

BLUFF
STAKES
BERNARD CRONIN



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Bluff Stakes



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BY

BERNARD CRONIN.

AUTHOR OF "THE COASTLANDERS," "TIMBER WOLVES," ETC.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
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Dedication

TO
MY FELLOW MEMBERS
OF
THE DERELICTS CLUB,
MELBOURNE

1822828



LAUNCESTON, dainty premier city of Northern Tasmania, lay in the shadow of oncoming night. Summer had passed; the muggy heat of cloudless days was giving place to crisp April mornings and the bracing conquest of the autumn winds. Rains beating in from the south-west had stilled the air and coaxed the parched hills to something of their former comeliness. Westwards, across the wide sweep of the coastline, where the undulating reaches of the foreshore lay open to the sea, the brown plains and windswept hollows of the more sparsely settled areas were experiencing to the full the cool comfort of the heat's remission. But in the city itself, set forty miles from the seaboard, and ringed about by tiers of low hills, the air was still close and sultry. As the darkness deepened this oppressiveness seemed somehow intensified. Even the placid waters of the River Tamar, gleaming like a mirror from its framing of shadowed bush, reflected something of the night's inherent discomfort. There was a suggestion of almost melancholy in the abortive fluttering of the evening breeze.

From the roadway which climbed between the terraced houses on Trevallyn, the heart of the little city, pricked with tiny illuminations, as spangles upon the garment of the drowsing earth, appeared faintly outlined below. One by one the more familiar landmarks became merged with the dusk. Windmill Hill, the Sand-hills, the curve of white roadway abutting upon the Gorge Bridge, the delicate silhouette of tower and steeple—night caught and subdued them by turn. And so on to the Western Tiers of hills whose pencilled outlines seemed almost at one with the wide arc of the night sky.

In a house overlooking the river a solitary light gleamed. There was about the building a suggestion of decay—not the healthy declension attributable to old age, but the unclean shrivelling, the disruptive decease that comes of neglect, of sordid occupancy, or of long periods of untenancy; typifying, it might well be, something of the shabbiness, the squalor, of the human life which had flowed between its four stained walls. The tottering fence, the waste of garden between, heightened the impression. One sensed, rather than was able physically to determine, the dank odour of the rotting timbers and trampled vegetation.

The French windows of the lighted room were thrown wide open to admit what little stirring of air the night permitted. Within were two men; one seated upon an upturned wooden case, the

other half sitting, half reclining, on the bare boards before the window. The room contained no furniture. Dust covered the floor and clung greasily to the sills and lintels. In places the paper was torn from the walls, exposing the bulging hessian behind. Patches of mildew discoloured the ceiling. The air was full of a penetrating mustiness.

The appearance of the men was in striking contrast to the surroundings. Their clothing suggested the comfortable, if not particularly well-tailored habiliments, of the ordinary city business man. Yet a resident of Launceston might have hesitated to claim citizenship with them on that account alone. There was about them an indefinable something which hinted at an alertness of self interest, a more guarded knowledge of certain phases of business life, than is assured or even necessary to the commerce of the city wherein they now rested. Both were nearing middle age; but beyond that physical resemblance ceased. The man on the floor was smoking a cigar. Both face and speech betrayed his Semitic origin. He was stout, clean shaven, and, if one might judge from the wrinkles about his pouchy eyes, and the curve of his full-fleshed lips, not without a certain unhealthy humour. His companion too evidently lacked the saving grace. His features were of the type classed as predatory. Hawk-eyed, hawk-nosed, with long, restless hands, and lean, nervous

body, he seemed amply qualified to sustain the metaphor to its fullest conception. Even his voice, as he replied now to a query from the other man, had about it a kind of shrill spitefulness that overruled and defeated the studied precision of the words.

“Why should he not, Hume?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure; unless it’s this ramshackle rendezvous of yours.” Hume took the cigar from his mouth and looked thoughtfully at its glowing end. “I can’t see your idea, Craigen, in arranging to meet in a place like this. With most men it would strike a false note. And I suppose this man Boyd is not unlike the rest of us when it comes to registering a first impression. You always did have a weakness for melodrama though.”

Craigen fidgetted irritably. “As I explained before, I had no option in the matter. Advertisement may be the soul of business; but not of a business such as ours, Hume. Don’t misunderstand me. I sing small for no man. But to flaunt our business openly in the face of this tin-pot township is simply to see an end to the whole affair. What we have so far done is perfectly legitimate. What we purpose doing”—he shrugged his shoulders, and a thin sneer came on his face—“that also, as I see it, is merely a business proposition. I choose to see Boyd in this house because I have no wish to alarm the circles of rustic finance.

You appear to forget that it's hit or miss with us both. If we don't pull this off it means good-night. I thought you understood that."

"But why this house?" persisted Hume.

"Because any other is impossible," retorted Craigen, with a sour smile. "I count it a piece of good luck that I know the caretaker of this ruin—if you prefer to call it so—well enough to be sure that his intelligence is not of the highest order. He has neither the wit nor the curiosity to discover any other reason for our presence here to-night than the one I gave him. We must be sure of secrecy. As for Boyd disliking this place, that is neither here nor there. I fancy he is too keen on his own advancement to bother about the scenic effects."

Hume yawned carelessly. "What time is he due?"

"Eight o'clock. It is now . . ." Craigen consulted his watch ". . . seven fifty. In ten minutes he should be here. I suppose it is no use going into further details, eh? The matter—on the outside, at all events—is perfectly simple. You and I, as governing directors of the Ajax, and with the full approval of the shareholders, offer Boyd the management of the mine. That is all there is to it. He will accept or refuse. And I am perfectly convinced that he will do the first."

"Why?" asked Hume abruptly.

Craigen appeared faintly amused. "Because

our friend is a man who knows which side his bread is buttered. I have not met him yet, but from all accounts he is pre-eminently the man we want. He is capable, full of ambition, and has a lot of the bulldog in him. If anyone can manage that mob of roughheads at Copper Creek it should be Boyd. I expect no trouble with him, except for one thing."

Hume tossed his cigar butt beyond the broken boards of the verandah, where it lay smouldering redly amongst the dank weeds. His eyes turned from their contemplation of the night to seek Craigen's face in some surprise.

"But I thought you told me——"

"I did. But what I mean is that Boyd prides himself upon being honest—perhaps I ought to say, inactively honest. He has scruples, my dear Hume, in regard to the mixing of the pie, which do not present themselves when it comes to an opportionment of the plums. In other words, Boyd may be said to remain honest for the sake of dishonesty."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hume, in a relieved voice.

He turned once more to the window and let his eyes wander over the face of the darkness. A tiny flicker of brightness from the solitary lamp on the landing stage of the river below caught his attention, and he gazed at it sleepily. At his back sounded the snap of Craigen's watch-case.

"Only five minutes to go, Hume. Let me do

all the talking. On second thoughts I've decided, once Boyd accepts, to give him the details—within limits." He sniffed disgustedly. "What a stench. For God's sake light another cigar, if you have one. I begin to regret I never learnt to smoke myself."

"You consider there's a reasonable chance of the thing going through?" asked Hume, after a moment's silence.

"A chance! it's more than a chance. It's almost a cut and dried certainty. The only thing in doubt is the exact location. That is, of course, the key to the whole affair." Craigen sucked his thin lips noisily. His manner became excited. "Look here, Joe, it's the hope of a lifetime. Here's a big syndicate of moneyed men—men well-known and trusted, mind, in the financial world—deciding to go nap on a settlement and development scheme on the north-west. They arrange to keep it dark until such time as the Bill comes before Parliament. They're thinking of local government intervention, business jealousy, and such like—see. They reckon it time enough to advertise when they've tested every link in the chain and know it will hold against outsiders."

"We know all that," said Hume a trifle testily.

"The more we discuss it the clearer we shall see our own way," retorted Craigen. "Well, this syndicate reckons to build a jetty and breakwater, take over Crown Lands for orchard settlement, lay light tramlines to tap the mines and saw mills, and

God knows what else. In short, they mean to found a town where at present there is only undeveloped country without a port, or a get-away of any kind, for close to fifty miles north and west. That's how it stands at present. When they move openly—that is, if they ever do move—depends upon when they think they can rush a Bill through the House without attracting too much notice. I have proof that more than one State Member has been sounded on the vote. And in the meantime I doubt if there's a single man outside their own ranks who knows what's going on. That is, beyond you and me. By the devil's own luck we got a sniff of the pie, and here we are. We can't cut in on their game, even if we wanted to. But, by the Lord Harry, we can start a game of our own—we can, and we will. And Ralph Boyd is going to help it on, whether he knows it or not."

"How much is he to know?" asked Hume. He was frowning a little.

"As much as we chose to tell him," said Craigen quickly. "Boyd's after the Ajax job. I know that for a fact. If he gets it he ought to be satisfied. He does what he's told to do. And we watch things from our own end and give him the tip when to jump in. If there's anything simpler I'd like to hear it."

A little silence fell, broken only by the heavy nasal breathing of the man on the floor. Outside the darkness seemed to settle itself more closely.

The lights along the river twinkled mistily. The slam and volley of a passing motor-cycle startled the heavy air to a fury of discordant echoes.

Presently, from the direction of the town, came the slow, booming notes of a clock striking the hour. Hume's sleepiness forsook him at once. He stepped on the verandah, beyond the little circle of light, and stood there stiffly, the fresh-lit cigar in his mouth stabbing the gloom with a quick glow. At almost the same instant there sounded the sharp tap of approaching feet along the broken footpath beyond.

"Eight o'clock," came Craigen's voice expectantly.

JEFF SEMPLE, horse-breaker, was having his tea. But for himself, and the quietly attentive presence of Yetta Nordsen, the landlord's niece, the room was deserted. Such regular patrons as the Copper Creek Hotel could boast had already appeased their several appetites and drifted outside again, each to his duty or inclination. Through the closed door of the bar-room came a low hum of voices and the muffled clink of glass.

In the long, low-ceilinged dining-room dusk was settling fast. From where he sat Jeff could see through the open window to the saucer of plain beyond, where a golden haze of sunset swam sparkling to vanish in the long rampart of shadow that flanked the western horizon. Closer at hand the spurs of the foot-hills, low-crowned, and covered thickly with stunted scrub, showed in sombre outline against the blue-grey of the ranges beyond. As the gloom deepened the faintly pencilled network of slope and gully dwindled to a grey obscurity. One by one the ridges were lost

in the wide-flung veil of oncoming night. High up on the range side an uncovered glimpse of the falls above the Ajax Tin Mine, where the sun's rays focussed momentarily on the smooth skin of water that slipped from the wide edge of the rocks, flashed across the intervening distance as if reflected from a huge mirror. The brightness lasted a bare second, falling abruptly to a mere smudge of aureate mist, that waned and glowed and waned again to nothingness. Stars sprang suddenly into being over the shoulder of the nearby hills. In the quick hush that attends the dusk a tiny breeze ran rustling along the heavy heads of the button-grass.

The horse-breaker pursued his appetite slowly and thoughtfully. His coat was off and his arms were rolled bare to the elbows. From time to time his mildly speculative grey eyes turned from the prospect without to glance quickly and almost shyly at the girl who was busying herself about the recently vacated tables. Jeff Semple was in his fortieth year. He was tall and loose-limbed, with lean, clean-shaven face, and hair greying at the temples. All his movements were deliberate, as might be expected of one whose calling demanded an almost infinite patience. Not alone his eyes—steady and resourceful, with little wrinkles of kindly humour at the corners, proclaimed him the man he was. The set of his head, the square, rather prominent angles of his jaws, the wide

forehead and firm-lipped mouth, denoted both sincerity and courage. There was about the whole man a curiously alert and determined expression seemingly at variance with the apparent mildness of his manner. His voice was low-pitched and even. Even under the stress of a great emotion Jeff Semple was seldom known to exert his tone. Rather it might be said that the fire, the energy translated into his being, showed itself in his eyes and mouth alone. That same schooling of self which had made him the horse trainer par excellence, the most reliable and honest breaker throughout the whole of the north-west of Tasmania, was also in evidence in his relations with his fellows. He never threatened unless he meant to perform. Yet his drawling voice gave no hint of the unalterable determination behind it. One sensed his mood rather than deduced it from any trick of speech or manner. A kindly man, strong-souled, imaginative, immeasurably staunch, and as clean-hearted as a child, Jeff Semple was afraid of no living thing. Yet curiously enough his relations with the other sex were characterised by a reserve approaching timidity. One may be excused where one does not understand. And Jeff Semple did not in the least understand women.

Something of this attitude showed itself now in the face he turned to Yetta Nordsen, who had silently approached the table.

“Anything you want, Jeff?”

“I’m doing fine, thanks, Yetta.”

The girl smiled with a flash of strong white teeth. The Norse strain in her blood was plain to see in her flaxen-gold hair, her fair, clear skin, the ice-blue of her eyes.

“Well, just call me if you do. I’ll be just outside in the kitchen.”

“I’ll remember it,” said the breaker gravely. He seemed on the point of adding something, but checked himself abruptly as the girl turned away. His gaze followed her to the door, where she suddenly hesitated and looked back at him. A ring of mischief sounded in her deep, throaty voice.

“Have you spoken to Jim Howth yet?”

“Not yet,” he assured her. He paused, teacup in hand, the wrinkles deepening about his eyes. “But there’s no telling when I may. Him being a policeman makes me feel kind of shy.”

“You don’t think Betty’s too old for you then?” asked Yetta, still with the same teasing note.

Jeff chuckled quietly. His affection for the quaint eight-year-old daughter of Jim Howth, the trooper stationed at Copper Creek, was the subject of an old joke between himself and the girl. On this point Yetta never tired of rallying him. She declared he was counting the days until Betty Howth was old enough to enact the part of Mrs. Jeff Semple.

“A woman ain’t a mite older than she looks,

Yetta. And Betty certainly don't look more'n eight. Besides, she's already adopted me for an uncle; and you know what the prayer-book says. I reckon we'll have to let it stand at that."

"She's a dear, wee thing," said the girl impulsively.

A queer light came to the breaker's eyes. "Of course. Fancy anyone wanting to be cruel to a child, Yetta. That's a thing I shall never understand. What would the world be without happy children. Supposing we was all born grown-up—and some folks are, you know. But not Betty. She's a sort of everlasting baby."

Yetta nodded back through the shadows. "I know, Jeff."

"She'll grow older, of course, in her mind and body," pursued Jeff, after a pause, "but her spirit ain't ever going to grow up. You know what I mean. Betty'll grow into one of those fine, sweet-souled women—God's women, as they call them . . . the sort we all like to think our mothers were . . . like you see around sometimes. . . ."

As if suddenly confused Jeff lowered his head over his plate and continued his meal in silence. Yetta returned softly to the centre of the room and lit the kerosene lamp which hung by a chain from the stained pine-board ceiling. By its light she stood revealed as a girl of about twenty-eight, or thirty, full-bosomed and deep-throated, with

strong arms and large, capable hands. Her quiet face held a slight flush.

“You’re sure there’s nothing more you want, Jeff?”

“Not a thing more, thanks, Yetta. I’m about finished. When I’ve swallered this tea. . . .”

“Well, call me if you do,” repeated the girl.

As she vanished in the kitchen there sounded a shuffling of feet at the outside door. Jeff looked up to see a stout, thick-set man of middle age coming towards him. A smile came on the breaker’s face, imparting to it a singularly sweet expression.

“Good-night, Bill.”

“How goes it, Jeff?” Bill Utting seated himself on the bench by the wall and began methodically to fill and light his pipe. “Well, what d’you know?”

“Not a thing,” disclaimed Jeff. “How’s the prospecting? And when did you get in?”

“Me and James was poking about the hills back of the Ajax, and pretty near as far up the Web as old Sam Pickens’ hut, all last week, but we didn’t strike any Bischoffs,” replied Utting. He puffed at his pipe reflectively. “We ran into Nat Absolam yesterday. He tells us the new mine manager’s due along here to-night. Absolam don’t seem to like it. I imagine he sort of thinks he could handle the job himself. Some folks have a neck like a giraffe.”

“Absolam ain’t a man I like,” said Jeff curtly.

“Nor me,” agreed Utting. He peered at his friend under shaggy eyebrows. “There’s a whole mob along up there that I don’t like, if it comes to that. What about them three men that come after Christmas—Kling, Sjoberg, and McGurr? Where’d they come from, anyway? What are they supposed to be doing? No wonder the Ajax ain’t paid a dividend for long enough.”

“This new manager—what’s he like?” asked the breaker. He stood up from the table and ran his fingers abstractedly through his hair. “Anyone sighted him yet, Bill?”

“Not that I know of. All I can tell you is that he comes in on the coach to-night. They aim to make things hum up in the hills there. I was hearing that the mine folks had a big meeting in town not long since. They was that fed-up with things that most of ’em wanted to close her down, but one or two of the big bugs said no. So now they’ve arranged to call in this Boyd man, set him up at the mine, and give him a free hand. And here he is coming along.”

“Young or old, Bill?”

“’Bout thirty, Absolam said.” Bill Utting glanced up as Yetta Nordsen came into the room. “We’re talking about the new Ajax manager, Yetta.”

“Everyone seems to be doing the same,” said the girl, with a slow smile. She waited a moment,

looking at Jeff. "I . . . do you know, I don't think I am going to like him."

"What! You been hearing something about him?" asked the old prospector curiously.

Jeff said nothing. He was gazing out into the thickening dusk. A slight frown was on his face.

"Only that he's a hard man to work for," said Yetta quietly. "He used to be in charge of the Pigeon Peak Mine over on Frenchman's Cap."

"What! That Boyd, is it? Ralph Boyd?" exclaimed Bill Utting. There was a note of concern in his gruff voice. "You sure of that?"

"Quite sure. Joan Norris told me this morning. She has friends who know Mr. Boyd. They wrote and told her he was coming here."

Yetta's eyes had gone back to Jeff, studying his strong profile with a strange intensity. The breaker had not moved or spoken for some time; but now, as if suddenly conscious of the girl's interest, he stepped back from the window and looked around at them.

"I suspicioned all along that it might be Ralph Boyd," he said. "It's a pity he's coming here. Not that I know of anything against him; except, as Yetta says, he's a bit rough in his ways. Boyd, the man driver, they used to call him on the west coast. But they say he's straight, and don't say a thing unless he means it. He pulled the Pigeon Peak affair out of the mud, anyway. He's young, and unmarried. That's all I know about him."

Yetta had returned to her work. Jeff waved his hand towards the open door.

“Let’s get into the open, Bill. The coach is about due. We may get a sight of Boyd. I’d like to see what sort of a looking feller he is. You can most always tell the colour of a man’s soul by the way he acts with his eyes and mouth.”

Bill Utting grunted and rose stiffly to his feet. The two men went through the door into the cool dusk and stood against the tie-rail in front of the building. The night was still. Only the sough of the far off wind came to their ears. Here and there, where the few houses of Copper Creek lay in squat shadow about the plain, lights shone mistily. One, brighter than the rest, came from a small weatherboard building set some fifteen or twenty paces down the road from the hotel. The door and window were wide open. Beyond, Jeff could see the slim figure of Joan Norris moving to and fro as she made ready to take over the expected weekly mail.

The half-shut eyes of the breaker watched the girl’s movements with friendly interest. He liked Joan Norris—liked her sincerity, the clean candour of her eyes, the womanly warmth of her voice. Above all he liked her pluck and independence. It was no light thing, he knew, for a city-bred girl deliberately to exchange the sheltered life of the towns for the haphazard existence obtaining at such a place as Copper Creek. Yet this was what

Joan Norris had done. For close upon two years now she had been in charge of the school and post office on the edge of the settlement, riding in daily to her work from the farm up in the hills by the Ajax Mine. Here she boarded with the widow Grant, a weary-eyed little woman whose face bore permanent record of the anxiety and suffering that marred the closing years of her married life. The two women lived alone, except for the inconstant companionship of Dan Grant, the widow's only child. Dan was twenty-three as years count, but thrice that age in worldly wisdom and native shrewdness. Bill Utting was wont to compare the lad's fiercely erratic spirit and unquenchable pugnacity to that of some gully-raking clearskin steer at a side muster. Dan worked the farm as the mood took him; often vanishing for weeks at a time in company of one or another of the prospecting parties that were to be found in the hills. His one settled task was that of line repairer on the telephone wire between Copper Creek and Lewistoun, a distance of sixty odd miles. He had a fair mechanical knowledge, and the occupation suited his temperament. He faced the fiercest windstorm unperturbed, seeming rather to revel in the uncanny vigour of the aroused elements. Of late, however, he had become quieter. He stayed at home more; perhaps because of the little hacking cough that had taken him since a night of the previous winter, when he had been adrift for

forty-eight hours in a stinging south-easterly rain-storm. Tardy recovery from the chill that ensued found him thinner in body, but with spirits unimpaired. His physical and mental activity was almost catlike.

An exclamation from Bill Utting interrupted the sequence of Jeff's thoughts.

"Sam Jones is coming up the Tier. I can hear the slap of hoofs every little while when the horses strike a patch of level going."

"I reckon you're right," said Jeff, after listening a moment. "Sound travels a long way on a night like this." He looked around in the darkness. "Here's some of the boys coming in. Let's go over to the office, Bill."

Half a dozen voices greeted them as they drew near to the little building. Bill Utting went to join the cluster of glowing pipes that held the angle of the fence, but Jeff walked straight on to the open door. At sound of his step on the porch Joan Norris turned with a nod of welcome.

"Good evening, Jeff."

The breaker leant against the door-post, his felt hat crumpled in his strong hands. "'Evening, Miss Joan. You look busy."

"I'll be busier in a few minutes," said the girl, with a tired smile. "The coach is coming now, I think. Sam is late to-night."

"Got passengers, maybe," suggested Jeff.

She nodded. "The new mine manager, isn't

it? I heard he was coming. I wonder what he's like."

"He's causing something of a stir," said Jeff, laughing. "We all want to know what he's like. And there's nothing like sizing up a man at first hand. You know his coming is like giving this place a new lease of life. It's the mine that keeps us going mostly, and it was touch and go for a time whether they closed her right up. But now she'll have another chance to make good."

