolled up the sleeves of his soft blue cotton shirt.

He looked long at the small heap which had cost him so much labour, for he had removed several feet of over-burden to get at it, and taking it out and humping it in a sack down to the water had cost him considerable sweat and toil.

‘People are dirt,’ he soliloquized, ‘just dirt with a bit of gold in it. God Almighty made us out of dust, and that’s what we all have to go back to in the end. There’s that heap of dirt ; I’ve had to dolly hard lumps of it to liberate the gold ; it was rough work to break ’em up. And now I’ll have to wash, and wash, and wash it in the waters of affliction, that’s what the old Book calls it ; and then often there’s little more than a glitter of gold to be found in it. They tell us there’s gold so fine that we can’t see it. Gold in sea-water. Gold in the dust that floats in the upper strata of the air. Gold that doesn’t show itself everywhere. And so every one’s dirt, with a bit of gold in ’em. But there’s precious little in some people. There’s that devil of a Major, and that snapping she-wolf, Madge Maguire !’

Just then, who should come riding along by the creek but the Wooler, cheery as ever.

He felt sorry for the lonely old man, without kith or kin but so inured to his solitary life that nothing else suited him. Always searching for gold, always suspicious of others ; like a ship, whose cargo had shifted in the midst of stormy seas, he faced the wintry storms of life, that come upon men in old age, overbalanced in his mind, and prejudiced against his fellows. Yet the man was possessed of the activities which have more to do with the happiness of life than its possessions. He read books, was a lover of nature, a believer in God, and in his own way a student of those differences which are the beginnings of philosophy.

But his faith in his fellows had been shaken, and his life soured. He was one of the derelicts which so many successful men of the world leave water-logged behind them, damaged by collision with their superior bulk. Joe's occupation as a miner caused him, perhaps, to think of it, but it was a frequent remark of his : ' People are dirt, just selfish barren dirt, with streaks of gold.'

' I've a letter for you, Joe, old man,' was the Wooler's greeting. ' It's been lying in the post office for several days ; so, as I was riding this way, I've brought it out. I shall have to push on, but I'll call and drink a cup of tea with you coming back.'

He handed Joe a letter ; it was from Will Monckton. It told of the death of Major Smart, and that by the Major's will, recently made, he had been left £1,000 ; and also that out of the earnings of the

'Good Fortune Gold Mine,' Mrs. Madge Maguire had paid for him to Lieutenant Monckton another £1,000. Will congratulated him on his good fortune, and told him that the money had already been paid to his credit in the Reefton Bank.

Joe slipped the letter into the breast pocket of his coat, which he had hung near by upon a bush, without a word; then slowly filled his prospecting dish with wash dirt, and stooping down to the water, filled it, stirred it with his hand, and gathered out the larger stones. Then with both hands he shook it roughly, so that any heavy particles might settle to the bottom of the dish, then allowed sand and gravel to flow with the water over the lip of the dish into the stream.

Tears were in the man's eyes, for he had been deeply moved by his unexpected good fortune; it would make his lonely old age more comfortable. Again he lifted the dish and shook it roughly, puddled in it with his fingers to break up a lump of clay, and again vanned the dirt and sand into the stream.

He was more careful now, for the residue was getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller, as the water with the gentlest motion of the man's experienced hand washed sand and dirt away.

At last he stood erect and held the steel dish sideways to the sun, in the light of which there glittered, on its side, a tiny nugget of the precious metal, with, as though streaming from it, a thin tail of golden dust left upon the side of the dish by the action of the water.

The man's eye brightened as he looked at it,

but his thoughts were elsewhere. 'Dirt, dirt!' he mused, 'mostly dirt; but God Almighty has panned them out, for no one else could have done it, and bad as I thought them, He must have found in the prospecting dish a tail of gold.'

THE END



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