Joan came to the door and stood at the breaker's elbow. "Do you think the Ajax is any good? I've heard so many different opinions, you know. George Nordsen was here not many minutes ago. He seemed quite angry about the mine being kept open; and when I told him just what you've said—that it was only the mine that kept the place going, himself included—he looked as if he would like to swear at me. He said the mine people were only wasting the shareholders' money, and there was bound to be trouble come of it. He was so rude. Anyone would think I was responsible."

"George Nordsen!" exclaimed Jeff. There was a ring of contempt in his voice. "Listen now, Miss Joan . . . don't you take too much notice of what George Nordsen says. He's two parts humbug, and the rest plain rogue. I kind of wonder sometimes how Yetta ever came to own such a man for an uncle. I do indeed."

Joan Norris was smiling in the shadows. "I

think we all do. Who was it said that if we can't help our relations, at least, thank God, we can choose our own friends! It sounds cynical, doesn't it; but the saying is not without excuse. And so you think the Ajax worth holding on to?"

"I do and I don't." Jeff hesitated a moment. "The plain truth is that she's never had a fair try-out. But they ought to be doing better than they are. That's what gets me. There is *some* tin there; though you wouldn't guess it from their output. I've my own ideas . . ." he broke off with a sigh. "I'm afraid there's trouble ahead for some of us."

"Trouble, Jeff? In what way? Do you mean over the mine itself?"

"I don't know," said Jeff, with a little movement of irritation. "Maybe it's just my liver that's out of order. I suppose things will go on the same as ever. I hope so. I'd give something to know what this man Boyd is like. Yetta was saying you had friends that know him."

"Not friends, Jeff; just people I've met once or twice. One of the girls writes now and then, and she happened to mention that Mr. Boyd was coming this way. She said that he was known as a good practical man, and people spoke highly of his capabilities."

"You've not seen him yourself then?" asked Jeff abruptly. He tried his pockets for a match; but apparently without result, for he sighed once

more and went to replace his pipe in the band of his hat.

Joan turned to a shelf above the counter. "A match, Jeff? I've some here. No, I've not seen him yet. Why?"

The breaker puffed contentedly for a moment before he replied. "'Thanks. It's funny, isn't it, what a difference those little sticks of wood make to a smoker. Oh, about this Boyd. . . . I just asked because I was curious to know what you thought of him. They say he's no sort of a ladies man.'"

"Isn't he," said the girl, absently. She held up her hand. "How clear the night is. How the darkness seems to soften everything. Not that Copper Creek stands in need of apology. The scenery is just toned to perfection. Listen—I can hear the rumble of the coach. It must be passing through the shale cutting. I've often noticed how the high walls there seem to catch the echoes and fling them out ever so far." She inhaled the crisp air with a kind of wistful enjoyment. "I do so love the country nights. There a real enchantment. . . . Well, I must get back to my work."

Jeff nodded and stepped outside. He walked slowly over to join Bill Utting and the other men by the fence angle. A little air of expectancy seemed to pervade the group. At sound of the approaching vehicle they appeared suddenly on the alert.

Bill Utting was the first to venture a decided opinion. His voice held a note of disappointment.

“ I reckon Sam’s alone,” he said.

“ You can see that far? ” commented a man sarcastically.

The old prospector turned swiftly in the direction of the speaker. “ I’m no owl, George Nordsen. But a man sees some things with his eyes shut. He can see ’em with his mind. Sam Jones ain’t got no passenger on board. I can feel it.”

The figure of the hotel-keeper suddenly loomed through the darkness. He was in his shirt-sleeves and sucked impatiently at a vile smelling cigar. He paused in front of Bill Utting.

“ Like to bet on that? ” he asked, with a sneer.

“ I’d hate to take your money,” retorted Utting swiftly.

Nordsen grunted. “ Meaning you’d hate to lose your own. I tell you the new manager’s on board that coach. Haven’t I got his room all ready and fixed up for him.”

“ Supposing he don’t want it,” suggested the old man. He continued to smoke placidly. “ You seem mighty sure of what he wants.”

“ You bet I am. He’s got to camp somewhere, ain’t he? This man Boyd is no tin scratcher to want to spend a night at the bottom of a badger hole when there’s a good clean bed kept waiting for him, and a drop or two of grog.”

Utting ignored the jibe. “ Maybe not,” he said

equably. "I can tell you this much though—badger hole or not, the new man ain't on the coach. How do I know? I tell you I can feel it."

Nordsen's reply was cut short by the arrival of the coach itself, which swung to a standstill just beyond the dim circle of light from the open door of the office. The driver climbed down over the swaying swingle-bars into the knot of questioning men.

"Manager! What manager?" he snapped belligerently. "What! Ain't he in the back of the coach there? No? Then maybe I jolted him out going over a rut. I dunno. But if you wait till I get my mails inside I'll sort my pockets just to please you. Manager! A hell of a manager . . . I don't think."

Jeff had gone quietly to the side of the coach and taken the two small mail-bags from under the seat. As he passed them to Joan Norris the aggrieved voice of George Nordsen broke into the babel of talk.

"This man Boyd can't be any class. Here's me goes and gets his things all ready, and he don't turn up. A man couldn't get a living if they was all like him. What you done with him, Sam?"

The driver paused with his arms full of parcels. "What's the matter with you! I want to bed the horses and get to my tea. Hold on a minute."

He dumped his load on the counter and returned to favour his audience with a sour grin.

“ Oh, yes; I seen him all right. And he seen me. What’s that? Why, don’t I keep telling you he got off at the pipe-clay bend . . . reckoned he hadn’t no time to waste coming along into town . . . said the sooner he got to his job the better. He said he thought maybe he’d better walk right bang to the Ajax to-night. I hope he falls down a shaft and breaks his neck.”

“ As fond of him as all that, are you?” suggested Jeff. “ What sort of a man is he, Sam? ”

Sam Jones snorted. “ Man! He ain’t no man at all. Yes he is though. I allus try to find some good in everyone. He wears a man’s trousers. Lemme tell you. He gets aboard at Lewistoun and sits there like he was a deaf mute at a funeral. Never cracks a word in a ten-mile drive. Just looks round on the scenery kind of interested. I speaks to him once or twice, but don’t get no answer. Now you all know me. I’m kind of sociable, ain’t I? Folks don’t have to talk much to have a conversation with *me*. Gimme a little encouragement and I sort of open up like a ’noyster, and get real friendly. But this man Boyd would turn a lemon sour. When he does speak, what does he say? Does he pull a bottle out of his pocket and hit me on the back and holler: ‘ I allus like to save my voice when I’m on a journey, in case I might want to say something when I get there. Take the cork out with your teeth and have a little gargle with me, Sam, old man.’ Does he say that? I ask you? ”

“ What did he say, Mr. Jones? ” came Joan’s amused voice at his back.

The driver swung round, his hands beating the darkness. “ Why, Miss, I’ll tell you. He says : ‘ I see you got your harness all tied up with hay-band. Why don’t you rivet it in the proper way? Makeshift is the curse of you country people. I hate to see a job slummed.’ ‘ Do you? ’ says I. ‘ I do,’ says he. ‘ If you was working for me,’ says he, ‘ you would want to draw your wages in advance, or you’d have none to draw,’ says he. ‘ The man that stops short of his best,’ he says, ‘ ain’t no good to himself or anyone else. He won’t get nowhere,’ says he.”

“ That was no sort of polite talk,” said Jeff sympathetically.

“ Did he say anything else? ” demanded Nordsen.

Sam Jones climbed on the box and gathered up the reins. The little group of men scattered.

“ If I tell you, will you promise to keep it to yourself? Very well then. He don’t say another word until he gets down at the clay bend, and then he says : ‘ How much do I owe you? ’ he says.”

The driver took his foot from the brake and whistled sharply. “ Giddup—you. Look out there.”

As the coach disappeared in the darkness Jeff checked his laughter to call a good-night to Bill Utting. Then he turned down the track to where

his hut stood some few chains back from the corduroy approach to the settlement. As he came close to the building a patch of white shewed itself by the doorway and a child's voice called a little tremulously :

“ Is that you, Jeff? ”

The breaker quickened his steps. “ Betty! And all alone in the darkness. How long have you been waiting? ”

She ran to meet him, and he snatched her up in his arms and pretended to scold her.

“ You'll scare your mummy clean out of her wits, you know, one of these days. And your father a policeman and all too. Of course they don't know where you are. They never do. Why didn't you go back home when you found I wasn't here? ”

The child clung to him trustfully, resting her smooth cheek against his rough, unshaven one.

“ Because I was frightened, Jeff. I don't like the dark a bit; do you! And so I waited and waited, because I did so want a story. Are you cross, Jeff? ”

“ Furious, ” declared the breaker. “ Why, the next thing I know I'll be having your daddy along to lock me up for stealing his daughter. Sit here in the big chair a moment while I light the lamp. ”

Betty watched the operation silently. The interior of Jeff's hut, with its harness-covered walls and clean board table, its possum rugs and the various oddments gathered up here and there as the

breaker travelled the country-side in pursuit of his calling, never failed to command her deepest respect. Her child mind delighted in the numberless evidences of her big friend's cleverness. Had not his own strong fingers fashioned the quaint articles she saw all around her—the heavy breaking halters, the leather hobbles and knee straps, the driving harness, the long, pliant greenhide whips. On narrow shelves above the stretcher bed were ranged tins and bottles beyond counting, knots of hide, pads of sewn and folded sacking, various tools and instruments rendered necessary by Jeff's further profession of horse doctor. For these last Betty's admiration was tempered with awe. Her eager brown eyes had witnessed some wonderful transformations due solely to the good geniis dwelling in those same tins and bottles. Did not her father owe the life of his best hack to them and the slow, healing fingers of their master.

Having set the flame of the kerosene lamp to his liking Jeff placed the home-made armchair on the ground just outside the door and took Betty on his knee. She snuggled against his shoulder with a sigh of content.

“ Now let's have our stories, Jeff. Is your pipe very, very nice? ”

“ Couldn't be nicer,” the man assured her gravely. He pondered a moment. “ See here, Betty, we're mates and partners, ain't we? ”

The child nodded.

“Of course we are,” said Jeff heartily. “Well, now—you know mates never break a promise between them. I’m going to spin no end of a good yarn for you, in about one minute; but before I start I’d feel kind of happier if you’d promise you won’t ever stay here by yourself again. If I ain’t here when you come, don’t wait. Just set a big stone on the doorstep, and I’ll understand, and go right along up to see you just as soon as ever I can. It don’t do for young wimmen to get wandering around in the dark promiskis like, when there ain’t no one to look after them. You might get a real fright one time. And your mummy is allus worrying where you get to. You’ll remember, won’t you, dear.”

She put up her hand and patted his arm softly.

“I’ll try, Jeff.”

“That’s the spirit. You know if anything was to happen to you . . .” He scratched his head thoughtfully. “Let’s see now . . . how does it start!—”

He began clumsily to weave a weird story compounded of bushrangers, bucking horses, and valiantly impossible deeds. In his enthusiasm he allowed his pipe to go out; even using the cold stem as a mock pistol for purposes of illustration. Over-estimation of his powers of narration, however, soon landed him in difficulties. At the end of perhaps twenty minutes his imagination began to flag, and he foundered on to a blood-thirsty and

wholly unsatisfying climax. His hair was damp with mortification.

“ I’m afraid it wasn’t exactly as I’d meant it to be,” he excused himself. “ But it . . . it wasn’t so *very* bad, was it, Betty?” he added hopefully.

“ It was beautiful,” declared a sleepy voice from the region of his waistcoat. “ I liked it ever so much. Was it true, Jeff? ”

“ Er—not exactly true,” said the breaker hastily. He twisted slightly in his seat to consult the tin alarm clock on the table beside the lamp. “ Halloa! time’s getting on. Hadn’t I better take you back home? ”

He made to rise, but Betty clung restrainingly.

“ Tell me about the poor man and the Princess,” she begged. “ It’s the story I like best of all; because, you know, it might be true, mightn’t it, Jeff. Only you never finish it. Why don’t you finish it? ”

“ Maybe I will some day,” Jeff sighed resignedly. “ Well, then—once upon a time there was a poor man and he loved a princess ever so much; but being so poor, you see, he didn’t like to tell her anything about it.”

“ Was he honest, Jeff? Mummy says nothing matters so long as we’re honest.”

The breaker smiled in greeting of the first of the quaint questions which Betty never failed to introduce into the telling of her favourite story.

“ I think so . . . yes, he was ; in that way, anyhow. But the princess, *being* a princess, was worth so much more than the poor man that——”

“ Was she very, very rich, Jeff? ”

Again Jeff smiled. “ Rich ain’t the name for it. Not with mone~~y~~, though, Betty. There’s other ways of being rich than with money. I don’t think the princess had much of *that*. But she was rich in lots of other things . . . in kindness, and helpfulness, and . . . and in the love of other people. And her hair was a kind of golden, anyhow. And she——”

“ Wasn’t there a wicked prince that wanted to run off with her? ” persisted the child dreamily.

“ No-o. I never heard tell of none.” He rambled quietly on, his big hand stroking the tangled curls resting in the hollow of his shoulder. He was staring straight before him into the darkness. As the seconds passed his words came more haltingly. It seemed as if he had lost the thread of what he was saying. “ . . . and so then, you know, Betty, when he got kind of sure that the princess wouldn’t ever love him, but loved somebody else, it made his heart all swell up and feel as if it was going to burst. And at first he wanted to go right away ; only he couldn’t do that, because he thought that perhaps one day she might want his help . . . that she might be in trouble. But he never told her he loved her because he was”

The breaker paused, waiting for the indignant :
“ Oh, Jeff, wasn't he silly. How could she know if he never told her . . . ” but Betty made no movement. Jeff bent softly and saw that she was sleeping. One small hand was clutching at his wrist.

He sighed, and began cautiously to fumble with his free hand for a match. By dint of extraordinary juggling he managed to manœuvre his pipe into position and light it. Then he settled back in the chair and stared once more into the face of the night.

Five minutes passed in silence. Suddenly he became aware of approaching feet. A man's figure emerged from the gloom and came slowly towards him.

“ That you, Jim? ” called the breaker softly. “ Betty's here . . . she's asleep. I was just thinking about carrying her along home. Mrs. Howth must be worrying. ”

The police trooper halted with a tired laugh. “ The little monkey. How she loves to torment you. But it's your own fault, because you encourage her. No—we weren't anxious. We always know where to look for her. And I knew you were at home . . . ”

“ You sound done up, ” said Jeff mildly.

“ I'm asleep on my feet, ” Howth told him. “ No, I won't wait. I've been in the saddle all day. I must have covered eighty miles since sun-

up. Can you lift her into my arms . . . it would be a shame to waken her”

“ Shall I carry her? ” Jeff suggested. He rose stiffly and with extraordinary caution. “ I don’t mind a bit.”

The trooper grinned. His arms went out for the little warm body of his truant daughter. “ No you don’t. Play fair. You’ve had her all the evening. And it’s not often I get the chance for a regular cuddle like this. She generally makes me pay for them. She’s a female Shylock when it comes to a bargain.” He paused a step away, and looked back. “ How fond of kiddies you are, Jeff. I can’t make out why you don’t get married. Mother and I often talk about it——”

“ Married! Me married! ” exclaimed Jeff. “ Why, Jim, it’s all I can do to keep myself. Besides, who’d marry an old bachelor like me? ”

“ Any girl in Copper Creek would be glad to do it,” said the trooper teasingly. “ Well, think it over. I haven’t been to a wedding for years. Good-night.”

“ Good-night,” replied the breaker softly.

He stood a moment in the starlight before turning to the open door of the hut.

RALPH BOYD had been at the Ajax two days before he found time to take any stock of the surroundings beyond the precincts of the mine. This period was occupied mostly by a thorough inspection of the workings, and attention to the correspondence accumulated since the departure of his predecessor, a man named McFarger. So far as he could judge the Ajax, despite its present record of bare subsistence, seemed likely eventually to justify the faith of the shareholders. Boyd quickly decided that the poor showing to date was due not so much to the want of payable dirt, as to the doubtful methods so far employed in the management. The records hinted at a leakage out of all proportion to fair working expenses. Even allowing the most generous margin there still remained many things for which there seemed no reasonable accounting. Broken pumps, lost tools, unaccountable delays in transit of the ore to meet the tiny ketch that called monthly at Shark Bay, sixteen miles away on the coast; things trifling enough in themselves, no doubt, yet in the aggregate opposed to any success-

ful working of the lease. Yet strangely enough in no one instance could Boyd definitely place the blame. Only that he was grimly opposed to the evasion implied by the term, he might have ascribed the whole sequence of past misfortunes to that bugbear of the weakly imaginative—bad luck. As it was, he wisely decided to wait before understanding anything more than the facts themselves.

On the morning of the third day after his arrival, a Saturday, Boyd rose early and went direct to the small iron hut which did duty for an office. As he passed the men's quarters he saw smoke issuing from the chimney, and the rank odour of frying mutton-birds greeted his nostrils. A man was sluicing his upper body over a barrel-tub set against a wall of the cook-house. He looked around as Boyd approached, disclosing the heavy features and swarthy complexion of Nat Absolam, the mine foreman.

Boyd nodded. "Good morning, Absolam."

"Morning," replied the foreman, with a quick grin that disclosed a mouthful of broken teeth. "Hitting old Father Time, ain't you, Mr. Boyd? It ain't long past five."

"I've some mail to see to," Boyd explained. He walked past, but suddenly halted and looked back. "By the way, I'd like to see you at the office later on—say nine o'clock, if you can manage it. Bring Kling and Sjoberg with you. I'd like to talk over a few things while they're on my mind."

“ I’ll see to it,” said Absolam, without comment. He stared after Boyd’s retreating figure, his wide mouth working curiously. He began to mutter as he turned to go in at the hut door.

“ Believes in starting early, does Mister Manager. Gosh, he’d make a dozen of that stringy-necked McFarger though.” He grinned suddenly, and hailed a man passing. “ Hey, Mike, the Boss wants to see you and Sjoberg this morning. I said I’d take you.”

“ I heard him tell you,” said Mike Kling. He smiled crookedly at the others surprise. “ Oh, yes—I was just inside the door. I thought I’d wait for Boyd to pass. Never thrust yourself upon your superiors, my dear Absolam. It’s not only exceedingly bad manners to do so, but it sometimes brings you into unwished-for prominence. However, in this instance, it seems the precaution was vain. We can’t very well deny the gentleman’s curiosity.”

“ You grinning devil—you,” said the foreman, with admiration. He walked on, leaving Kling to take his place at the water-butt. “ Have you seen Sjoberg around? ” he asked over his shoulder.

“ I have not,” returned Kling indifferently.

Left to himself he stripped his lean body to the waist, and began to wash. All his movements evinced a fastidiousness which seemed almost absurd in view of his surroundings. Indeed, his whole manner suggested that he had at one time or

another known a society much in advance of that in which he now found himself. One might be excused for thinking, as Boyd was presently to do, that here was a man patently at odds with his appearance; a man who, so far as externals showed, was fitted for something higher than a mere day labourer in a wayback tin mine. Whatever the reason of the anomaly it was not immediately apparent. Yet one was left with an uneasy conviction of something behind, some defection which was the more to be distrusted in that it was so carefully concealed. Kling was a short man, and slight in proportion. His face was thin and colourless, with straight nose, and ears set slightly below the level of his eyes. His voice was high-pitched and defiant. One physical peculiarity he had—not exactly a lameness, but a kind of hesitancy of the left leg scarcely noticeable excepting at odd moments.

Down at the office Ralph Boyd was tackling his correspondence whole-heartedly. He was anxious to straighten the work and give himself an opportunity to see something of the country adjacent to the mine. So far his impressions were confined to the shortened view seen through the open window in front of his desk. He had a glimpse of a low valley hemmed in by a maze of green timber, the silver sheen of the river backwater, and a line of blue hills in the far distance. To the left of the river, and quite close to what he judged to be the

highest boundary of the mine, were the iron chimneys of a cottage set in the centre of a small orchard. Once he had caught the flutter of a skirt between the trees. The sight brought him no more than a passing interest. A moment later he had forgotten it in some detail of his work.

A little after eight o'clock Boyd repaired to the cook-house; to find, as expected, that the place was deserted except for the cook himself.

"Too late for some breakfast?" asked Boyd.

The cook, by name Jerry Slott, shook his head encouragingly. He was a rotund, slow-moving, but immensely powerful man, with wide mouth, prominent blue eyes, and a bulging Adam's apple.

"I kept you some. I reckoned you'd be along some time. Your pre . . . pre . . . no, I believe I've forgot the word—I mean the man that was here before you come . . ."

"Predecessor?" suggested Boyd.

"That's it—your preassessor, Mr. McFarger, he was a married man. Had his wife up here with him. He fed at home."

Jerry thrust a plate of stew on the board table before his employer and stared at him thoughtfully.

"Eggscuse me, but you ain't a married man, Mr. Boyd, are you?"

Boyd frowned slightly, but replied pleasantly enough. "No, I'm not. Are you?"

"I've a missus on the mainland," said Jerry. He sighed, and dipped a pannican of steaming tea

from the boiler swung to the side of the immense fireplace. "At least she is my missus, and yet she ain't—if you know what I mean. She's been on her own this last three years. That's wimmen for you. Whenever I see a young fellow making up to a girl I feels like saying to him: 'Wait!' just that little word 'Wait. Don't do nothing in a hurry!' Look at me. Do I look as if I knew what I was talking about, or don't I?"

"Oh, certainly," said Boyd. He had no desire to be made a confidant of the cook's domestic troubles, yet he could not help feeling amused.

"You bet I do," said the rotund cook, with great emphasis. He continued to regard Boyd fixedly. "Mr. McFarger would ha' been all right only he had a wife—I say, he had a wife. What was the conskience? He never done no good at his job. Used to spend his time picking her wild flowers, and such-like. Now you're in his place, and he's somewhere else."

Boyd laughed outright. "Naturally."

"I don't see no humour in it," said Jerry tartly. He returned to his pots. Towards the close of the meal, however, he again approached; a desire for conversation plainly evidenced by his manner.

"Bye the way, I seen old Sam Pickens yesterday. I was telling the boys at brekfus. He'd run out of terbacc-oh, and he called in to borry some."

"Who is Sam Pickens?" Boyd felt forced to ask. "One of the men here?"

“ No, Mr. Boyd.” Jerry began to roll himself a cigarette in a corner of newspaper. “ I sort of forgot you wouldn’t know him yet. He’s an old crank prospector that hadn’t ought to be let wander around loose. Not but he ain’t as harmless as a silkworm ; though he’s sharp enough at a bargain, and as cunning as they make them. But he sees things—you know what I mean ; he sees things that ain’t there, so to speak.”

“ A bit touched, is he? ” asked Boyd. He lit his pipe and began to puff leisurely. The tin clock on the shelf above the fireplace registered half-past eight, so he had plenty of time to keep his appointment with Absolam. The cook was proving an unexpected source of amusement. Boyd found himself quite liking the man. In spite of Jerry’s eccentric manner and appearance there was something about him eminently sincere and honest.

“ I’ll give you a . . . a parrerlell, as the saying is. Here’s me yesterday sitting putting a patch on my—I mean I’m darning holes, and doing a little plain sewing, when old Sam pushes his whiskers round the side of the door with a noise like a busted saddle-girth. ‘ Good day, and be hanged to you,’ says I. ‘ Whoo-oof,’ says old Sam. ‘ What seems to be the matter with you?’ I asks him. ‘ Have you seen it?’ says he. ‘ Seen what?’ says I. ‘ The Washammerjangabaloo,’ says Sam ; or words like that. ‘ It’s bin chasing of me ever since I left the crik,’ says he. ‘ I seen its

tail vanish up the chimbley not ten minutes anon,' I tells him. 'Come inside and sort your ideas,' I says. I gets him to talking about something else, and in a minute or two he's as sane as Joolius Ceaser."

"Does he drink?" Boyd ventured lazily.

"He don't know the smell of it. No, Mr. Boyd, he's just suffering from what they calls halloo . . . halloo . . . eggscuse me . . ."

"Hallucinations!" offered Boyd, coming once more to the rescue of the rotund cook's vocabulary.

"That's it. To look at Sam he's the kind of old tramp you'd set the dorg on. But take it from me he's no pauper. Why, they say he owns nigh a hundred acres of plain-land round about Sandy Cove. But he don't do nothing with it, if it is his. Some say he's just waiting a chance to sell it, but I dunno. It don't seem like it was good for anything but a bit of winter grazing."

Boyd showed a sudden interest. "Where is Sandy Cove?"

"Just beyond Shark Bay, where we ship the ore from. Sandy Cove is the best port of the two, for all they don't use it. There's a strip of good solid ground running right to the foreshore. If ever there was to be a jetty built along this coast . . ." Jerry scratched his ear dubiously. "But that ain't likely, seeing what it 'ud cost. All the same, there's been a lot of rumours floating about. And

somebody'll have to do something soon, with all these new shows starting up in the hills."

"Perhaps the Government intend to move."

The rotund cook smiled sadly. "All they'll do is talk. The way things is now you've to take your turn at the sheds along with the rest. If you're lucky you'll get your ore shipped sometime. If you ain't, you won't. Fragricidal, I calls it."

"Eh!" exclaimed Boyd, mystified.

"Fragricidal. It means one brother murdering another," explained Jerry solemnly. "This mine ain't no happy fambly. I'm telling you. I done my best for Mr. McFarger . . ." He broke off suddenly, and Boyd noticed that he cast a quick look towards the open door. "Eggscuse me, I believe I'll get on with my spud peeling."

Boyd got to his feet. The little interlude was already forgotten. His thoughts were on the coming interview.

"When I'm through at the office, Jerry, I intend to look over the outside country a bit. Put me up a bit of lunch, will you. I'll send one of the men across for it."

The cook nodded, and Boyd stepped briskly through the door and down the track to where three men were standing by the side of the tool shed.

As he came up to them Absolam greeted him with a self-conscious grin. "On time, ain't we, Mr. Boyd?"

"Come inside, will you?" said Boyd. He un-

locked the door, and pointed to some empty cases against the far wall. "Pull some of those out and sit down. Good. I shan't keep you long."

He seated himself, and looked at Absolam alertly. "Since I came to the Ajax I've been doing my best to get the hang of things. Without going into too much detail it seems fairly evident to me that the mine hasn't had a fair and square chance to make good. Of course a man can't learn much in a day or two, but already I've discovered things that have set me thinking pretty hard. By the way, what sort of man was McFarger?"

Absolam glanced at his companions before replying. It seemed to Boyd that the big foreman was particularly observant of Kling.

"Oh, I dunno. He was all right. He didn't interfere with the men much. A pretty decent . . ."

"Hold on," said Boyd quickly. "What I meant was, would you say he was competent—a man who knew his business?"

"Quite so," said Kling unexpectedly. His crooked mouth was slightly raised at the corners.

Boyd flashed him a look. "Thank you. I wanted an opinion. Because, you see, all sorts of things seem to have conspired to give the Ajax a bad name. You know what I refer to. Stores have been lost, tools broken, there have been delays in getting the ore to Shark Bay, breakdowns have occurred on the way, and so on. It appears incom-

prehensible. It's my theory that most of this could have been avoided. Mind, I'm not criticising McFarger. I'm just telling you what has happened, and leaving the matter of responsibility to take care of itself. But"—Boyd suddenly slammed the table with his hand, his eyes became hard—"that sort of thing is going to stop right now. And the reason I sent for you three is this. I've noticed that you seem to have a considerable influence with the rest of the men. I don't know the reason of it; and, in a way, it's not my business to know. The point is that I want your co-operation. The manager that thinks he can make a success of his job without the help of those under him, is taking a big chance. You see I'm talking straight. It's as much your interest as mine to see the Ajax well up on the share list. In the past there has been carelessness somewhere; but whether deliberate or excusable I can't say. And while I'm at it I may as well say there's some evidence that the mine property has been interfered with from time to time. Can you suggest for what purpose, or by whom? "

Absolam shuffled his feet noisily. Boyd, looking straight at him, had a curious feeling that the foreman wanted to take his cue from Kling. The idea seemed absurd. For all that Boyd continued to hold the man's attention. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kling and Sjoberg exchange a glance.

“ I dunno that I can,” said Absolam, after a momentary hesitation. “ These things just happen, Mr. Boyd. It’s just a sort of bad luck. I——”

“ Rubbish,” retorted Boyd. He spoke curtly, as was his habit when annoyed. He had no patience with the fetish men call luck. To his matter of fact nature the word almost constituted an offence. “ If you can’t offer a more sensible suggestion than that, I’m mistaken in your intelligence. Get rid of any idea that I’m out to find a scapegoat. I’m not. I’m not concerned with the past at all, except to understand it with a view to safeguarding the future. What do you think, Sjoberg? ”

Sjoberg, a short-set, thick-bearded man of about forty, appeared a trifle disconcerted at being addressed so directly. He returned Boyd’s look sullenly, but without speaking.

Kling interposed with a light laugh.

“ After all, Mr. Boyd, why let us quarrel over an abstract term. Most men will disagree with you when you deny the existence of such a thing as luck; but the point is immaterial. And in this instance, at all events, I think we can safely dispense with the word. I can give you the solution in two others of a more practical nature—outside interference.”

“ Ah! ” said Boyd. He found himself observing Kling more closely. The man’s apt manner and speech surprised and interested him. “ I had

the thought myself, for naturally no one in the employ of the company would have anything to gain by tampering in such a way. In fact, quite the opposite. Are you guessing, or have you something definite to go on? ”

“ Oh, it’s merely a guess,” said Kling. “ But I’m pretty good at guessing.”

“ Go on,” invited Boyd, briefly.

Kling’s eyes flickered. “ I’d say Dan Grant. I’ve thought so for a long time.”

“ Dan Grant! ” echoed Boyd musingly. “ Surely I’ve heard that name before. Who is he? ”

“ That’s Grant’s house over there,” said Kling. He pointed through the window at the house buried amid the fruit trees. “ The one with the orchard. As you can see, they’re higher up the river than we are. But they’ve a few acres of flat on the other side of the mine area, a good bit downstream.”

Boyd gazed for some time before replying. The tiny cottage in its setting of russet foliage, the green slope of the valley side, the quiet, sunlit water that rested deep in the hollow of the woods, the sombre shadow of the massed timber, the patch of blue sky high up over the crest of the hills, might well have appealed to the nature love that was in him. Yet it was not on these that his interest dwelt. He was trying to recall what it was he had heard of this man Grant . . . someone

had told him something. But the thought continued to elude him.

“ Why should Grant interfere with the mine? ” he asked, a little irritably.

“ I don’t know,” Kling told him. “ Unless it is that the silt and slush from the overflow of the big dam is flooding that bit of land I told you of. Of course, it’s a pity, but I don’t see what we can do to avoid it. It isn’t done on purpose.”

“ I see,” said Boyd. “ And you think Grant is that kind of a man, eh? You think he would try to retaliate in some way? ”

Kling grinned. “ Well, Mr. Boyd, what would you do if someone covered your only bit of river flat with stinking yellow mud. Go after him with a gun, wouldn’t you? ”

“ It sounds feasible,” admitted Boyd, frowning.

“ You know it is. I don’t like carrying tales. . . .” Kling shook his head with an appearance of reluctance. “ You understand, Mr. Boyd, I wouldn’t dream of definitely accusing Dan Grant, though I must admit everything points to him.”

“ But yet you’ve no direct proof,” said Boyd.

“ Not yet. But it ought to be easy to get it.” Kling looked at Absolam, and again came that curiously uneven lifting at the corners of his mouth. “ Of course, I’m merely offering a suggestion. But it could be done, eh Nat? ”

“ I don’t see why not,” grunted the foreman.

He appeared much relieved that Kling had elected to bear the brunt of the conversation. "It might be Dan, or it mightn't. I dunno. But they say he don't care much what he does when the drink's in."

Boyd uttered an exclamation. "That's it. I knew I'd been told something about him. Isn't Grant the man that got drunk and ran amuck in someone's house? . . . They were talking about it in the hotel at Lewistoun."

"Oh, he don't booze regular," conceded Absolam. "He just takes a bender now and agin."

"Dey say he goes schweed on der leedle school mees, yah," broke in Sjoberg, with a sudden guffaw. It was his first and only remark throughout the interview.

Boyd gave the man a look of dislike. "We're not concerned with his private affairs, Sjoberg. Well, I'm glad to know this other. Forewarned is forearmed, as they say. If young Grant is tampering with the mine property, it's up to us to catch him at it. Now I want to say this much more. I've been sent up here to make the Ajax pay. Well, I'm going to do it. In some way we've got to increase the output and decrease the working expenses. This wastage has got to stop, and it's got to stop *now*. Understand me—I've been given a free hand. Treat me fairly, and I'll do the same by you. But there'll be no room for a shirker on the pay-roll of this mine."

“Are you hinting at anyone, Mr. Boyd?” asked Kling coolly.

“No, I’m not,” said Boyd sharply. “I’m merely taking the precaution to let you know how matters stand. Neither you nor any other man can sit there and tell me that there hasn’t been carelessness somewhere. However, as I said before, I’m not concerned with the past. But from this on things are going to be run on a different basis. I’m going to see that each man has his job, and does it. And that’s where you three can help. And you can take it from me that in a year’s time this mine will either be paying a decent dividend, or she will be shut right down. And it won’t be the last.”

“You seem mighty sure, Mr. Boyd,” remarked Absolam bluntly.

Kling said nothing, but there was a little glint in his half shut eyes that Boyd felt inclined to resent. He rose from his chair as an indication that the discussion was ended.

“I have to be sure. If I had no faith in the Ajax, or in myself, I shouldn’t be here at all. We’ll go into details early next week. Good morning.”

The curt dismissal was accepted without comment. The three men stamped outside and began to climb the rise towards the water-race. Out of sight of the office Absolam halted and eyed his companions curiously.

“ He’s a hell of a man, ain’t he?”

Sjoberg grunted and spat on the ground. His heavy face was puckered stupidly. “ He dinks he is der man fer der yob.”

Kling smacked him on the back. “ And so he is, Dutchy. It’s some pleasure setting your wits against a man like Boyd. That McFarger was too easy. But this chap . . . Oh, he’s clever—and be damned to him. He knows his own mind, and he won’t scare. He’ll keep us guessing.”

“ It don’t matter so long as we guess right,” said Absolam. He blew noisily down the stem of his pipe. “ And he don’t know a thing.”

“ You think not? ” asked Kling, with a thin smile. “ Well, but it doesn’t matter if he does. We’ll trump his best. I’ve got him wondering as it is. He can’t place me. But you don’t want to get it into your head that this man is anything like McFarger. Boyd is a fighter born. Remember that, Sjoberg.” He swung swiftly about as a hail came from the direction of the cook-house. “ There’s Jerry calling. What’s he saying?”

They could see the cook making a funnel of his hands. His voice came faintly to their ears.

“ I jess seen Phil McGurr. He’s looking for you three. There’s something gone wrong with the big nozzle.”

“ We’re coming,” roared Absolam, in reply.

His eye sought Kling’s, and a slow grin started on his face. Sjoberg was already heading towards

the shoulder of higher ground on their right, from whence sounded the hollow boom of rushing water.

“No,” said Kling sharply, as if in answer to an unspoken question.

“I thought . . .” began the foreman, but ceased abruptly at the impatient lift of Kling’s hand.

“Hell! Am I as crude as all that!” said Kling. His crooked mouth worked sneeringly. “And the man just getting into his stride, and looking for trouble with both his eyes! You might know me better. If that fool up there has started anything . . .”

“I’ll go and see what’s doing,” mumbled the foreman. He slouched carelessly in the wake of Sjoberg’s retreating figure. Kling followed. He snapped his fingers as he went, and his under lip was thrust forward wickedly.

GRANT'S farm rested on a slope of the valley a short quarter-mile above the boundary of the Ajax Lease. The house was of paling, with quaint gable roof, and narrow verandahs; the chimneys were of corrugated iron reared lengthways against saplings set firmly on end in the stiff clay soil. Over the top of each chimney was bent a wide hoop of tin, a contrivance evidently designed to nullify the importunities of the south-west winds, which, dropping over the adjacent timber, must otherwise have driven the smoke to escape by way of the house itself. A few creepers climbed the eaves and along the gutters, reaching thin fingers of russet and gold to grip the uneven ridge. A portion of land at the front and sides of the house had been fenced off for a garden. Late as was the season the tiny flower beds were gay with bloom. Trim paths wandered between, and on through the olive-green of the native bushes that hugged the walls of the house. A low arch led to an outhouse almost smothered beneath a riot of creeper; thence to a gate set in a privet hedge. Beyond this was the orchard, and the brown of the cultivation paddocks.

Outside the area of the farm the scrub crept

thinly on every side. A forest of dead timber covered the eastern ridges, rising starkly to meet the blue-grey of the autumn morning. Long forgotten fires, raging their devastating course at the snarling behest of the east winds, had brought the once stately timber to little more than a confusion of charred and lifeless wood. The comeliness of clustering leaf and shadowed trunk, the cool recess of gully-bed and slope, the shining olive waves of fern and moss and creeper, were given place to grey skeletons that flung their gaunt limbs wildly heavenwards and made the hills ring with their harsh threnody. No longer the earth sent forth cool green harbourage to shield the creatures of the bush. The sun scorched and blistered it, the rains of winter beat upon it, the wind searched its every nook and hollow. There remained nothing but a tangle of bracken, and the unsightly evidence of dead and rotting timber. Through such desolation ran the narrow track leading to Copper Creek. From the crest of the ridge the settlement, reared four miles beyond in the trough of the plains, was easily to be seen.

Only at its eastern approach, however, was the little farm so ill served. Elsewhere the eye delighted in the natural beauty so typical of the northwest. Southwards the timber gave place to wide, undulating plains. A silver ribbon bound about the feet of the valley marked the course of the Ajax River, a smudge of brown denoting the spot

where Copper Creek sought junction with it through a belt of low-lying swamp. Through a gap in the far off knolls one caught the gleam of yellow sands and the misty blue of the ocean.

It was a habit of Joan Norris to rise early on Saturdays, notwithstanding that the fret and fume of the week's work often tempted her to week-end sloth. The Copper Creek School mustered no more than a bare score of scholars; touselled-headed urchins, for the most part; yet whose naïve affection for their teacher charitably offset less evident virtues. So much the girl admitted thankfully. Not for worlds would she have returned to the cramped environment of city life. Though it must be admitted that there were occasions when thought of the morrow, with its ride to and from the little settlement, its noisy hours of precept and practice in the stuffy atmosphere of the school house, its rigid adherence to the monotony of the day before, was only to be endured because of a lively sense of humour and an abounding faith in the gospel of work. Joan had a just estimate of her own capacity, and not a little determination to help her courage over the rough places.

Something of the girl's outlook on life was reflected in her appearance. Her eyes were clear and compelling, with a hint of mischief lurking in their brown depths. Her mouth was large, with full lips, and white, even teeth. Perhaps a little of the magic of open spaces had crept into her cheeks, for

the skin was softly tanned and glowing with health. A pile of thick brown hair crowned her head. By accepted standards she could claim to nothing more than passable good looks. At the same time, there was something about her face which was quietly attractive. The secret lay not in the features themselves, but in their expression. Her voice, too, was arresting in its low, musical tones.

The widow Grant was busy with the breakfast dishes when Joan left the table a little after eight o'clock. Dan Grant had been absent since before daylight, in response to an overnight call to repair a break in the telephone line. He might or might not put in an appearance by next morning. No one—unless, perhaps, Jeff Semple—could hope to gauge the promptings of the lad's restless spirit. In his bodily movements Dan was as unstable as the wind.

Joan went straight to the kitchen and took the drying towel from the widow's hands.

"I'll do that," she said reprovingly. "You know this is my regular Saturday morning task. It's a kind of self-imposed penance for my sins. Go and sit down and watch me at it."

"You've had a trying week with your chicks and your mails," protested Mrs. Grant. But the girl would not listen. She took the little widow by the elbows and thrust her laughingly into a chair.

"Now off you go and tell me the news," she ordered. "What time did Dan leave?"

Mrs. Grant looked at her affectionately. "How young and strong and confident you are. No, you didn't hurt me. But I was too terrified to resist. My dear, I wonder if you know how fortunate you are to have all your life ahead of you, instead of behind, as we old folks. And yet I don't know. We know the worst the past can do. If one could only see ahead . . . not always, of course; but just now and then, when the way seems to be growing unduly hard . . ." She sighed, and smoothed the grey hair from her forehead. "You were asking about Dan. He must have left about five, I should judge. I know I seemed to hear him moving around the house hours before daylight."

"I never heard a sound," declared Joan. "Is his cough better, Mrs. Grant?"

"I . . . I think it is," said the widow slowly. Her voice held a note of wistfulness that did not escape Joan. "If he'd only take more care of himself. But you know what Dan is. When I tell him he just laughs at me. He won't own but what he's as well as ever he was. And yet I know it isn't true. I hear him in the night sometimes. I can't help feeling just a wee bit anxious. You see Dan's all I've got."

Joan flicked the towel almost viciously. "If Dan Grant were my child he'd do what he was told," she said determinedly. "Oh, yes; you can laugh if you want to. But I mean it. The way he roams around in all weathers is a scandal and a dis-

grace. Whatever's wrong with the man that he can't stay at home respectably. He's a regular Wandering Jew."

"Do be careful of those dishes," implored the widow. "It won't help in the least for you to break half-a-dozen of them." She sat back with a sigh of relief. "And don't you get calling my son hard names. Dan's the best boy in the world. He wouldn't do a thing in the world to grieve me. I know he wouldn't. All he needs is to settle down.

. . . ."
"Which he doesn't show the slightest intention of doing," retorted Joan.

"There you go again," said the widow accusingly. "Why, of course, he'll settle down one day. Men are quite different to us, the way they look at things. Dan's anxious to get on. He wants to make money. He's always saying he can't bear to see me working like this. As if I minded. We might be much worse off than we are. When I remember the times when Dan was growing up, and . . . and . . ."

She ceased suddenly, and Joan saw that her mouth had a little pathetic droop. The girl turned quietly aside, unwilling to witness her friend's momentary distress. She knew perfectly the thought in the widow's mind. Long since she had come to learn something of the Grant's history, and the pity of it never failed to stir her deeply.

Dan's father had been a man of great personal

charm, gifted beyond the ordinary, imbued with the instincts of greatness. Unfortunately also he had the sensitiveness of the artist, the almost morbid temperament of those who draw near to the border of genius. To such an one vice comes easily, if at all. Stephen Grant sought early the means to combat the strain of work that was become a weariness, the jar of tiring nerves, the horror of long, sleepless nights. He turned, as so many have turned, and for no better reason, to that King of Deceivers, John Barleycorn. And thereafter for them all existence was inverted hideously.

Of the closing scenes of this sordid human tragedy Joan had been told only the barest details. She knew, however, that Dan and his mother, tiring at last of the degradation of poverty and the unspeakable bitterness of a natural affection subverted by unnatural despair, took their courage in their hands and set out to face life by themselves. In the weeks that followed they travelled steadily north, Dan working here and there as they went. So, by slow degrees, they came to Copper Creek, where Dan invested his savings in a partially improved selection which had reverted to the Crown. Since then they had steadily prospered. Of Stephen Grant they heard nothing for five long years. Then came the news—as such news always seems curiously to come, unexpectedly and by devious ways—first, that he was confined in a

mental hospital; then, soon afterwards, that he was dead.

Remembrance of these things softened Joan's voice when next she spoke.

"I think Dan wonderful," she said presently. "Just think how he has toiled and slaved to buy this home. His temper is sometimes ferocious, and he uses the most shocking language . . . but he's a dear, for all that. I don't think any man in Copper Creek can boast as many friends as Dan; unless it's Jeff Semple."

The widow smiled at mention of the breaker. "And Jeff is like a father to the lad. Dan thinks there's no one like him. He'd sooner take Jeff's advice than mine."

"I believe he would," agreed Joan. She went to the open window, and resting her arms on the low sill looked with eager eyes at the glorious prospect confronting her. "What a morning; oh, what a morning. Isn't it good just to be alive. I'm wondering if I'll pay my promised visit to Susie Packer. Would you mind very much if I did? I could start early and take it easy on the way. But I just hate leaving you all by yourself."

"Of course you must go," said the widow promptly. "The Packers will begin to wonder if you hold off much longer. If Dan was home he could run you across in the jinker. He'd be glad to do it."

Joan made a little face across her shoulder.

“ Thanks . . . I believe I’d sooner walk. Dan’s driving is none of the safest. Although I’d love his company.”

“ Why, Joan Norris, you know there isn’t a better driver in the Island than my Dan,” said the widow indignantly. “ The idea of you saying such a thing. He’d take the greatest care of you. He’d sooner die than have you hurt a hair of your head. If you could hear what he says sometimes . . .”

“ Of course I was only joking,” broke in Joan hastily. She felt the warm blood flooding her face, and was thankful that her back was towards the widow. “ Still, he is a little bit reckless, you know. He doesn’t seem to care what he does.”

“ Some men are like that,” said Mrs. Grant oddly. “ Dan is . . . how shall I put it? . . . What I mean is that, although he loves me dearly, I don’t always count in his thoughts. I call him a boy, but he isn’t one really. He’s a man. He’s nearly twenty-four. And . . . and at his age, you know, a man dreams dreams. If Dan was to marry . . . Oh, but I wouldn’t be the least bit jealous of her. It’s what he needs—a good, sweet girl to bear him company through life, and hold up his hands against the world. He’d be a different man.”

“ Yes,” said Joan, in a muffled voice. Her chin rested on her folded arms, and she was gazing steadily before her.

“ Dan would worship his wife,” resumed the

widow slowly, after a quiet pause. "He'd class her with the angels. He's like that . . . passionate in every thought. If he could win the girl he wants . . ."

Joan was silent. The widow continued to eye her motionless figure wistfully. And suddenly she said a queer thing.

"God make life beautiful for those I love," she called tremulously. "Joan . . ."

The girl turned slowly to face her. "I won't pretend to misunderstand you. But you make it hard for me. I . . . don't you think . . .?"

"Dan loves you, child," cried the widow, with all her heart in her frightened voice.

"I . . . have sometimes feared so," said Joan, in a low tone. Once more the rich blood flooded her cheeks. "But I . . . Oh, how can I say anything to hurt you. Yet surely it is best to be quite honest. I don't love Dan—at least, not in that way."

"But you will. Joan, you will."

Joan shook her head. Her eyes met those of the older woman almost timidly. "I'm fond of Dan . . . tremendously fond of him. But not that way. I've been dreading this would happen. If I could be sure of the future . . ."

"Dan will teach you to love him," said the widow eagerly. "Child, he's all I have in the world. Would I lie against my own happiness!

I tell you he worships the very air you breathe. Yes, I know what some would say of him . . . that he is wild and reckless. Is it that frightens you? Then you shall see what love will do. You shall know”

“Don’t . . . please don’t,” whispered the girl. The colour had slowly drained from her cheeks, leaving them almost white. “Dear Mrs. Grant, won’t you understand that I speak the truth when I say I do not love Dan. But if I did . . . if ever the time came” She broke off, and the distress in her eyes deepened. “Don’t you see that this will make it almost impossible for me to remain here.”

“I did wrong to speak,” said Mrs. Grant abruptly. Her lip quivered. “If Dan knew of it he’d never forgive me. You mustn’t leave us. Promise you won’t leave us. Forget what I said. You’ll surely grow to dislike me now for a meddling old fool not content to let her boy do his own courting.”

“No—no,” said Joan. She bent impulsively and kissed the little widow’s frail cheek. “We won’t speak of it again.”

An awkward silence fell. For the first time between the two women there came a feeling of restraint. Joan was the first to speak.

“Well, I’d best be going, if I want to reach Packers in time for dinner,” she said, endeavouring to make her voice sound natural. “You won’t

mind being alone? Or shall I leave it until some other day."

Mrs. Grant roused herself with a sigh. "No, you must go. I shall manage all right. Will you be late back?"

"I hope not," said Joan. She glanced at the clock. "I must hurry."

She emerged from her own room some ten minutes later to find the widow still sitting as she had left her.

"I'll take a few flowers, if I may," she said, with a return to her usual brisk manner. "Some of those Easter Daisies, I think. Susie Packer loves them. And you know the Packer's land is so poor they can scarcely grow flowers at all. I'll say you sent them."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," retorted the widow, rising to her feet. "You must take the credit yourself. I should never have thought of doing anything so useful. Take an armful, if you like. That poor crippled Susie doesn't have much brightness in her life."

She watched from the window while the girl gathered a bunch of the flowers.

"I'd like to be going with you," she called, a little envious of the sunshine and the crisp, clean air.

"Why don't you?" coaxed Joan, smiling with a flash of white teeth.

"I can't. The house is a positive pig-stye. There's no end to be done. Well, good-bye."

“ Good-bye,” replied Joan.

She went through the creaking wooden gate and along the side of the cultivation to where the cool, green shadows of the backwater beckoned invitingly. In the far distance the ranges stood out with a curious distinctness. She could almost count the ridges of the foot-hills, and the little dark lines, like pen tracings on blue paper, that marked the lay of gully and ravine. The air was clear, and full of the tantalizing sweetness of the autumn bush.

Joan walked slowly, to the accompaniment of a sober reflection. The incident just over had left her with a vague uneasiness. She felt as if she had been suddenly thrust into strange and unwelcome surroundings. She was aware of the disquiet that invariably attends an attempt at self analysis. The more she tried to define her thoughts the more persistently they eluded her. One moment she was doubtful; the next, assured. She knew she did not love Dan Grant, but the knowledge brought no consolation. Why was it, she wondered, that she found herself unable to return this love of an honest man. And presently she grew angry with herself that she could not. Yet always some instinct warned her that she must not try to force her feelings. She had a curious sense of helplessness, as if the ordering of her life was something apart from any thought or circumstance of which she was then conscious.

It was late in the afternoon when she left

Packer's farm on the return journey. For some distance the track followed the crest of a high ridge. Trees rose thickly on every hand: great spreading eucalyptus, about whose rugged boles spread a wilderness of matted undergrowth; green-topped blackwoods and myrtles, whose shining leaves caught the eye restfully; groves of musk and dogwood, and the comeliness of tall man-ferns rising from the gully beneath. Joan looked on the familiar scene with kindling eyes. She loved the friendliness of the bush, its solitude, the quiet that pervaded each nook and hollow, the sober restfulness of its garb. She never failed to experience a sense of awe at the majesty of the trees, the dignity with which they lifted their great limbs from the ruck of earth in patient striving towards the clear blue of the infinite skies.

When nearing the end of her journey Joan felt she was tiring. An open glade in the bush caught her attention, and she turned aside to it and sat herself thankfully down on the trunk of an uprooted spar. How long she remained thus she did not know. Her thoughts had again reverted to the incidents of the morning, and she was for a time so engrossed as to be almost oblivious of her surroundings. Presently, however, she became aware of someone approaching from a point in the scrub exactly in front of her. She could hear the snap of breaking twigs and the crackling of the undergrowth, varied every little while by pauses which

evidently denoted a halt. Listening intently Joan found herself growing puzzled. The advance lacked confidence. In place of a steady, forward movement there seemed rather to be a kind of aimless groping, a slow and cautious circumlocution of the thick bushes, that hinted at bewilderment.

The girl waited silently; a little uncertain of what she ought to do. She was not alarmed; but she was intensely curious. And quite suddenly she felt that she wanted to aid; to relieve, in some fashion, the anxiety she knew to be burdening those painfully hesitating feet. Before she quite realised it she had uttered a little, quick coo-oo-ee.

The movement amongst the bushes ceased. She called again; more loudly, and with less apprehension. Almost immediately she was answered by a man's voice, in which sounded a note of such startled relief that she could not restrain a smile. She continued to call encouragingly, guiding the clumsy approach with all the interest she might have had in some game during her school recess. She was on her feet watching eagerly, when a man stumbled from cover and halted within a yard of her.

"I was bushed, by George," he greeted her abruptly.

The intense seriousness with which he proclaimed this self-evident fact, no less than the absence from his tone of anything resembling gratitude to herself, amused Joan.

“ I inferred as much,” she said dryly.

He made a little gesture of annoyance. “ I might be some school kid, to judge from to-day’s experience. I thought I was enough of a bushman to venture on a short cut, but it seems I’ve something yet to learn.”

“ It’s more easy to lose yourself around here than some might think,” said Joan simply. “ And you are new to the district. At least, I do not remember to have seen you before.”

“ I’ve been on this end of the coast exactly three days.” He smiled ruefully. “ My name, by the way, is Boyd. I’m the manager—perhaps I ought to say, the new manager—at the Ajax mine. I’ve been out exploring, and I can’t say I like the experience. I don’t think I’ve ever in my life before encountered such a jumble of gullies as I crossed this afternoon.”

“ It is confusing,” Joan admitted. “ They call this place the Devil’s Web, because of the way the gullies run into one another and spread through the hills in a kind of maze. Even the old hands are puzzled sometimes.”

“ I can well believe it,” said Boyd.

He glanced aside for a moment, and Joan seized the opportunity to study him covertly. She knew an altogether unusual interest. So this was Ralph Boyd—the man of whom she had heard so much; this was the man whose coming had occasioned such

a stir in the tiny community. She felt a sudden thrill at the strangeness of the meeting.

Boyd was a man of average height, with broad shoulders, and erect head. His copper-brown hair was cropped close to the temples, and his face was clean shaved. His most prominent feature was his mouth, which was wide and firm lipped, and only relieved from being almost brutal by the little upward lift at the corners. It was the mouth of a thinker, a fighter; yet, also, the girl thought, an honest mouth. His chin was square and determined. She saw that his hands were big and rough, with slightly splayed knuckles—the hands of a worker. She remembered what they had said of this man, and her interest quickened.

Boyd had seated himself on the grass. His fingers were busy with his pipe.

“ You won’t mind if I smoke? ” he asked. “ By the way, ought I to know your name? ”

Joan looked at him uncertainly. “ I suppose the introduction would be rather one-sided otherwise, wouldn’t it? My name is Joan Norris. I board with the Grants. Perhaps you know the house. It can be seen easily from the mine.”

“ Thank you,” said Boyd gravely. He smoked in silence for some moments. “ Yes, I know the place. And am likely to know it better, You see, Miss Norris, I am at present rather interested in young Grant.”

“ Oh! ” said Joan. She would have liked to ask

him why, but reflected that it was hardly any business of hers. She said instead: "I suppose you are very busy at the mine, Mr. Boyd."

Boyd looked up at her quickly. "Is that a chance remark, I wonder. Or are you really interested?"

"It was a natural question, wasn't it?" said Joan, reddening. So the man *was* a boor, after all, it seemed. "They say a new broom sweeps clean. And there must be plenty to keep you busy."

"There is," returned Boyd. He seemed unconscious of giving offence. "Well, Miss Norris, you'll find the work will be done. Oh, yes; I know the Ajax hasn't much of a reputation to date, but we're going to alter all that. If the tin's there I'll find it."

"You are evidently sure of yourself," suggested Joan, a little spitefully. "Mr. McFarger did his best, you know, but somehow he failed."

"Oh, I've got to be sure of myself," said Boyd. He laughed grimly. "I don't mind telling you that the Ajax means more to me than the usual. I've got the chance to make good in a big way, and, by George, I'm going to do it. McFarger was a bungler. I say that deliberately. Personally I've no time for the man that falls down on his job."

Joan's eyebrows lifted. "Are you always successful then in what you undertake, Mr. Boyd?"

The sarcasm was lost. To her amazement Boyd replied quite seriously. "Always. Why shouldn't

I be? If it comes to that, why shouldn't any man be successful? Success is merely a matter of knowing and doing. It's within reach of any man."

"And you would make no allowance then for temperament, or physical disability, or bad fortune, and the like?" asked Joan. His assurance left her a little breathless.

"Within reasonable limits, yes," rejoined Boyd. He shrugged his shoulders. "But you want to remember, Miss Norris, that no man has a right to undertake work for which he is unfitted. Every man to his own job, is a good saying."

Joan glanced at the sun, now declining behind the timber. "I think you are inclined to be narrow in your view, and a little hard in your judgment," she said straightforwardly. "But perhaps circumstances are responsible. I must go, Mr. Boyd, or else my friends will be feeling anxious."

"Then I hope you won't object to piloting me at least part of the remaining distance," said Boyd, scrambling upright. "Please be the Good Samaritan once more, Miss Norris."

"You really confess to being bushed then?" smiled Joan.

"It would be foolish to deny it. I could, of course, follow and keep you in sight, and so save my face; but I prefer to be honest. Are we far from the mine property?"

"Quite near to it, as a matter of fact," said

Joan. "If it were not for the timber between you could see Grant's place from here. It's only just around the hill. And the mine boundary adjoins, you know."

For some distance they proceeded in silence. Joan was attempting vainly to sum up her impressions of this man who strode so unconcernedly beside her. In some respects she felt she liked him. There was no denying the bluntness of his methods, nor the uncompromising candour of his speech. Yet she felt that these things, after all, were no real evidence of character. They were merely externals. Admitting Boyd's egotism, his apparent lack of sympathy, his neglect of the little courtesies which women prize, there still remained much that puzzled her. She liked the friendly, if rather impersonal, expression of his brown eyes; the sincere ring in his voice. They at least, she decided, were beyond reproach of counterfeit.

She came out of her thoughts to find Boyd looking at her amusedly.

"I believe they call it a brown study, don't they, Miss Norris?" he asked.

Joan flushed. "Please forgive me. Only it wasn't a brown study altogether. In some respects it was rather black."

"Then I hope I wasn't the subject," laughed Boyd. "But you were looking so serious that I half feared I was pushing a chance acquaintance too far. Halloa! is that Grant's farm? I shouldn't

have recognised it. I suppose that's because I'm viewing it from a fresh angle."

"I know, and love, every inch of it," declared Joan. She stopped and pointed to a track winding through the ferns. "That is your way, Mr. Boyd. It's only a short distance, and you can't very well lose your way. Good evening."

She went to move on, but Boyd called to her almost sharply. She was surprised to see that he was frowning slightly.

"One minute, Miss Norris, please, if you don't mind. I think you told me a while back that the Grants are friends of yours. Am I right?"

"Yes," said Joan. She wondered what on earth the man was driving at. "I told you I was boarding with Mrs. Grant."

"So you did," admitted Boyd, with a half laugh. "Though the inference isn't as obvious as you appear to think. However, I wanted to say this—tell young Grant to keep away from the mine property."

"Whatever for?" asked Joan, in astonishment.

"For the sake of his own skin," said Boyd. She saw his jaws tighten angrily. "I owe you a good turn, Miss Norris, and I like to pay my debts as quickly as possible. Otherwise I should not have spoken at all. As it is, if you have any influence with Grant you'll be advised to use it."

He raised his hat and turned away.

It was Joan's turn to call, and she did so promptly. "Mr. Boyd . . . please. When I said the Grants were friends of mine I spoke no more than the truth. I don't in the least understand why Dan Grant should not visit the Ajax. Nor, I am sure, would he. Perhaps you will explain."

Boyd hesitated. "Oh, certainly; if you insist. But I think you will find young Grant isn't in need of any interpretation."

"I do insist," said the girl, with spirit.

"Very well," said Boyd. He looked at her appraisingly. "I should say you would make a good friend. And I'm not sure that I'd like to have you for an enemy. Still, as you appear to think, having said so much I might as well finish. Someone — Dan Grant, for choice — has been meddling with the mine property. I'll admit I haven't any direct proof so far, but all the evidence points that way. I'm giving you a friendly hint. If I catch Grant at it I'll have no mercy."

"Oh!" exclaimed Joan. For a second she struggled with her indignation. Then the absurdity of the charge struck her so forcibly that she burst into a laugh.

"I'm glad it amuses you," said Boyd stiffly.

"Oh, but it doesn't amuse me," declared Joan, once more resentful. "Mr. Boyd, I don't know where you got your information, but it's too ridiculous altogether. No one who knows Dan would credit it for an instant."

“ Yet I believe it to be true,” said Boyd. He met her anger calmly. “ So do a great many others.”

“ Will you tell me why you believe it,” asked Joan, after a little pause, during which she continued to eye him scornfully. “ And will you tell me what possible motive Dan Grant could have for interesting himself in your affairs. I assure you I am quite curious to learn.”

“ I’m sorry you take it that way,” said Boyd, smiling at her tone. “ I don’t know that I’ve anything to gain by going into details. You’ll have no difficulty in getting the information from Grant himself.”

“ Mr. Boyd,” said Joan earnestly, “ I wonder if you will accept my assurance that you are quite mistaken. I know Dan Grant well. Ever since I came to teach at Copper Creek my home has been with the Grants. What you suggest is unthinkable. Dan is the soul of fairness. If he thought he had a grievance against you he would fight—yes, but he would fight openly.”

The appeal went unnoticed. Indeed, Joan doubted if he heard her at all. Certainly his next words seemed totally irrelevant.

“ Are you the school-teacher here, then, Miss Norris? ”

Joan gulped down her annoyance. “ Yes, I am. But what possible connection is there ! ”

“ Oh, none, of course,” disclaimed Boyd. He

raised his hat once more and turned to go. "I was merely curious to know how it was you seemed so out of place with your surroundings."

"Good evening," said the girl shortly.

She was frankly bewildered. Her heart was hot within her at thought of how Dan had been slandered. Yet her resentment did not end here. In some inexplicable manner she believed herself to be included in the sum of Boyd's disapproval. She was not to know the thought that had flashed into his mind—the dingy echo, as it were, of Sjoberg's crude wit: 'Dey say he goes schweet on der leedle school mees.' She remembered only that his parting glance had seemed a little contemptuous, and she felt her face burn. She told herself that this new manager was detestable. She was still breathless from her thoughts as she passed through the creaking gate of the orchard, and so slowly on up the narrow path leading to the house.

“WILL they be trains with wheels and things, and real smoke—like you see in the pictures, Jeff?” asked Betty Howth. She balanced her small body on the rail of the feed-binn and swung her legs vigorously. “Honest now . . . will they?”

The breaker nodded. “Honest, Betty. At least, that’s the kind they mean to have if it comes off at all. But they’ve got to settle just which part of the coast they’re coming to. Hold this bottle a second, will you. That’s the idea. I wish I had you to help me like this always. See what a fine job we’re making of things. Your dad will be able to ride clean over the edge of beyond, if he wants to. I’ve never seen a gall dry so beautifully.”

He stood a pace away from the big black troop-horse and looked him over admiringly. “That’s been a bad back, but I think it’s right now. I don’t believe it’ll rub sore so long as your dad’s careful. And he’s all that. There ain’t a better rider in the district than Jim Howth.” Jeff paused thoughtfully. “Unless, maybe, it’s that man Kling, up at the mine.”

“ I don’t like Kling,” said Betty frowning.

“ Neither do I,” said Jeff, with a smile. “ But perhaps he don’t like us either, so that kind of makes things even. Did your daddy say what time he was starting out. It’s near dark now, and he’s got pretty near an all-night trip. I’m glad I’m not a policeman.”

He could feel her big, serious eyes observing him reproachfully.

“ Why, daddy says you’re miles better than any policeman. He says it’s funny to see the way you get your own way with the bad men. There’s lots and lots of bad men at Copper Creek, aren’t there, Jeff? ”

“ I dare say there’s quite a few, if you came to count them all up,” the breaker admitted. He began methodically to gather up his belongings. “ And so your daddy said that, did he. Now that’s nice of him, ain’t it? But between you and me, I ain’t so sure that he’s right. Maybe he said it just to please us. I don’t get my own way half as much as I’d like. And you’ve no idea how I hate trouble.”

“ Will there be trouble when the thing is built where the ships are to come, Jeff? ” asked Betty.

“ When . . . when what? Oh, you mean when the jetty is built. I dunno. I hope not. What made you ask? ”

“ I heard Bill Utting telling Sam Barnes about

it and he said there was bound to be a row come of it sure as hell," said Betty, all in a breath.

"What!" exclaimed Jeff. He stood straight up in his astonishment. "As sure as . . . Betty Howth, don't you ever use that word again. My gracious! I never heard of such a thing."

The child wriggled plaintively. "But Bill said it. I was there and heard him. Is it such a very very bad word, Jeff?"

"Bad!" echoed Jeff. "Why, it's the worst . . ."

"And I heard you say it once too, the time Mr. Peter's pony trod on your foot. You know you did, Jeff."

The breaker threw up his hands in assumed horror. "If ever you say that word again, I'll certainly get someone to spank you. It don't matter if Bill Utting did say it. He's an old fool. He ain't a little girl like you, any way; he's a hard-case old tin scratcher. As for me saying it . . . now, you know, Betty, it sort of slipped out that time. Don't you ever let me hear you . . ."

"Well, then—I won't," promised Betty stoutly.

"I should say not," said Jeff, still shaking his head. "Why, bless us, if your father was to hear of it . . ."

"Hear of what?" came Howth's pleasant voice

from the doorway. "What a pair of gossips you two are. Hear of what?"

Jeff swung around with a laugh. "Never you mind. It's a secret, ain't it, Betty?"

The child nodded her head with such vigour that Jeff laughed again.

"There you are, Jim. Didn't I tell you."

"Well—but look here," began Howth seriously. "Don't you go letting her worry you, Jeff. She's a young monkey—and it's nearly time she was in bed."

"Now you're saying things of my partner," said Jeff, with mock displeasure. "Worry me! Well, I like that. She's been as busy as a pig in a turnip paddock."

"I'll bet," said Howth. He reached for the small figure on the rail of the binn and held her a moment in his strong arms. "Busy asking questions, I suppose—eh, chicken? Now that's something like a hug and kiss. You nearly took my breath away."

He set her gently on her feet and turned to the waiting horse.

"How's the back, Jeff? Think it'll last out. I ride fairly heavy, you know."

"So long as you're careful you can't go wrong," said Jeff. "Betty and I reckon it's about the best job we've done for a long time. Use a cold water lather after you off-saddle, Jim, and I don't think you'll have any trouble. When d'you expect to be back?"

“I’m not sure,” said Howth, considering. “To-morrow night or the next day, I think. I’m not keen on going at all, if it comes to that.” He checked himself abruptly, seeming to peer at his friend through the half light. “There’s two or three from the Ajax just come into the Creek. They’re over at Nordsens now.”

“Oh, Kling and his mob,” said Jeff indifferently. “They’ll just get tight, and then go home again. Let ’em be.”

“Dan Grant came in with them,” said Howth quietly.

By the light of the match he was holding to his pipe he saw the breaker’s eyes narrow suddenly.

“Dan! Sure, Jim?”

Howth nodded. “Quite sure. Saw him myself. He was riding alongside of Kling. Sjoberg, McGurr, and Jerry Slott were with them.”

Jeff was silent. There was something in this that he did not understand. Knowing Dan Grant’s fierce dislike of Kling, it struck the breaker as singular that the two should suddenly appear together on apparently friendly terms.

“Jerry Slott’s all right,” pursued Howth. “He’s a queer mixture, but he’s straight as a ram-rod. But Mike Kling is a degenerate. I can’t place that man, somehow. He hates me like poison since I grabbed him with those skins last winter. He’d do anything to get back at me. Well, I must be off.”

“ Yes,” said Jeff.

He felt Betty's small hand groping for his, and he caught it and held it warmly. He knew the child hated these goings-away of her father, although she rarely shewed it openly. Not for worlds would she have them notice the trembling of her mouth and the soft filling of her eyes. Jeff, with his curious understanding of her moods, knew that she welcomed the darkness that hid her distress, and he lifted his free hand and patted her shoulder encouragingly.

Howth led his horse into the open and mounted ; looking down at them for a final word.

“ Betty, you were late last night, so mother wants you to turn in early. You'll take her to the house, will you, Jeff? The wife's got a cup of tea waiting for you, if you'd care for it. Well—so long.”

He lifted the reins and rode away at a smart canter. They stood a moment listening to the soft thud of receding hoofs ; then Jeff bent down and swung Betty to his shoulders.

“ I can hear your mother calling us. Come on, and let's hurry. That tea will be getting cold, and I could certainly do with a nice hot drink.”

Mrs. Howth was at the door peering anxiously into the dim starlight. “ I was just coming to find you,” she told them, in a relieved voice. “ Jeff, you spoil that child of mine.”

The breaker carried his charge inside and put her

on the box couch in the kitchen, where she sat regarding them sleepily. "Well, but she's worth spoiling," he defended. "Don't you get to worrying about her now. She's got the makings of the finest horse doctor that ever was. We're going into a reg'lar proper partnership in a year or so."

"Well, for the present she's going to bed," said Mrs. Howth energetically. "Help yourself to some tea, Jeff. Come along, chicken."

Left to himself the breaker drank his tea slowly, and with evident relish. From time to time his thoughtful gaze left the open window to contemplate the neat interior of the room, the little careful details which betokened a woman's loving overlordship, and a sigh escaped him at recollection of his own untidy bachelor shack. Presently from the end of the passage came Betty's lazy voice calling a final good-night, and he made haste to reply according to the invariable formula:

"Good-night, partner. Give my respects to the dream folk."

In spite of his air of preoccupation Jeff had about him a singular appearance of alertness. His head was slightly inclined towards the window as if in the attitude of listening, and it was noticeable that he stirred a little at each sound from without. After a lapse of several minutes he took out his pipe and slowly packed it. He was in the act of applying a match when a faint noise caught his

attention. He stood up, thrust the pipe back into his pocket, and strode to the window, where he remained staring into the night. A second later came the click of the garden gate and a boy ran up the path.

“What’s wrong, laddie?” called Jeff softly.

The youngster halted and threw a scared glance upwards. Recognising the breaker he uttered an exclamation of relief. “Please, Jeff, I’ve been hunting for you all over the place. Miss Nordsen wants you over at the pub. She said to tell you there was trouble. I think Dan Grant is hurt.”

Without a word Jeff climbed out of the window and dropped lightly to the ground. The action betrayed no hint of excitement. He went quickly along the path, the boy trotting at his heels.

Going through the gate Jeff said quietly over his shoulder: “Thanks, Billy. Come round to my hut in the morning, and maybe there’ll be something for you. Off you run home.”

“I don’t want nothing,” said the youngster breathlessly. “I’d do anything for Miss Nordsen.”

“Good man,” said Jeff approvingly. “But you come, all the same.”

Without seeming to hurry his long legs yet carried him rapidly towards the smudge of light that marked the hotel. As he drew near there came to his ears a confused jumble of sound, from which issued a man’s voice, high-pitched and

threatening. Jeff's brows drew together, and he quickened his pace insensibly. The outer door was closed. He went straight to it, opened it without hesitation, and passed inside.

His first impression was one of quick distrust. The long, low-ceilinged room was heavy with thick, pungent, tobacco smoke, through which the light of the tin lamps at the back of the bar glimmered oddly. Immediately on his entry the sound of voices stilled. In some curious manner he felt himself to have drawn the attention of the whole room. It was almost as if his coming had put an unwelcome check upon some carefully designed crisis. He was aware of an undercurrent of hostility directed against himself, and he stiffened instantly. His eyes went watchfully towards George Nordsen, who was staring straight at him. The hotel keeper was lolling back in his chair, his head thrust forward, a gleam of lamplight on the rubble of red beard that covered his high-boned cheeks. Conscious of Jeff's attention he suddenly mumbled a greeting.

“How goes it, Jeff?”

“Good-night, George,” responded the breaker clearly.

His gaze travelled carefully over the other men present, noting their several attitudes; then came to rest on a little group standing around an overturned card table at the end of the room. Jeff's eyes hardened. He began to move forward, slowly

and without any appearance of concern. A man at his elbow spoke in friendly fashion, and Jeff nodded and smiled as he passed on.

“Halloa, Jerry! Having a bit of a break!”

At the corner of the bar stood Yetta Nordsen, one arm about the shoulders of a slight, dark featured youth who clung dizzily to the back of a chair. The girl's hair was disordered, and her eyes were blazing. As he met her look a little spasm of pain, instantly suppressed, crossed the breaker's strong face. He took a deep breath.

“What's wrong, Yetta?”

She raised her hand and pointed at Kling, who stood by with a sneer on his thin lips.

“Ask *him*. He and Dan quarrelled. It might have been over the cards, but I don't think so. Dan can hardly speak. They've drugged him somehow. When I came in they were hurting him. They wanted him to say something, or do something, and he wouldn't.” Yetta's bosom heaved. She thrust her face at Kling. “You call yourself a man, do you! Then what sort of a man are you? This is the second time you've drugged Dan . . . you—you beast.”

Jeff stepped past Kling without a word and took Dan kindly by the arm.

“What is it, Danny?”

The lad attempted to speak, but the few words were thick and unintelligible, and passed into a furious coughing. Yet for one brief instant the

dullness seemed to fade from his eyes. Their black depths suddenly flamed with hatred, and he lurched towards the grinning Kling. Jeff held him back easily.

“Nothing like that, old chap. Lend me your handkerchief, Yetta, will you!”

The girl proffered it silently, and he took it and gently essayed to wipe away the thin trickle of blood from Dan’s cheek.

“There now—that’s better. No, don’t try to talk. Plenty of time for that to-morrow. Think you could get him along to my hut, Yetta? That’s the idea. I’ll be down right away.”

He moved to let her pass, but Kling stepped suddenly in the way. He was smiling nastily.

“That’s all right, Jeff. But supposing you mind your own business!”

“Certainly I will. I wouldn’t butt in on anyone for a fortune,” said the breaker mildly. “Yes, that’s right, Yetta. Of course, I forgot that side door. That’s your easiest way, isn’t it. Get him to lie down on my bunk. He’ll be miles better after a sleep.”

Kling’s smile left his face. He went to push past, but Jeff stumbled and trod clumsily on his instep, and the man recoiled with an oath of pain.

Jeff was instantly regretful. “Did I hurt you, Kling? Too bad of me. I’m like that though, sometimes. I hurt my leg once off a horse, and the knee seems to give way now and then.”

The eyes of the two men met in a long stare. Kling was the first to break away. His face was flaming angrily.

“Some mothers have awkward children, Jeff.”

The breaker made a little gesture of self annoyance. His slightly agitated movements after colliding with Kling had somehow brought him exactly in front of the door through which Yetta and Dan had vanished, and he leant against it now with concern on his face.

“It was too bad of me, Kling,” he repeated. “Now, you know I wouldn’t have had that happen for the world.”

“Damn you, you did it on purpose,” shouted Kling, gesticulating.

It was evident that he gave some signal, for at once Sjoberg arose from his seat halfway down the room and faced towards the outside entrance. At almost the same instant, however, Jerry Slott upended his chunky body with a prolonged yawn, dragged his chair forward a pace or two, and sat down again. By accident or design he now blocked the exit for which Sjoberg was making. Sjoberg stopped short and eyed the cook doubtfully. The inspection evidently failed to reassure him. He glanced furtively at Kling, hesitated, then returned to his original position. Jerry yawned again noisily and lifted his legs to rest against the panels of the door.

Jeff, whose watchful eyes had missed nothing of

the little byplay, was grimly amused. He had no doubt whatever that the cook's sudden change of position was deliberate, despite the apparent innocence of the action. Just why Jerry Slott should choose to aid him he did not know, but he was instantly grateful. The expression of Kling's face showed that he too had seen and understood, and for a brief moment the air was tense with threat. All at once, however, the crisis seemed to pass. Kling ran his tongue over his thin lips and turned back to the breaker.

"Satisfied?" he asked, with a sneer.

Jeff's thick eyebrows lifted humourously. "Me! Why, certainly I'm satisfied. Why, Kling, I thought you knew me better than that. What are you having to drink?"

"I'm not drinking," returned Kling shortly.

"No! That's too bad." Jeff's glance went towards the other men, and the smile in his eyes deepened. "You then, Sjoberg? You and McGurr look a little warm. The drinks are on me. Eh! You ain't drinking either! Now . . . now . . . you know I just hate a lonely glass."

His tone of gentle raillery fetched the scowl back to Kling's face, but Jeff affected not to notice. His voice came again almost plaintively. "What's the matter with this crowd? Ain't there no one thirsty?"

Jerry Slott's legs slid to the floor, and he faced

around with a grin. "I'm always thirsty. A whiskey straight, for mine. And send it down to me, will you. I'm sort of tired and discomposed to move."

"Fine!" said Jeff. He nodded genially towards the bar. "Set 'em up, George, will you?"

"What'll *you* have?" asked Nordsen, in a surly tone. His red-rimmed eyes sought Kling, but fell away almost immediately.

"Anything . . . anything at all, George," said the breaker timidly. He advanced to the bar counter and began to watch Nordsen's preparations with interest. "That is, anything but the kind of drink you poured out for Dan Grant. Me, I'm not a regular drinking man. I've got a mighty weak inside. I've got to be careful what I ask it to do."

"Funny as hell, ain't you!" snarled Nordsen. Jeff smiled good-humouredly, but before he could reply Jerry Slott's sleepy voice intervened.

"I once knew a man that owned to a kind of weak stomach like yours, Jeff. He went to the city to have it seen to, and they say he spent mighty near a fortune in patent medicines. When he come back home he was the most excessively ruined man you ever see. Absolutely rabunculous. Had to borrow to pay his coach fare. Well . . . here's how!"

Jeff lifted his glass, returned the cook's nod, and drank slowly. When he looked round it was

to find Kling standing at his elbow. The anger had gone from the mine man's face, but in its stead was a kind of cold malice infinitely more to be dreaded. Jeff returned his insolent look steadily.

"Going to have one with me after all, Mike?" he asked. "No! Well, now, what can I do for you."

"If there's anything you want to say, say it," said Kling. His pale eyes seemed to jump. "Don't hint. It's offensive to me, and it's likely to land you in trouble. Now go ahead and let's hear what you think is troubling you."

The breaker's mouth tightened. With a scarcely perceptible movement he placed his feet so as to be able instantly to turn to right or left. The fingers of his right hand were raised to play with the lapel of his coat.

"Certainly, Kling. I'd like to. There's some game playing with Dan Grant. Now I want to say this. Dan is a friend of mine. If you haven't believed that so far, believe it now. I say he's my friend. But even if he wasn't, I'd push in and stop your game, if I could. This is the second time Dan has been doctored. I reckon there'll be no third time. And it wouldn't have happened to-night, only you knew Jim Howth was away and thought you had a free hand. Well, I'm here to prove that you hadn't."

"You've got a wonderful imagination," said Kling, yawning. "Anything else?"

“You deny it?” demanded Jeff.

“Oh, I wouldn’t bother to deny anything,” grinned Kling. “But what would I want to dope Dan Grant for?”

“That’s what I hope to find out,” said the breaker. For the first time his manner showed a trace of anger. He threw back his head, and his eyes burned with a strange light. “Oh, not from you, Kling, or any of your kind. You couldn’t talk straight to save your life. Even your thoughts are crooked. Now I’ll say only this—drop it. Whatever your game is, drop it. Go your own way, such as it is, and leave others to go theirs. I don’t know who you are, Kling, nor where you come from. So far I haven’t wanted to know. But, by the Lord Harry, if you get me started I’ll trace your pedigree back to the gaol you came from. Now get out of my way.”

He advanced so quickly that Kling stepped aside almost automatically. By the time he had recovered from his astonishment Jeff was halfway down the room.

“Going home, Jeff?” came George Nordsen’s voice mockingly.

The breaker spun on his heel. “Yes, I’m going home. But before I do I’ll tell you this much more. When you come at me, make sure you get me—understand. There’ll be no second chance—for you. If you don’t get me the first time . . .”

He went on again deliberately. As he passed the Ajax cook he bent his head and said quietly :
“ Thanks, Jerry.”

Jerry Slott contented himself with a nod. He was watching Kling intently through half shut eyes.

At the door Jeff halted once again, his truculent glance sweeping from side to side.

“ Maybe some of you would like to try it—now,” he said.

There was no response. He waited a moment, then opened the door and passed outside. He walked slowly on through the cold air, the incident already forgotten. His thoughts were ahead, where the faint light beckoning from the window of his hut told him his friends waited his arrival.

Dan was stretched on the bunk, his face to the wall. Over him bent Yetta, one large, cool hand resting on the lad's burning forehead. As the breaker's eyes took in the scene there came once more to his face that little curious flicker of emotion. As before, it was instantly suppressed. When Yetta looked up it was to see him smiling.

“ That's the idea. How is he? Asleep? ”

“ He's unconscious, I think,” said Yetta, her lips quivering.

Jeff stepped to the bunk and turned Dan's face gently upwards. With his fingers he parted the closed eyelids and made swift inspection.

“ They overdid it this time,” he declared softly. “ Now I wonder what the game was ! ”

“ Is, Jeff,” said Yetta. She met his thoughtful look with a kind of wistful intentness. “ They haven’t done yet. What can they want of him.”

“ What happened ? ” asked Jeff.

“ They were drinking and playing cards. Dan was quite sober—until his last drink. They seemed quite friendly together. I was in the dining-room, and their voices reached me quite plainly. And then suddenly there was an uproar. When I ran in McGurr had just caught Dan by the arms and Kling—the beast—was striking Dan on the face with his hand. My uncle wouldn’t interfere. It was abominable.”

“ And then, Yetta ? ”

“ Why, then you came, and I wasn’t afraid any more,” said the girl earnestly. She clasped her hands, and an odd little flush came on her face. “ But you mustn’t fall foul of those men, Jeff. I should never forgive myself if harm came to you. Perhaps I shouldn’t have sent for you.”

“ You did quite right,” the breaker assured her.

She turned to the still figure on the bunk with a passionate gesture. “ What else could I do. He’s only a boy, Jeff. What right have they to treat him so. Oh, I hate the whole shameful business with all my heart. I’d have left my uncle long ago, only that I promised my aunt I would try to look after him. You did not know her.

She died just before we came to Copper Creek. But you would have loved her, as I did—and do. It was she that took me and cared for me when my parents died. She couldn't have done more for me if I'd been her own child. And because of that”

“I know,” said Jeff gently.

But the girl went on unheeding. “I don't love my uncle. I have never cared for him in the least. But I can't break my promise. Let men drink, if they want to. But this sort of thing” —she put her hand on Dan's shoulder, looking at the breaker with dilating eyes—“why, Jeff, it's terrible. If he gets the fumes of it in his blood . . . you know how his father went. . . . And yet he doesn't care for drink. I can't understand how they were able to drug him again. . . .”

“I know—I know,” said Jeff once more. He nodded soothingly. “I had a straight talk to Kling. He'll wait a long time before he gets a chance to come this joke again. I don't know what he's after, but I'll bet he doesn't get it. Dan can tell me, or not; just as it suits him. But if he don't want to speak, well and good. I won't butt in.”

“If Dan knows, he'll tell you, of course. But he may not know. Will he be very ill, Jeff?”

Jeff shook his head. “He'll be mighty sick and sorry, but nothing more. It's time his friends

took a hand. Things ain't going too well with Dan."

"What things?"

"Oh, just things in general," said Jeff vaguely.

Yetta looked at the clock on the table and rose quietly to her feet. "I must go, Jeff. Can I do anything more?"

"Not a thing, thanks," said the breaker decidedly. He looked around the hut with a slow smile. "I see the fairies have been at work straightening up. I suppose you did that while you were waiting for me. It was like you to think of it."

"It was nothing," said Yetta. "I was glad to find something to take the ache from my mind."

"It was like you," repeated Jeff. He held the door for her to pass. "Shall I see you back? They won't trouble Dan while he's here."

"He might wake and need you. No, don't come. Good-night, Jeff. I know you'll look after Dan. You will, won't you?"

"He's my friend," said the breaker gravely.

He closed the door gently after her, and turned towards the bunk with a little sigh.

DAN GRANT sat on the grass, his back to the wall of the outhouse. He was plaiting a stockwhip, and worked with head lowered and lips pursed in a noiseless whistle. From time to time he glanced quickly at Joan Norris who reclined opposite in a low deck-chair, her hands in her lap, and her eyes fixed dreamily on the blue horizon.

The girl appeared totally unconscious of Dan's interest. Dressed in a simple gown of white, with the sparkle of the morning sun on her cheeks, and the wind gently ruffling her brown hair, she seemed the embodiment of youth and restful ease. To Dan, indeed, she looked wonderfully sweet and very, very desirable. His dark, æsthetically thin features softened curiously as he gazed. Above all, and beyond all, he wanted this girl for his wife. His passion devoured him like some living force. There were times, such as now, when his deep-set eyes glowed with repression and his lips trembled on the verge of passionate declaration. Yet always some sixth sense intervened, telling him that the time was not yet ripe, that his very impetuosity would frighten her and bring to naught the darling wish of his heart. Rather must he curb his im-

patience—wooing her with his eyes, with his thoughts, with every fibre of his being. And so, exulting, would come to watch the light grown in her eyes, glory in the awakening tenderness of her voice.

Dan Grant was an admitted puzzle to all save his most intimate friends. He presented a curious contradiction. He was petulant as a child; prone to fits of anger which constantly betrayed him into absurdities of manner and speech; impulsive in all things; reckless to a degree; intolerant of restraint. So much became abundantly plain upon even a slight acquaintance. On the other hand not even his most bitter enemy could deny the lad's warmth of heart, his eager espousal of a friend's cause, his absolute straightness in a business deal. He was generous to a fault, and full of a fine enthusiasm for life, and all that life stands for.

Presently Dan put his work aside and asked a question softly of the motionless girl.

“Asleep, Joan?”

She looked up with a smile. “No, Dan. But I was dreaming, all the same. I was trying to imagine what kind of a place Copper Creek would be in, say, another five years. Will all those grand plains be made hideous with buildings. I suppose so. If all these rumours are true about some big company that intends to build a jetty and breakwater, and put a huge sum of money into developing the country, then it can hardly do

otherwise than alter the place beyond belief. And yet . . . I don't know that I like the thought. Of course changes must come, but I prefer them to be gradual. I distrust the outcome of revolution."

"So long as the scheme includes our present port it must boost us somehow," said Dan. He frowned a little. "I'm like you. I don't quite care for the business, though mine is for a different reason. Why can't they leave us alone?"

"It's the penalty of progress that old fashioned ideas must go to the wall," Joan told him. "But there'll be compensations. The price of land will go up—yours with the rest. In a few years you'll be able to sell out at a good big profit."

"Supposing I don't want to sell out, Joan. Why should I? This is about the only place I ever had a liking for. Mother's the same. Until we came to Copper Creek we had a pretty bad passage. Now we're in the way to finding a permanent home you can bet we're not anxious to pull up stakes and move on. Can you blame us?"

"I don't know that I can," said the girl, with a sigh. She watched his face anxiously, as if wondering to account for the dark hollows beneath his eyes and the dull pallor of his cheeks. "Will rumour ever become fact, do you think?"

"Oh, they'll bring it off somewhere along the coast," said Dan. He broke off to cough; beating impatiently on the grass with his hand. "Con-

found this tickling at the back of my throat. Yes, of course, they'll build a jetty somewhere. What I don't like is the way they keep us guessing. Why shouldn't everyone know which location they've decided upon. Where's the need for all this mystery?"

Joan looked thoughtful. "Mr. Howth thinks the reason for that is probably because the promoters of the scheme wish to avoid outside speculation."

"There may be something in that," said Dan. "Anyone with a lucky turn might hop in on them and reap a regular harvest."

"It will help the mines, too," pursued Joan, after a little silence. "Jeff says that Mr. Boyd told him he expected to double the output from the Ajax once the tramline was laid."

"Boyd!" exclaimed Dan. "I didn't know Jeff had met him. When was this, Joan?"

"Four or five days ago. Mr. Boyd wanted to buy a hack, and asked Jeff to make the deal. I suppose he knew Jeff was the best judge of a horse on the coast."

"He is that," said Dan shortly.

Mention of Boyd sent his thoughts back to Kling, and others of the mine faction. Although it was a full fortnight since the affair at the hotel, the memory still rankled. He had wakened next morning in Jeff's hut with a feeling of sickness not altogether physical. Understanding of what

had happened stung him to a fury of resentment. But for his friend's quiet insistence he would have confronted Kling then and there. A brawl must have been the outcome of any such move, and this the breaker was anxious to avoid. It required all his tact and patience to extract a promise from Dan that he would not thrust himself in Kling's way. The lad confessed that he was far from understanding the reason for the action of the mine man. All he knew was that, as on the previous occasion, Kling had hinted mysteriously at some important communication, had skilfully evaded an immediate explanation, and, later, with the aid of Nordsen, had contrived to drug his drink. The first time this happened the effect had been to drive Dan into a raging madness. It needed but a hint from Kling to magnify his animus against a certain man to monstrous proportions. The lad ran amok. But for Jim Howth, who got wind of the affair, he must have found himself in serious trouble. The trooper, however, managed to pacify the victim of Dan's aberration. Dan apologised and made good the damage he had wrought. And there the matter ended. The lad had then no suspicion that Kling had deliberately engineered the whole affair. As a consequence it was comparatively easy for the mine man to repeat the trick, though with negative results. Kling over-did his second attempt, and thereafter Dan was fully awake.

Joan, watching the dark flush rise on the lad's cheeks, had no difficulty in guessing his thoughts, and felt a swift pang of sympathy, coupled with renewed dislike for the men who had so shamed him. Yetta Nordsen had told her the whole story a day or two later, and the two girls were agreed in their understanding of the affair. Dan had been cruelly tricked; though for what reason, or purpose, they could not determine. It was significant that the brunt of their indignation was directed at Kling. Yetta avoided any mention of her uncle's name. If she or Joan suspected Nordsen's complicity they concealed the thought even from each other. It seemed to be understood between them that Yetta's uncle must be given the benefit of the doubt.

Presently Joan sought for a change of topic, and found it in the dawning beauty of the bush.

"Dan, do look at the river. Did you ever see such light and shade? If I were able to paint I would ask no better subject. See the blackwoods along by the junction . . . just a billow of shining green. And that dip beyond, all hidden in shadow, with just the gleam of white water. . . . Why, Dan, it's really beautiful."

Dan's eyes lit with sudden interest. "Of course it is. That's why I always choose this spot here by the shed. That's my favourite view." He regarded it critically. "Yes, Joan, it's perfect. I don't know of anything better."

“But this morning it’s even sweeter and softer than usual,” mused the girl. “I wonder why that is?”

“Perhaps it knows you’re here, and wants to look its best,” said Dan teasingly.

Joan laughed. “Well, it is certainly making an impression. Ah, now it’s in danger of being spoilt. The human element has crept in, and that’s always fatal to real charm. Don’t you see the man walking along the ridge. I wonder who it is? How dare he be so energetic on a Sabbath morning.”

“I don’t know,” muttered Dan. He was staring intently before him.

“He’s coming this way,” said Joan suddenly. A queer thought disturbed her mind. Could this be Boyd, she wondered? Yet why should Boyd visit Grant’s farm? It was more likely he would not care to set foot on the place after the unfriendly message he had asked her to deliver. She felt a twinge of conscience that she had deliberately refrained from doing anything of the kind. She refused absolutely to associate herself in any way with what she conceived to be an insult to Dan. Yet now she began to doubt if she had acted aright. Might it not have been better to tell Dan frankly of Boyd’s mistaken belief, and trust to his sense of humour to rob the affair of any sting. She began to dread a meeting between the two men. They were so exactly opposite as almost

to constitute the extremes of temperament. She was immensely relieved to hear Dan exclaim suddenly :

“ By Jingo, it’s Nat Absolam. Now I’d like to know what brings *him* here. No good, I’ll bet.”

“ What a huge man he is,” commented Joan, as the foreman came toiling up the hill towards them. “ Is he as quarrelsome as they say? ”

“ Just about. But he’s only a big lump of beef, any way. He’s got no brains. Before he took up with Kling and McGurr he was harmless enough, even if he wasn’t over civil. But since they took him in hand he seems to have an idea that he’s somebody. They’re using him, and he can’t see it.”

“ But he must know his work, or he wouldn’t be foreman,” Joan felt called to protest. “ Mr. Boyd said that Absolam was quite reliable, and one of the best workers he has ever had. He told me that not a week ago.”

She felt Dan’s eyes on her.

“ So you’ve met Boyd too? When was this? You never told me, Joan.”

“ Didn’t I! ” exclaimed the girl lightly. She smiled at the reproach in his voice. “ Perhaps I thought you wouldn’t be interested. Yes, I’ve met him. So has Yetta. She was with me in the post office one evening when he called for his mail. He didn’t seem in a hurry to get away, so, woman-like, we tempted him to gossip.”

“What did you think of him?” demanded Dan.

“I can hardly explain. I don’t quite understand him. And yet there’s something about him . . .” Joan glanced to one side, a faint warmth suffusing her cheeks. “But I’ll tell you this, Dan—he’s the most self-assured creature you ever met in your life. The way he ignores other people’s opinions as being too feeble for serious consideration, makes me want to scream. Yetta is quite savage about it. She declared afterwards that she felt she wanted to take the man by the shoulders and shake some sense into him.”

“She could do the shaking all right,” said Dan amusedly. “Unless Boyd is bigger than the average. And so you didn’t like him?”

“Not particularly,” admitted Joan. “But of course he may improve upon acquaintance. Some people do. Not that I think we shall see very much of him.”

“No, that’s true,” said Dan, though doubtfully. “Boyd ought to be a busy man. Did he say what they expected to do with the Ajax? I can’t see why they want to hold on for. It can’t be paying them.” He lowered his voice. “No, don’t go, Joan. If Absolam wants to see me, let him go ahead. There’s nothing private that I know of.”

The foreman was already close to them. At sight of the girl he halted and removed his hat clumsily.

“Morning, Miss Norris. How is it, Dan? Kind of warmish to-day, ain’t it?”

“We’ll get winter soon enough,” said Dan. He was wondering at the grin on Absolam’s heavy face. “Out for a walk, are you? Well, you’ve picked a good day.”

“Oh, one day’s as good as another to me,” grumbled the big man. He glanced towards Joan, but the girl’s face was averted. “Oh, yes; I ain’t as particular as some folk.”

“You want to see me?” suggested Dan.

“I got a note here from the Boss.” Absolam felt slowly through his pockets. “He asked me to run it across. Give this here to young Grant, he says.”

“The Boss!” echoed Dan, a little blankly.

“Boyd,” explained Absolam. He gave the letter into the lad’s outstretched hand. “Give it to Grant, he says. If he ain’t at home, fetch it back with you.”

Dan turned the missive idly in his fingers. His face wore a puzzled frown. “I see. What is it about, Nat?”

“Search me,” invited Absolam, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. His eyes seemed to twinkle maliciously. “I don’t know the first thing about it. I’m the postman.”

“Well, we’ll have a look,” said Dan.

He went to tear the letter open, but paused at a sudden exclamation from Joan. Curiously

enough the girl was not looking at himself, but at Absolam.

“Let it wait, Dan, will you?”

He looked at her in astonishment. “Why, Joan? There may be an answer.”

Joan returned his look quickly, a shadow of anxiety in her eyes. “Just to please me, Dan!”

“Why—certainly.” Dan’s tone was light, but his bewilderment was plain to see. “I reckon it isn’t that important that it can’t wait. Tell Mr. Boyd I’ll see to it, will you, Nat!”

Joan regarded the foreman’s expanding grin with contempt. “Are you going straight back to the mine, Mr. Absolam?” she asked quietly. “I see. Then will you please deliver a message in return. I think Mr. Boyd intended calling in at the post office to-morrow for his mail. Will you let him know that it will not be necessary. There are no letters for him.”

“I’ll mention it,” said Absolam. For some reason he seemed a trifle disconcerted. “Still, he may go just the same.”

“That would be a pity,” said the girl curtly. As if all at once forgetful of the man’s presence she sat back in her chair, contemplating the soft blue of the horizon. Dan, as if in unconscious imitation of her abstraction, had taken up his whip and was running it idly through his fingers. His forehead was puckered thoughtfully.

For a moment Absolam hesitated, looking from

one to the other. His eyes glinted, and he seemed on the point of saying something, but coughed instead, and turned on his heel.

“Going, Nat?” asked Dan, with a trace of mockery in his voice.

“I think I’ll get along,” returned the foreman, in a surly tone. “Well—so long.”

Dan watched his departure silently. Presently he turned his head to find Joan regarding him almost timidly.

“What is it?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know, Dan. How rude you must think me. And yet . . . oh, how can I explain. It was just that something came over me all at once. . . . I seemed to know that letter isn’t friendly . . . that it is going to hurt you. . . . You’ll laugh at me. How foolish I am.”

“I’d sooner trust your intuition than my own,” said the lad slowly. “And yet I can’t see why you should think as you do. I haven’t any quarrel with Boyd. I’ve never even met the man. Still, somehow I seem to be glad that you spoke when you did. Shall I open it now, Joan?”

“Yes, why not!” Her voice was half ashamed. “It was only that I distrusted the look on that creature’s face. He seemed to be watching us . . . to be gloating over something . . . you’ll think me absurd.”

Dan opened the envelope and drew forth a single

sheet of folded paper. She saw his lips move as he read. He sat motionless for so long that she could not forbear an exclamation.

“ Dan! I was wrong, wasn't I? Dan! ”

The lad lifted a face so congested with angry blood that she felt a thrill of fear go through her.

“ Dan! what is it? ”

The distress on her face, in her voice, seemed to recall him to himself. He took a deep breath and rose unsteadily to his feet, holding the paper towards her. His words came thickly.

“ The damned hound. Read it, Joan. ”

For a second the written lines were blurred to her sight. Then suddenly her pulses steadied and she began to read mechanically :

“ PURSUANT to the provisions of ‘ The Mining Act, 1917, ’ Section 130, I hereby give you notice that it is my intention, on behalf of the undermentioned Company, to construct a water race through your freehold situate in the Parish of Rymah, County of Darwin, Tasmania, in the manner and under the conditions described hereunder : such water being required by me for mining purposes.

“ Dated at Copper Creek, this 14th day of June, 19——.

“ RALPH BOYD, Manager,
“ Ajax Mines Ltd.

“ D. GRANT, ESQ.,
“ Copper Creek. ”

“But what does it mean?” She looked at him without understanding. “Surely no one can enter your property in such a manner. They must get your permission first. Oh, Dan, what a shame.”

Dan threw up his hand with a passionate gesture. “But they can, Joan—they can. The Act protects them in any outrage they like to commit. Isn’t it enough that I’ve slaved and toiled day and night to make a home, but men like this Boyd can come and tear up my grass land and run their dirty gutters where they like. . . . Joan, I’ll fight them. By God, I will. Let them start and see what comes of it.”

“But how can they—how can they?” repeated Joan indignantly. “The land is your own. You can claim the protection of the law.”

“The law!” exclaimed Dan. He laughed bitterly. “What does the law care for the rights of the small man! I tell you this damned Mining Act over-rides the land-holder every time. It doesn’t matter who or what he is . . . any gang of mining crooks can spade over his farm from end to end, so long as they serve him with a bit of a dirty notice like this. Surface damage! . . . what good is that! -A sop to fling in your face.”

His anger brought on a violent fit of coughing, and the girl could only wait in troubled silence until he paused gasping, and lifted a shaking hand to push back the damp hair from his forehead.

“If that man wants a rough-up, Joan, he can have it. I fought for this place, and I’ll keep it against all hell.”

Joan looked at him a little helplessly. “You mustn’t take it to heart like this. Surely there is a way to prevent them doing as they want. It’s almost unbelievable that the law would uphold them. Go and see what Mr. Howth says.”

“It’s no good, Joan. Jim Howth is a good fellow, but he can’t help me here.” Dan picked up his hat from the grass and turned away. “Tell mother I’ve been called to fix a break—anything you like. No need to worry her before it’s time. She’s had enough and to spare of that already, God knows.”

“Where are you going?” asked Joan quickly.

“Going! Why, I’m going to see Boyd. The sooner I call his bluff the better.”

Joan caught him by the arm. “Dan, you mustn’t. You’d be one against all of them. What good will it do. And in your present mood only harm could come of it. Dan—no.”

The lad tried gently to free himself but she clung the tighter.

“Wait until Jeff comes. If you still want to go, Jeff will go with you. Dan . . . *please*. Oh, won’t you listen!”

In her eagerness she swayed towards him unconsciously. Her face so close to his own, the touch

of her body, the fragrance of her hair, intoxicated his senses. For one wild moment he almost lost control. So great was his self repression that the blood drained from his cheeks leaving him ghastly white. He turned his head aside with an effort, afraid to meet her eyes.

“It’s not Jeff’s quarrel, Joan. I can’t drag my friends into a thing like this.”

“Promise me,” she cried insistently. A little scornful laugh escaped her. “Not Jeff’s quarrel indeed! If I know anything of him he’ll make it his quarrel. Do you believe your friends are as spineless as that? I loathe Mr. Boyd for what he would do. You shall not go alone.”

Dan yielded reluctantly. “I’d sooner see Boyd now, and be done with it. But I’ll wait, since you want me to. But of course Boyd expects me sooner or later.”

“I suppose he does,” said Joan, releasing him. “He can hardly expect you to suffer his impertinence in silence. Go and see him by all means, but you must not go alone. There will be some plain speaking between you, and it’s as well to have a friend handy. What will you say to him?”

“Don’t ask me.” The lad smiled at her whimsically, but she did not fail to catch the undercurrent of dejection in his voice. “It depends, I suppose, on what he says to me, and how he says it.” He folded the notice and put it carefully in

his pocket. "Joan, I'm not superstitious, but somehow I wish we'd never heard of this man Boyd. I've got a feeling that the old peaceful times are done. What time is Jeff to be here?"

"For dinner. You knew he was bringing Yetta and Betty. Your mother asked them to stay until the morning."

"I'd forgotten," muttered Dan. He looked at her with clouded eyes. "Don't mind what I've been saying, Joan. This thing got me rattled for a moment, and I went a bit crazy. It's not anger that's wanted, but some good, clear thinking. I'm like that though. I seem to go off just when I shouldn't. Was I very absurd?"

"You were quite right to be angry," said Joan gently.

"Was I? I'm glad you think that." He turned in the direction of the house. "I think after all I'll tell mother. She's got a shrewd little head of her own. Maybe I'd have done better if I'd taken her advice more often, but it's no use worrying about that now."

For a long time after he had gone Joan remained as he left her. This latest evidence of Boyd's selfishness affected her deeply. Surely, she thought, he could not know to how great an extent his methods would be resented. She was strongly tempted to see Boyd on her own account and make an appeal to his sense of fair play. A little thought, however, convinced her that such

a course would be unwise. Her motive might be misconstrued, not only by Boyd, but by others also. She reflected, too, that perhaps he was not alone to blame for what had happened. Doubtless he had his orders from those who employed him, in which case appeal would be vain. Yet all the impulse of her generous nature rose in defence of her friends. That they must suffer to prosper the greed of others was unjust and wicked. She wondered dimly how such things could be.

She was still immersed in thought when a clatter of falling slip-rails and the sound of Betty's voice in shrill greeting announced the arrival of Jeff Semple. Joan sprang to her feet with a sigh of relief. Somehow the mere sight of the breaker's strong, imperturbable face seemed to ease the load at her heart. She went smiling to meet the visitors.

"Jeff . . . Yetta. You don't know how welcome you are. And my little Betty. . . . No, haven't I told you I hate being called teacher out of school. I like you to call me Joan. Has she been good, Jeff?"

"Good ain't the word for it," declared Jeff. His grey eyes twinkled. "She sat as still as a mouse all the way. Hardly cracked a word of any sort, did you, Partner?"

"I was thinking," Betty told them seriously.

Jeff laughed as he drove off to the stables.

"Story making, I'll bet," he called back over his shoulder.

Betty made a face after him. "Doesn't Jeff love teasing. But I was thinking ever so hard. Really and truly."

"You were certainly very quiet," said Yetta. She looked at the child affectionately. "What was it all about?"

"You won't think me silly?" demanded Betty, slipping her small hand into Joan's as they went towards the house. "Well, then, I had such a funny thought in my head. I was pretending I was in the kitchen at home, and there was an old witch sitting by the fire, and she was boiling an egg in a saucepan. It was boiling ever so hard, and I was trying to think what would happen to the egg if it kept on boiling and boiling for ever and ever. What *would* happen, Joan?"

"You curious child," said Joan, laughing. "Wherever did you get hold of such a quaint notion. Has Jeff been telling more stories?"

"I made it up myself," said Betty. "But what *would* happen, Joan?"

"Ask Jeff," suggested Joan, as the best way to escape a difficult situation. "You queer little thing."

"I asked daddy, and he told me not to be silly," said Betty plaintively. "But I think I will ask Jeff, because he loves riddles. And this is a riddle, isn't it, Yetta?"

Yetta smiled and nodded. "One of the very best. Jeff will have to think hard before he can

find the answer. There's Mrs. Grant waving to us. Go and meet her."

As the child ran off Yetta glanced at Joan a little wistfully. "Don't you ever wish you were a baby again? I know I often do. And yet that's rather cowardly, isn't it? I suppose, after all, courage isn't a matter of age."

"I should say it was more a matter of conviction," said Joan softly. "It's a matter of right or wrong. I don't know that I have ever wanted to be Betty's age again, but . . . but sometimes I find myself wishing I were a man."

“EVERYBODY’S coming on the bluff stakes these times,” said Jerry Slott. He fixed Boyd with a challenging eye. “Seems like they ain’t any decency or honesty left in the world. What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Boyd returned. “All the same, I think you’re a bit hard, aren’t you, Jerry. Some of us still claim we’re not so black as we’re painted.”

He sat back and regarded the cook with some amusement. This was the third Sunday morning that Jerry, for reasons best known to himself, had wandered up to the manager’s cottage on the rise above the big dam and entered into casual conversation. In a way Boyd was beginning to look forward to these informal visits. They revealed Jerry as a man singularly fond of talking, full to the brim of ill-assorted ideas and exaggerated notions, occasionally irritable and prone to argument, yet, on the whole, level-headed enough, and having the courage of his opinions. He had a fund of quaint anecdote and his vocabulary was the weirdest thing

Boyd had ever encountered. Jerry Slott in polysyllabic mood was something to stagger the most rabid etymologist that ever thrust his nose between the covers of a dictionary.

“ Oh, maybe,” he said now, in answer to Boyd. “ But that don’t say you’re right. It’s the man that bites, and keeps on biting, that gets the bone. If the other feller is smaller than you, ride over him. If he ain’t—if he’s bigger, then dot him when he ain’t looking. It’s surprising how transmargorial it’ll make you feel.”

“ I imagine it would,” said Boyd gravely.

“ Too true it would,” said the cook. He wagged a huge finger. “ And then again you got to remember that all men ain’t the same. Bluff’s a good dorg, but bite’s a better. Never judge a man by his neck-tie.”

Boyd blew a cloud of tobacco smoke and watched it lazily. “ Appearances are often deceptive,” he remarked sententiously.

Jerry’s eyes brightened. He put out a hand and tapped Boyd paternally on the knee.

“ You never shed a truer word. Don’t I know it—don’t I? Listen to me and I’ll tell you a little eggsperience. I once got into holts with a Chink. It was over on the mainland, and I was coming back to town after doing a bit of rabbiting down in Gippsland. There was a man I wanted to see that lived in the city. When I gets to Flinders Street I hands in my check and goes outside. Did I men-

tion that Little Simpkins Avenoo was where I wanted to go to? Well, it was. I'm looking round for someone to tell me where it is, when my eye hits a Chink leaning against a verandah post close handy. At the back of the picture there's a motor car drawn in to the kerb. All right. This here Chink is dressed a treat, and they's a seegar in his mouth. Otherwise he's just plain Chink. And a Chink's always a Chink, ain't he? "

"Certainly," agreed Boyd.

"That's what I thought. But it seems not." The cook hesitated, and spat mournfully over the edge of the verandah. "I says to this one, friendly like—I says: 'Me allee same wantem find Lilly Simpkins Avenoo, thinkee catchem flend. No can do. You tellee me I coughee up one piecee sixpence. Savee?' He looks at me kind of solemn for a spell, and then he says, in a voice like the purlin' of a stream, 'I was under the impression that I was familiar with all ramerfications of the Australian vernaculum,' he says, 'but this is a new one on me. Or was you only sneezing?' he says. I'm that astonished I don't do nothing but stare at him for nearly a minute. 'Eggscuse me,' I says, 'I thought you was a Chink.' He looks at me some more. Then he takes a fresh grip of his seegar, and says he: 'Even asooming the objective reality of your superstition,' he says, 'I have yet to learn that the uncouth sounds of which you have so lately disbursed yourself, have their original habertat in

Asia,' he says. ' Good morning,' he says. About five seconds later I'm pointing up the street with one hand, and holding a policeman in conversation with the other. ' Oh, that man,' says the John Hop, ' why, that's Ah Men, Sectry to the Chinese Consul. Will you have a sip of brandy, or shall I drive you to the horspital in a cab? ' he says."

" That was a bad break," laughed Boyd.

The cook's solemn features relaxed and he grinned in concert. " You've said it. I've been a bit scared of Chinks ever since. You never know what's inside a pie until you open it."

" Perhaps not," said Boyd. He looked at Jerry with sudden suspicion. " Come on now—what are you driving at? "

" Me! Not a thing. I was just remembering that it ain't a man's clothes, nor yet his looks, nor the way he talks, that tells you what he is."

" I generally find that a man's eyes form the best index of his character," remarked Boyd, after a moment's pause. He was asking himself what it was the cook's manner suggested. Several times during the conversation he had had the impression that Jerry was hinting at something he wanted Boyd to know, something he was unable or unwilling to convey outright.

The cook grunted and rose from his seat. " That's so. Watch his eyes, if you've a fancy to. But, better still, watch his mouth. He may hold his eyes steady, but if he's telling or acting a lie the

corners of his mouth will give him away every time. I've proved it." He waited with his hand on the railing of the verandah, looking round at Boyd. "Did you ever notice Kling's mouth?" he said.

Without waiting an answer he strode away in the direction of the huts. Boyd gazed after him with a puzzled frown on his face. The reference to Kling annoyed him, although he could not have said why it should. So far as he could judge both Kling and Absolam were responding to his appeal. They knew their work thoroughly, and were undoubtedly instilling something of their own energy into the men under them. At the same time, Boyd was forced to admit that he was not altogether satisfied. The past few days had seen a recurrence of those mysterious incidents which had hampered the operations of his predecessor. He recounted them mentally, his wits alert to understand, but could make nothing of the endeavour. There was an elusiveness about each which completely baffled him. He felt that he was being called upon to deal with a problem more subtle than he had ever before encountered. Thoughts, vaguely disquieting, plucked at his consciousness, only to recede at the moment of grasping. It almost seemed as if his brain refused to function beyond certain limits of understanding.

In his annoyance Boyd turned his head sharply, and at once sat upright, a new interest in his eyes.

Nat Absolam was in the act of entering the gate at the bottom of the enclosure.

“ Well ! ” called Boyd sharply.

Absolam grinned. “ I give it to him all right.”

“ Good,” said Boyd. He looked at the foreman expectantly. “ What did he have to say? ”

“ Not a thing,” said Absolam. “ He never opened it while I was there. Miss Norris wouldn’t let him.”

“ Miss Norris ! ” said Boyd, in astonishment. “ Why? ”

“ I reckon she smelt a rat,” said Absolam. He shrugged his shoulders, and a kind of surly admiration was apparent in his voice. “ She’s got brains, that girl. Wait awhile, she says, there ain’t no hurry. And that reminds me—she said to tell you there ain’t no mail for you.”

“ I see,” said Boyd. “ All right, Nat, I don’t know that we’re called upon to do anything more. As soon as we can we’ll take the levels and make a start. There’s a lot of work to be done before the new face is ready. It won’t be for a week or two. In the meantime I don’t expect any trouble from young Grant. He’s probably got sense enough to see he can do nothing.”

Absolam looked doubtful. “ Perhaps not. He’s a trier, all the same. I’ll bet he’s raising hell this very minute. And the Grant’s have got some solid backing. You see if he ain’t on your door-mat before night.”

“ Well, you know, Grant and I have to fix a price for compensation, if we can,” said Boyd, smiling. “ We’ve got to meet sometime, so the sooner the better. Tell Jerry I’m batching dinner here, will you. I’ve some letters to write.”

The foreman nodded and departed. Boyd remained seated for some minutes, a preoccupied frown on his face. Presently he roused himself, and going inside the house made a light meal of tinned meat and biscuit. Immediately afterwards he settled down to write. He was folding the last letter when a sound of voices reached him. He walked back on to the verandah in time to see two men nearing the house. One he recognised as Jeff Semple; the other was a stranger. Boyd eyed the second man with interest. He seemed to know instinctively that it was Dan Grant, and his jaws set obstinately. He returned the breaker’s greeting pleasantly enough, however, and pointed to a board bench against the wall.

“ Take a seat.”

“ Mr. Boyd, Mr. Grant,” introduced Jeff, briefly.

“ Pleased to meet you,” said Boyd to the younger man.

Dan contented himself with nodding. It was noticeable that neither man offered to shake hands. Their eyes met and held for a brief instant; then Boyd turned back to Jeff.

“ I think you’re the first visitors I’ve had from

outside. Now . . . there's something I can do for you, is there? "

" Why, Dan here wants to have a word with you, Mr. Boyd," said Jeff, settling his long legs. " It seems there's a little misunderstanding. He'll tell you."

" Indeed," said Boyd, in a non-committal tone.

" One of your men handed me this a couple of hours back," said Dan abruptly. He took Boyd's notice from his pocket and held it up. " It's genuine, I suppose? "

" I wrote it, Mr. Grant—if that's what you mean," said Boyd. " Why? Isn't it in order? "

Dan smiled grimly. " Oh, it's pretty enough. And I make no doubt it complies with the regulations. The point is I can't consent to give you a right-of-way through my land. Get all the water you want, and welcome. But find some other way than across the only decent grass-land I've got."

" It's not a question of right-of-way in the sense you appear to think," said Boyd. He glanced at Jeff as he spoke, but the breaker evidently had no immediate intention of joining the conversation, for he was studying the mine surroundings with a detached air. " What I mean is that the Act gives me right-of-way anywhere it can be shown to be honestly necessary. In this case there is no alternative route. We are going to begin work on new ground, and the present level is quite out of the question. Of course you're entitled to full compensation."

“Damn the compensation.” Dan made a movement of impatience. “Look here, Mr. Boyd, treat me fair and you’ll find me right. But if you try to push this thing through as it is, it’s not you, nor I, nor any man, that can see the end of it. Don’t think that because you represent big interests and I’m only a poor man, you can thrust me aside as if I didn’t exist. I’m here to say you can’t. There’ll be no water-race allowed through land of mine.”

“That remains to be seen,” said Boyd coolly. “What exactly do you mean by treating you fairly? Isn’t that what I propose to do?”

“Not if you stick to this,” retorted Dan, tapping the notice with his finger. “Now, I’ll make you an alternative proposal. I don’t want to do so, I might tell you, but needs must when the devil drives, as they say. I never thought to sell a single foot of the land I’ve worked so hard to get, but I’m not unreasonable. I’ll sell you a chain-width along my bottom boundary, and you can do what you like with it.”

Boyd could scarcely refrain from smiling. Did he impress young Grant, he wondered, as being as easy as all that. Why, the next he knew, the fellow would be offering to sell him the whole farm—at a price.

“I’m afraid we can’t do that,” he said. “We’re not at present interested in farming. We’re going to keep right on mining.”

The amused contempt in his voice brought an angry flush to Dan's cheek. "Or would you say, swindling!" he suggested, with a sneer.

Boyd half rose in his seat, but instantly recollected himself and sat down again. Before he could utter the hot words that sprang to his lips, Jeff Semple interposed.

"Maybe Mr. Boyd don't quite get the hang of things. Let me try to explain, will you?"

Without seeming to notice the frankly bellicose attitude of both men, the breaker quietly took the notice from Dan's hand and spread it open on his knee.

"See here, Mr. Boyd. This is your own sketch, ain't it? You've drawn a section of Dan's land, and these dots mark the course, as near as you can guess before taking sights, of the gutter you aim to dig. That's so, ain't it?"

Boyd nodded. He was breathing hard, and the knuckles of his hands shone white. The insult rankled, and he was itching to speak his mind.

"Well, I don't mind saying that you've picked a pretty fair fall," continued Jeff easily. "But I want to put it to you, Mr. Boyd, that I can find you a better. By keeping to Crown Land a chain or two eastward you'll get just about the same fall, and you'll shorten the cut by nearly a quarter. Take a trip along and see for yourself."

"I've already considered that route," said Boyd

curtly. He gave Dan a look of disdain. "It isn't suitable. The formation is much less favourable to open drains, and there is soft ground in one place. I might save on the distance, but what about the everlasting repair work!"

"That is so, Mr. Boyd," said Jeff, looking earnestly at the manager. "Still, you could timber the race throughout. The extra cost wouldn't amount to anything much. Suppose Dan offers to see to that part of it? How about it then?"

Boyd hesitated, though not on account of any uncertainty as to what he should reply. Before serving the notice he had carefully considered the matter from all standpoints, and his judgment held. Jeff's personality, however, was making a strong appeal. Boyd discovered that he was falling into line with popular opinion, which pronounced this steady-eyed, slow-speaking man to be sincere and wholly likeable. It was therefore with something of regret that he replied:

"Even in that case I must stick to my original plan. You forget that I am merely the paid servant of the Company, and as such I am bound to do my best by them. The race must go through as proposed. That is final. But suppose we discuss the question of compensation. I shall do my best to meet you there."

"There's another thing I'd like to say," pursued the breaker, without noticing the refusal.

“ Mr. Boyd, it so happens that your race is going to divide the only bit of clover flat that Dan owns. That’s a real hardship. You see it’s not only Dan that must suffer—there’s his mother. I don’t think you’ve met Mrs. Grant. When you do, you’re going to be glad that you never did her any harm. She’s one of the finest . . . ”

Boyd held up his hand. This was pure sentiment, and he loathed anything of the kind. “ I have no wish to harm anyone. All this is beside the question. I’ve already said that we are bound to compensate. I have no option save to stick to the terms of the notice.”

Jeff began a reply, but his words were cut short by Dan. The young fellow was on his feet, his whole attitude expressive of bitter defiance.

“ Then if you do, I can tell you you’ll get all that’s coming to you. I’ve met your sort before to-day—yes, and stood up to them, and beaten them. And I can do it again. There’s no reason on God’s earth why you should set foot on my land. You know it, and I know it. What’s your real game? ”

“ If that is the attitude you intend to take, I refuse to discuss the matter further,” said Boyd frigidly. “ We’ll go ahead and appoint an arbitrator. And I can assure you, in turn, that I shall make full use of the law to punish any attempt on your part to hinder the work of the Company.”

Dan’s eyes flashed. “ To hell with the law,” he

shouted. "What sort of a law is it that licks the boots of the big fellow every time, and pushes the poor man into the gutter to lie and rot. Set foot on my land, and see what comes of it."

As always, his immoderate anger induced a paroxysm of coughing, and for several moments he was unable to do more than glare speechlessly at Boyd. His very helplessness seemed only to intensify the almost childish abandon of his passion. He lost all control of himself and broke into a flood of shocking self-invective. "God damn this God-damned cough," he finished weakly.

Boyd's eyebrows lifted in astonished contempt. His own anger had cooled, and the intemperate outburst merely disgusted him. He shrugged his shoulders and looked at Jeff.

"You'll be doing your friend a service to keep him away from here in future," he said significantly. It was on the tip of his tongue to hint at Dan's supposed interference with the mine workings, but he refrained.

Jeff rose quietly and put his hand on Dan's shoulder. There was appeal in his eyes. "Mr. Boyd, I'm still hoping that this ain't the last word. I'll ask you to take no notice of anything but the right and wrong of the matter. Will you think it over?"

"No," said Boyd bluntly. He hated compromise of any sort.

"I think you're making a mistake," said Jeff.

“ Now, Danny, we’ll get. Good afternoon, Mr. Boyd.”

Dan offered no resistance to the friendly pressure of the breaker’s hand. The brunt of his passion was over, but his knit brows and the hard lines about his mouth, were eloquent of his mood. They passed in silence down the pathway, and began to climb the slope. At a turn of the scrub they came suddenly upon Jerry Slott, who was smoking placidly with his back against a tree. He greeted their appearance without surprise.

“ Afternoon, Jeff. It ain’t often we see you along this way.”

Jeff laughed. “ Not on foot, anyhow. Having a bit of a spell, are you? ”

“ Sort of,” said the cook. He nodded to Dan, and taking the pipe from his mouth pointed the stem enquiringly. “ Been seeing the boss, haven’t you? How did you find him? The least bit liverish, eh? ”

“ Boyd’s a hell of a man,” said Dan harshly. “ Well—so am I, when I’m put to it. We’ll see.”

“ He takes some knowing,” said Jerry. He nodded again, sagely. “ But I’ll say this much for him—he’s game, and I think he’s honest inside of him.”

Dan sneered.

“ Oh, that’s all right,” said Jerry, without resentment. “ I know he’s like a dose of jalap—nasty to take, but kind of doing you good, all the

same. With a man like the boss you know where you stand, anyhow. He'll talk straight." The cook's face wrinkled in a smile. "Getting back now, are you, Jeff?"

"As hard as we can," Jeff admitted. "There's been a little mud-slinging, and we ain't over and above popular, as you might say. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," said Jerry. He looked at the breaker with mild interrogation in his eye. "I thought maybe you'd like to know that there is a shorter way back than round by the huts. Ever try the river track?"

"Shorter, did you say!" exclaimed Dan. "Why, it's nearly half as far again."

Jerry returned the lad's puzzled look with one of assurance. "Depends how you take it. You'll find no ob . . . eggscuse me, obstickles that way, anyhow. It's been a fine day, ain't it?"

"Thanks, Jerry," said the breaker suddenly. "Maybe the river track is the best. I reckon we'll try it. So long."

Disregarding Dan's protest he strode forwards once more. On the crest of the ridge he halted, looking back at the mine quarters. He seemed to be searching for something, and presently raised his hand and pointed.

"Ah! I thought so. That's what Jerry meant. He must have waited just to warn us. What d'you make of that down there, Danny?"

Dan said nothing, but Jeff knew by the expres-

sion of his face that he both saw and understood. Through a gap in the stunted timber the huts were plainly visible. Near the boiler shed were grouped seven or eight men, their faces turned to watch the strip of track that wound down from the manager's house. There was something peculiarly significant in the attitude.

"Waiting to beat us up, maybe," suggested the breaker, with grim amusement. "They certainly owe me something, but it looks like they'll be called to wait a little longer. That's one more I owe Jerry. He's a trump. Now, Danny, how about Boyd? What are you going to do?"

"Fight him to a finish." Dan's jaws closed with a snap. "Jeff, they just can't do it. It would break my mother's heart." He looked at his friend with smouldering eyes. "It's either Boyd or myself for this. I've got a feeling that way—as if we both want the same thing from life. He knows it too. I could read it in his face. He's as hard as hell."

"He's just human, the same as you and me," said Jeff slowly. "Come on home and talk it over with the others. Maybe the women can find a way out." He sighed, then smiled patiently. "And there always is a way out, you know. Come on, lad. I promised Betty I'd string her a yarn before her bed time, and I reckon I'd sooner face that mob down yonder than disappoint the little lady. She's the best partner a sinful man ever had."

OVER the scattered outlands of the north-west winter descends with but scant warning. The cold radiance of clear skies gives place suddenly to leaden murkiness, the wind demons are unleashed in a fury of stinging sleet that turns in a trice to driving rain, the plains and Tiers are enveloped as if by magic in a blanket of sodden mist. Over all and above all sounds the vibrant humming of the gale, the booming of great trees in conflict with the elements, the unceasing clamour of the surf beating upon the wide reaches of the foreshore. The yellow sandhills are beaten white, and streaked by myriad rivulets of trickling slime; the gutters threading the plateau above are filled with slow moving water that lays bare the grey roots of the shrunken button-grass, and strews the washed soil with dark lines of peat sediment.

Ralph Boyd, engrossed in his work, took small heed of the changing season. With the advent of winter, however, he was forced to relax something of the strict personal supervision which he had thought necessary. On the whole he felt he had

reason to be satisfied with the prospects ahead, and resolved to take the first opportunity of forming an acquaintance at first hand with the surrounding country. Until now the chance had been denied him. Except now and then to ride in to Copper Creek for the mails, he had scarcely taken foot from the mine premises. He resolved accordingly that he would accompany the next shipment of ore to its destination at Sandy Cove.

During the days following his brush with Dan Grant, Boyd almost succeeded in driving the unpleasant incident from his mind. In spite of his refusal to reconsider his decision he felt that his attitude on that occasion had been just and reasonable. He regarded the affair solely as a business proposition, refusing to concede anything to sentiment. This was perhaps to be expected. The ruthlessness of his upbringing, his struggle from comparative obscurity towards the goal of his ambitions, his deliberate shaping of every thought to that end, had warped a natural compassion and left him devoid of sympathy, or even understanding. In all that he did Boyd held to the truth, but it was truth of his own making. Dan Grant's intemperate defence of his own was entirely misconstrued. Boyd looked upon it as merely evidence of a desire to take unfair advantage of the situation; in fine, a sort of commercial brigandage to which he was by nature opposed. One aspect only gave him uneasiness. This was the attitude taken by

Joan Norris. Boyd was conscious of a desire to stand well in her good graces. The girl interested him to an unusual degree, and he had so far thought to discern in her manner and conversation something of friendliness towards himself. He was both amused and irritated to discover the concern that filled him lest she too might misunderstand and condemn.

It was on a dark morning in September that Boyd saddled his horse and prepared to accompany Kling and Sjoberg on the trip outward to Sandy Cove with nearly half a ton of tin oxide. At the very moment of starting there occurred some hitch with the loading, and he stood bridle in hand at the turn of the bywash from the big dam above, waiting for the men to make ready. In the dawning light the wide face of the workings was scarred curiously with shadow. Thin spirals of mist rose sluggishly to meet the rim of the cliff that hung pendulous, like the lip of a sneering giant, from the inverted bowl of the sky. Underfoot the ground was churned to a frozen slush. The air was chill, and filled with the strange echoes of dissolving night. Overhead a heavy wind swayed the massed blackness of the timber belt.

Presently, as Boyd struck a match to consult his watch, a step sounded at his back and he turned to find Absolam standing by him. The foreman returned his greeting, breathing noisily upon his clammy fingers.

“ Yes, Mr. Boyd, she’s nippy this morning all right. The water in the pools beyond the tail-race is near froze. Well, they won’t keep you waiting long now. A pack-girth bust, and Kling’s fixing it.”

“ I told Kling last night to overhaul the gear,” said Boyd. “ Why didn’t he do it? ”

“ He did, so far’s I know,” Absolam told him. “ You can’t always tell to a fraction. Some of that leather’s frost-bitten. It wants renewing.”

“ Well, have it seen to,” ordered Boyd sharply.

“ McGurr wants a turn at nozzle-man,” said Absolam, after a slight pause. “ He knows the work. He was on the hydraulic at Bluenose before he come here. It’s all right.”

“ I’ll take your word for it,” said Boyd. “ Give him a turn, if you like. You ought to know your own men. Anything else before I go? ”

“ Only about them ripples and stoppers,” said Absolam.

Boyd grunted impatiently. “ Leave it until I come back. I thought you told me everything was fixed.”

“ I forgot about them,” said the foreman. He coughed deprecatingly, and lapsed into silence.

Boyd’s gaze went past the blurred outline of the sluiceway to where the iron walls of the boiler-shed gleamed wetly in the strengthening light. Already from the dim seen arc of washway beyond came the

first faint stirrings of assembling labour. There sounded the calling of the men, the slow moan of sucking pumps, the ripple and splash of water. The silent watches of night seemed suddenly to waken to an insidious throbbing; as it might be, the primeval grumblings of disintegrating soil tortured from the bowels of the shrinking hills. For almost the first time Boyd's imagination was touched. He stood motionless, his whole consciousness absorbing the significance of that hollow diapason, as if the earth were in truth alive and trembling to the touch of its wounds. A puff of cold air came down the valley, and he shivered involuntarily, and fastened his coat more tightly about his chest.

“They're right,” said Absolam, as a shout came echoing out of the mist at their feet.

Boyd mounted and went to join the pack-horses that strung reluctantly down the shoulder of the hill. Kling and Sjoberg were waiting for him on the boundary, and they rode abreast over the sodden plain. Boyd proceeded for the most part in silence, scarcely noticing the talk of his companions. His thoughts were busy, and he did not rouse himself until they were nearing the end of the journey. Then it was to ask an abrupt question of Kling.

“Which is Pickens' land?”

Kling beat his chilled hands together in an effort to warm himself. His tone was surly. “Sam

Pickens, you mean. He's got about a hundred acres back this way from the reservation line on the foreshore. That's right. I've seen his name on the survey map."

"So have I," said Boyd. "What's his idea?"

"God knows," said Kling flippantly. "There was talk of him fencing and putting up a bit of a hut; but what for, I couldn't tell you. It's only peat plain, and no water on it. You wouldn't expect anybody but old Sam to bother holding it. The man's as ratty as burnt snake."

"Then how can he hold on?" Boyd persisted.

"Oh, he's sane enough in the legal sense," Kling assured him, with a sneering twist of his thin mouth. "This is his land we're on now. We passed the corner peg awhile back. About all you can say for it is that it's high and dry."

He darted off as he spoke, riding to head the pack-horses from a side track. Sjoberg, heavy-faced and taciturn, followed after, and Boyd was left to himself. Acting on an impulse he drew rein and looked about him, not heeding the sting of the wind that whipped off the leagues of tumbling grey sea beyond. Pickens' block evidently contained the whole of the thin tongue of land which he now saw divided the fissured sweep of the coastline. This intersection of high land was roughly about fifteen chains wide, and continued right to the edge of the beach itself, thus forming a firm and even approach. It was, on the face of it, in the nature

of a freak formation; yet Boyd was quick to see that it provided the sole inlet from Sandy Cove. The fact was not new. He had already been careful to acquaint himself with the main features of the region. None the less this confirmation at first hand gave him instant satisfaction. Pickens' Plateau, as the place had been christened, was ideally fitted for the purpose he had in mind. He sat awhile musingly; then turned his horse and rode towards the tin shelter sheds that showed on the headland a half-mile distant. Here he dismounted and turned his horse loose in the yards at the rear.

When he regained the sheds the packs were already unloaded. Sjoberg had disappeared, but Kling was talking busily with three men, strangers to Boyd. Two of these, it transpired, were packers from a copper show on a spur of the Carfax Ranges, whose one high peak was just visible from where Boyd stood. The third man, big and bluff, with weather scarred cheeks, and friendly eyes, was Ben Hayes, skipper of the ketch that rode at anchor within a stone's throw of the shore. With him Boyd talked business for an hour, by which time it was noon. At Hayes' invitation he rowed out to the ketch and dined on fried mutton birds and biscuit, washed down by a pannican of steaming hot tea. Later they returned to shore, where the big skipper endeavoured to sound Boyd on popular rumour.

“ They tell me we'll have a jetty here by next

winter," he observed. "What do you know about it?"

Boyd disclaimed any particular knowledge. "I've heard that, but I know no more than you do. What site will they choose, do you think?"

"Do you mean on the coast, or just hereabouts?" demanded the skipper.

"Here, of course. Anywhere else would be no good to Copper Creek."

"That's so," agreed Hayes. He smoked thoughtfully. "Well, I should say it 'ud have to be either Shark Bay here, or else Sandy Cove." He added, with a twinkle in his eye, "That is if old Sam Pickens let's them."

"I've heard of that man," said Boyd. "Something of a character, isn't he?"

Hayes wagged a forefinger facetiously. "I should say he is. Sam gets madder as the moments fly. Not, mind you, but what he ain't sane enough when he likes. I never met a shrewder head at a bargain." He indicated two small sacks of ore set apart by the wall of the shed. "See that tin; that's from old Sam's show up at the Devil's Web. That's the third lot he's brought along this year. Good ore, too, they tell me. Oh, he's no slouch."

"I'd like to run across him," commented Boyd.

"Why, that's easy enough, as it happens," says Hayes. "Follow the beach past that sand-spit over yonder, and you'll come slap on him. He's camped in a bit of a hollow to leeward of some

honeysuckles on the edge of a fresh-water spring. What he aims to be doing there, the devil only knows. But then, as I said, the man's not right in his head. New Norfolk's holding down a job for him." The skipper yawned and rose reluctantly to his feet. "I've been glad to have a pitch with you, Mr. Boyd. I must get along now and see to the loading. She's beginning to blow up dirty. So long."

Thus deprived of company Boyd descended in turn to the beach and walked slowly in the direction of the spit pointed out by Hayes. The rain had ceased for a little while, but the wind had added force. Seawards the heaving lines of storm-tossed water vanished in a grey obscurity of mist. The harsh screaming of gulls sounded through the incessant roaring of the surf.

Out of sight of the sheds Boyd quickened his pace, and presently came upon a thick clump of scrub set beyond the low shoulder of a knoll. A smudge of smoke spread fanwise overhead, and he caught sight of the gleam of wet canvas. A minute later he had climbed the sandbank and dropped into the hollow beyond.

Seated under a bag fly was a little, hairy, wisp of a man, with sharp features and bright, bird-like eyes that regarded Boyd with mingled cunning and suspicion.

"Good day," said Boyd affably. "Mr. Pickens about anywhere?"

“ My name,” piped the old man, in a thin treble. He looked at Boyd with his head on one side. “ My name, mister.”

“ Good. I wanted to see you,” said Boyd.

He sat down on a log opposite and began to talk.

JEFF SEMPLE was handling a colt in the yards behind his hut. The animal, a nuggety chestnut, with a blaize and three white stockings, was nervy and inclined to be vicious, and the breaker had spent the best part of the day petting him in the crush-yard. An hour since he had brought the colt into the open and now trotted him at the end of a long halter-lead.

In spite of the tiring nature of the work Jeff's temper remained unruffled. His patience appeared inexhaustible. He spoke to the animal as one speaks to a fractious child; soothingly, without a trace of fretfulness, stroking its fear with the quiet, drawling tones of his voice, winning its confidence by the serene, unhurrying method of his approach.

On the wide top-rail of the crush Yetta and Betty sat as interested spectators. By the child especially Jeff's every movement was followed with almost breathless attention. Her wide-open brown eyes shone with excitement, and her lips trembled with eagerness to applaud some real or fancied evidence

of her big friend's progress. Once, indeed, her feelings overcame her caution, and she clapped her small hands in enthusiastic approval.

“ Oh, Jeff, how clever. But did he really try to bite you then? ”

At the sound of her sweet, piping tones the colt drew back sharply, and Jeff turned his head with a little frown.

“ Whoa, laddie . . . whoa, then, old boy. Betty, you young scamp, didn't you promise me you wouldn't call out. Now he's timid again, you see. The least little thing startles him. Steady there . . . so.” He cast a quick glance at the declining sun. “ It must be near knocking off time. Have you your watch, Yetta? ”

“ Half-past five,” said the girl.

“ As late as that! Oh, well—we'll let this gentleman go. He's had a fair gruelling; and if he's as sick of it as I am, we'll both be satisfied. He's just a bundle of nerves, but he'll make a fine hack for someone after a week or two.”

“ Please can I ride him, Jeff? Just a little ride? ” asked Betty, from her perch. “ I mean when you've taught him to be good.”

“ We'll see,” said the breaker teasingly. “ Why, if he was to open his mouth good and wide, he'd swallow you whole. And then what would your mummy say to me.”

Talking quietly all the while he manœuvred the

colt into the angle of the fence and with the aid of a long, thin stick dexterously freed the halter.

“That’s the idea. No running around all night treading on the lead and trampling good rope into a mess. We’ll have a shot at backing you tomorrow, old man. Come and help fill the drinking trough, Betty. Mustn’t let him go thirsty if we can help it.”

“Here’s Bill Utting,” called Yetta suddenly.

“Bill!” Jeff turned to look. “So it is. He’s been back in the hills this last week. A fine fellow, Bill.”

“I like him,” said the girl simply.

“One of the best,” said Jeff, with heartiness. He lit his pipe, and stood regarding the approaching man with a friendly smile. “How goes it, Bill?”

“Pretty fair,” said Utting. He removed his hat with a flourish. “You’re looking well, Yetta. Oh, yes—I’m not complaining. I’m getting older every day, but my spirits is booming. That your colt, Jeff?”

“No—Parson’s,” said Jeff. “I’m to get the use of him for three months, though, after he’s broken. That suits me. Well, what d’you know?”

Utting looked at him curiously. “Nothing much. Dan’s playing for a fall. I seen Mrs. Grant as I came along. She wanted me to tell you.”

Jeff did not reply for some moments. He was looking to where Yetta Nordsen stood by the drink-

ing trough, her supple body bending to take the can of water from Betty's straining arms. He saw the pallid gleam of her hair as it rippled to the caress of the evening breeze, the broad, white forehead, the full-lipped, tender mouth, the curves of her neck and shoulders, the gracious amplitude of her bosom . . . and a little tremor shook him. He sighed deeply, and his hand brushed his eyes, as if to clear their sight. He turned to Utting with an effort.

"Tell me, Bill?"

"It's like this," said the old man. As he spoke he began to tick off each point with a stubby finger. "Boyd's been taking levels on Dan's ground. They tell me Dan don't do nothing till it's all over; then he tears up the pegs and heaves them into the river, along with an odd tool or so that's been left behind for the morning. Well, now it seems Boyd's minded to give him a lesson. Up at the mine they're planning a come-back at Dan. Someone's passed the word that a bunch of Kling's goats are coming over to-night to beat him up. Dan sends over and gets the two Packer boys, and young Bert Halligan. What good are them kids in a mix-up? But Dan don't care. They tell me he's in one of his stone crazy moods, and wouldn't take sass from the devil himself."

The breaker nodded. "I know. They can't scare him. Go on, Bill."

"I've finished," said Utting. He looked at

Jeff, plain appeal in his eyes. "But what's going to happen. The good Lord knows I think that man Boyd ought to be pickled in boiling kerosene; though there's no denying he's got the law with him so far as he's gone."

"Confound Danny; he's just a rip-snorting, hell-bent young tiger-cat," Jeff complained, though with a note of admiration in his voice. Above all men the breaker loved a fighter; and there was no denying the spirit of Dan Grant. "Well, what about it? Hold on a minute, Bill—we'll ask Yetta."

At his call the girl turned quickly, and came towards them. She was holding Betty by the hand.

"What is it?" she asked.

Utting repeated his news. Yetta considered, her eyes clouding anxiously.

"What a shame," she declared. "Jeff, surely you won't allow it. What are you going to do?"

Jeff shook his head in perplexity. "I don't know. Honest, I don't. You see Dan's butting against the law; and that ain't wise. Oh, yes; the law's rotten. I'll give you that in. But that don't make it any better. And if Bill and I mix in, they'll just pot the lot of us."

"It will be a dark night," said Yetta slowly. "They might recognise your voices, of course; but so long as they don't actually see you. . . . And Boyd's breaking the law himself, if he lets his men do this."

Jeff's face brightened. He slapped his thigh approvingly. "That's the idea, Yetta. Of course, it'll be dark. We'll just have to take our chance of showing up." He broke off to exclaim: "Why, what's the matter, Partner?"

Betty was looking at him with round eyes. At his words her lips quivered.

"Will they hurt Dan? You won't let them, Jeff, will you? I'll tell daddy, and he'll go and lock them all up."

"Confound it, I forgot all about Jim," muttered the breaker, under his breath. Suddenly he caught the child in his arms. "Hurt Dan! Why, of course not. We won't let them. But listen, Betty. We won't tell daddy anything about this. It 'ud only worry him, and he's got enough to do as it is. You just leave things to Bill and me. Dan will be as right as a bank. And we'll make this our secret—just between us here. Maybe we'll tell daddy after."

"I love secrets," declared Betty, her mood changing instantly.

"Me! I'm never happy without one," Jeff asserted. He gave the little body an extra hug. "We mustn't breathe a word—not a pig's whisper. That's the style. Now off you run with Yetta, while Bill and I get busy."

"How will you go?" asked Yetta. Some quality in her voice caused Jeff to look at her

quickly, but as quickly he glanced away again. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I can't seem to think of anything," said Jeff. "Why, I think we'll drive up in the jinker. We'll leave as soon as we have a bite to eat." He hesitated; then added quietly: "It'll be all right. Don't worry, Yetta."

"I'm not," said the girl clearly.

She stood a moment, watching the strong lines of his averted face, and a little smile came to her fine mouth. Her eyes were strangely soft.

"I don't think Dan has much need to worry either," she added, in turn.

"They all come to Jeff to help them when they've been naughty, don't they, Bill?" called Betty, over her shoulder, as Yetta led her away.

"Never knew 'em to fail," agreed Utting. He waved a vigorous farewell. "Nor never knew him to fail them, either," he finished under his breath.

Jeff stood silently watching until the two disappeared from sight. Then he squared his shoulders and turned to Utting, a sudden briskness in his tone.

"Get inside and fix a meal, Bill, will you. You'll find a pile of kindling in the corner, and there's tea and sugar on the shelf. I'll catch a horse and harness up."

It was quite dark when they left the hut. The night was clouded slightly, and a little chill wind stirred the heads of the button-grass. The air was

full of the vague, passionless odour of wet bush. Overhead the stars shone frostily.

Later would come the moon, rising from the immense black shadow of the timber belt to touch the sky with silver grey, and swell the mystery of the night to a veiling saffron radiance. But now the drowsing earth, heavy with the first rains of winter, lay inert and silent in the spell of the dusk. The only sounds were the dull rumble of the jinker wheels, and the shrilling of tree-frogs along the brown-soil gutters.

Bill Utting sat stiffly on his seat, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his cardigan jacket, and his teeth clenched firmly on the stem of his pipe. From time to time he glanced at the dim figure of the man at his side, as if wondering at the breaker's silence. Jeff had scarcely spoken since taking the reins. His brow was furrowed, and he drove with unseeing eyes. Yet despite his preoccupation his senses were instinctively on the alert. He felt his way through the darkness as it were subconsciously, safeguarded by that unerring sense of direction which comes of lifelong experience.

Many problems beat on the breaker's mind, but he thrust them all aside save one. There dwelt continually on his mental vision the picture of Yetta Nordsen, as he had last seen her—tall, supple-bodied, her massed hair steeped in sunlight, her eyes full of calm, almost maternal solicitude. He remembered the curve of her parted lips, the

clear tones of her voice, the gentle heaving of her outlined bosom. His thoughts were crude, imaginative, rising from the unplumbed depths of his soul like the groping, bitter-sweet waters of a forming spring. Until he had seen Yetta Nordsen the breaker had never known love of woman. His earnest, self-contained nature had found in itself all that his simple outlook asked of life. He had viewed women timidly, curiously, without understanding, even though dimly conscious at times of the primal lure of sex. But now the old peace of mind, the old sober ambitions, were of a sudden as if they had never been. He was filled with a strange unrest. He seemed to be struggling blindly and vainly through a storm of emotion, in response to an impulse beyond his understanding.

At first Jeff had been dismayed at the change. But slowly, by imperceptible degrees, he came to knowledge of the truth. He loved Yetta. Not with the wild, covetous passion of youth; but strongly, reverently, full of the exquisite imagining of clean, robust manhood. The thought devoured him. And then—subtly, cruelly, came a conviction that the girl cared for Dan Grant. Strive as he might he could not stifle the belief, and all the years of his repression echoed passionate protest. Every fibre of his being cried out that this was his woman, his natural, God-given mate. He knew that he ought to hate Dan; yet strangely he could not. The lad was his friend; nay, more than his friend.

The bond of affection between them was only comparable to that existing between father and son. Jeff wondered dully if this was the reason why Yetta, with unconscious cruelty, chose always to lay the burden of Dan's welfare upon him. The bitter irony of it scorched the breaker like a flame.

Now, as he drove across the blackened plains, Jeff found himself wrestling against a flood of alien thought which threatened to overwhelm him. In instinct, reaching back beyond conscious understanding, he felt suddenly afraid. A great desire to be master of himself took hold of him. He fought to strangle the black, bitter thoughts that poured from the crevices of his mind; to follow his highest, most unselfish impulse. Yet renunciation was not easy. There were sensations he had no words for. His throat ached and throbbed; his eyes were hot with repression. Yet, presently, because he had gathered something of the patience, the eternal resignation, of the great outlands wherein his life was cradled, his soul knew surcease of its agony of indecision. The torment stilled. The passionate tumult of his mind gave place to a sort of dull anguish. And dimly to his hearing came the complaining voice of Bill Utting.

“What's the matter with you?”

Jeff returned to full consciousness of his surroundings with a start. “What's that, Bill? I wasn't listening.”

“Don't mention it,” said Utting resignedly.

“ I only ast you the same question three times. Take your time about answering. I wouldn't hurry you for the world.”

“ I'm real sorry,” said Jeff. “ I was thinking a spell, and maybe I'd got in deeper than I'd meant. What did you say? ”

“ I asked you what was the little game? ”

“ What little game? ” echoed Jeff, in bewilderment.

“ Kling's little game,” said Utting patiently. “ Just how far does he ride with Boyd. Does he go all the way, or does he get off at the end of the penny section? I want to know.”

“ You think that mob is bluffing Boyd? ” suggested Jeff.

“ I don't think ; I know.” Utting smacked his hand on his knee. “ Didn't they bluff McFarger? Didn't they? But what for? I'm asking you? Is Boyd in it? ”

“ I don't know,” said the breaker. He was supremely glad of the diversion. “ I never thought of it that way. What do you think, Bill? ”

“ He ain't—leastwise, he ain't in Kling's game. But I'll go ' he ' if he hasn't got one of his own going.”

“ What! Boyd has? ” exclaimed Jeff, in astonishment.

“ That's what I said,” said the old prospector, with a touch of asperity. “ What else is he here for? This job he's on now won't hold, and you bet

he knows it. The Ajax may be all right for a lot of tin scratchers—good money in it for them; but not for a registered company liable for dividends. She can't run it. There's more in it than meets the eye."

"Maybe you're right," said Jeff, considering. "But what's the idea then of running a race through Dan's land, and trying out on a new face? You're not going to tell me that that part of it is bluff too."

"Oh, a passenger here or there ain't much of a circumstance to a sinking ship," returned Utting enigmatically.

He settled back in his seat, refusing to be drawn further. In the end Jeff gave him up, and set himself to consider the task ahead. He was still undecided when they reached Grant's house. The rails were down, and he drove the jinker right to the garden gate, where they climbed stiffly to the ground.

"Going to unhitch?" Utting asked.

"I suppose I might as well," said the breaker. As he debated, the door of the house was suddenly thrown back and the thin figure of Mrs. Grant stood framed in the opening. She recognised Jeff with a cry of relief.

"I've been hoping you might come. Who is that with you?"

"Bill Utting," returned Jeff. "Where's Dan, Mrs. Grant?"

“ I don’t know,” said the widow, in a muffled voice. “ I think he’s down the paddock. I begged and prayed him not to go, but it was no use. He’s been acting strangely all day.”

“ He’s bound to be a bit upset,” said Jeff soothingly. His hands were busy stripping the harness from his horse. “ Don’t let it worry you, Mrs. Grant. We’ll get right along and see what’s doing. Can I turn Star loose in here? Thanks. Anybody with Dan? ”

“ The two Packer boys and young Jimmy Halligan,” Mrs. Grant told him. “ Won’t you have a cup of tea first? It’s all ready. You’ve had such a long drive. . . . ”

“ Not a thing, thanks,” said Jeff. He straightened himself quickly. “ Not a thing. They’ll be down on the clover flat, I suppose? Good. We’ll make a move. Ready, Bill? ”

Receiving no answer he peered about from side to side, but the old prospector had vanished. Jeff grinned, and swung off along the fence.

“ Bill’s stolen a march on me,” he called back over his shoulder. “ Don’t be uneasy, Mrs. Grant. Oh—and Yetta sent her love to you. I nearly forgot that.”

He climbed the fence and went cautiously down the slope of the hill, his senses alert to discover some trace of his friend. No sound, however, disturbed the quiet of the night. The darkness was

intense, but now Jeff thought to discover a faint lifting towards the east. A moment's scrutiny told him that his surmise was correct. Somewhere beyond the grim shadow of the timber belt the moon was rising.

Jeff was stirred to a vague regret that he might not find time to witness the silver glory of its coming. Despite his cramped environment the breaker had a warm and understanding temperament. He never failed in his appreciation of nature's artistry. A true son of the outback, he knew something of the outback's varying mood. A brilliant sunset, a corner of unimagined landscape, a half-tone impression at dusk of some bizarre odd and end of scenery—these things gave his senses instant and lasting satisfaction. So now he went on almost reluctantly; his eyes raised to the sombre line of the horizon, as if marvelling at the coming transformation.

At the stack-yard fence Jeff halted and looked about him. There was still no sign of Bill Utting, and he began to wonder if he had not come in the wrong direction after all. It struck him as curious that the night was so still. He could hear only the murmur of the wind in the far off trees, and the slow song of the river beyond the shoulder of the hill. In that corner of the great valley the slumbering earth seemed only as the symbol of an infinite repose. Beyond, in the distant cities, life, wildly tumultuous, permeated with the fever of existence,

went crashing onwards towards its inevitable disillusion. But here, in this world of velvet shadows and nebulous horizons, cloyed with sweet odours, saturated with mysticism, was no more than the faintest bourdon of conscious oppression.

Jeff sighed pleasantly. For an instant his mission there was forgotten, and he stood with his hat in hand, the soft breeze ruffling his hair; his mood receptive to the calming impulse of the night. Not for long, however, was he permitted to remain undisturbed. There came suddenly a thin trickle of sound from the void before him, and he spun on his heel. As he ran the silence broke to a babel of noise. Almost before he knew it he found himself stumbling above mounds of freshly spaded earth, and the indistinct lines of Boyd's trespassing water-race rose to meet his straining sight. To right and left spunt the dim shapes of men in furious conflict. His ears caught the thud of blows and the hoarse panting of the combatants, as the fight surged about him. And suddenly he was in the thick of it. A figure sprang at him from the cover of the darkness, and a heavy blow jarred his right shoulder.

The breaker gave ground warily, his arms shooting from his sides like piston-rods. In spite of his sudden anger he found the situation not without a certain grim humour. This inextricable mingling of friend and foe appeared as supremely ridiculous. He wondered how Dan came to allow such a

blunder. He could admire the lad's courage, but his strategy left much to be desired. For a second he even had the thought that it was Dan himself who now drove at him through the gloom. And then all at once a wave of the fight forced his opponent against the skyline, and he saw that it was not so. This man was too big, too strong; although lacking in agility. And presently it was borne upon him that it could be no other than Nat Absolam. As if to confirm the sudden discovery the big, bellowing tones of the foreman smote the air in a roar of pain. His hands, reaching out clumsily, scraped Jeff's throat, slid to his shoulders, and there fastened in a furious embrace. An instant later the breaker freed himself with a quick heave, and drove his fist full into Absolam's face. The man dropped back with a grunt, and next moment the impact of charging bodies sent them apart.

Jeff recovered himself groggily. His first impulse was to rejoin the fight. Then reason came to his aid, and he began to shout for Bill Utting. As he did so, there came to him a sound of muffled coughing. Again he shouted. There was no response; but to his fancy the clamour seemed to lessen. He heard a man's voice in sharp exclamation. And then once more that long, choking cough from the shadows on his left. Jeff called a third time. He was in the act of turning in the direction, when of a sudden there was a spurt of

red flame and the night was split with the roar of a discharging gun.

For a second of time the breaker remained as if paralysed; the startled blood pounding at his ears. By the growing light of the moon climbing behind the swaying fretwork of the timber, he saw the little knots of struggling men fall apart, as if aghast at the grim portent. There came the thud of running feet, the swift passing of shadowy figures across the dim screen of the darkness. And then he too was running; fearing he knew not what. In the sudden hush that succeeded the stampede of the mine men, the voice of Bill Utting echoed stridently through the night.

“ What damned fool let that gun off? ”

The same thought was in Jeff's mind; but now he halted precipitately, the words of angry remonstrance clipped short on his lips. Dan Grant was seated on the ground. He was alternately coughing and swearing; his thin body, from which the clothing had been rent almost to the waist, shaking convulsively with each recurring paroxysm.

“ I did, if you want to know, ” he gasped. His cramped shoulders straightened defiantly. “ God damn this God-damned cough. Jeff . . . Jeff, did you see the blighters run? ”

“ Good God, d'you want murder on our hands? ” asked the breaker, in a shocked voice.

Dan laughed jerkily. “ Murder!—nothing. I fired in the air. I wanted to frighten them. And,

believe me, so I did. If they come back for a second dose . . .” He broke off to cough.

“Halloa, Bill. How goes it?”

But Utting shook his head at him. “That’s all right, Dan; but I’d sooner you hadn’t done it. If Boyd likes to use the lever you’ve given him, he can make things mighty nasty for all of us. Interfering and shooting—that’s a pretty pair.”

“Oh, Boyd don’t hold all the cards,” Dan assured him easily. “I know what I know. And she’s a full hand, Bill—three aces and a pair of kings.”

“You’re sure you hit nothing?” demanded Jeff anxiously.

“Not unless it was the moon.” Dan rose unsteadily to his feet. A plaintive note came to his voice. “Of course it was a mad thing to do. I’ll give you that in. But I had to . . . to . . . Oh, damn it, what’s the use. I’ll fight Boyd to a finish. But I don’t want to hurt my friends.”

“Well, it don’t look like you’ve made much of a start,” said Jeff whimsically. His momentary anger had given place to an intense relief at the absence of tragedy. “What’s the matter with Jimmy Halligan? Did they paste you, James?”

Young Halligan gave an indignant disclaimer. “I’ve had the time of my life. You should have heard the whack I got at Kling—I’m sure it was Kling. The beast tried to bite me.”

“Take care he don’t do it yet,” advised the

breaker seriously. "If he hasn't recognised you, don't go out of your way to tell him." He stood a moment considering. "Well, we'd best make a move back. They won't trouble us again. Not to-night, anyhow."

He moved to Dan's side as Bill Utting and the other three started up the rise. Suddenly he put his arm about the drooping shoulders of his friend.

"Danny!"

Dan looked at him in silence. By the widening light Jeff saw that the lad's face was working curiously. A great pity swelled in the breaker's heart.

"Old boy, what's wrong? What's really wrong, I mean? You don't think I'm blaming you? I was angry just for a second . . . you see it seemed so damned foolish. But that's all over and done with."

Dan stirred slightly. "It's only that I can't see the sense of it all. Sometimes I'm afraid."

"All what?" asked the breaker gently.

"In this . . . in everything. What's the good of it all? I suppose you think I'm mad to butt in on Boyd's game. I suppose you think there's only one end to it. Well, maybe you're right. But I tell you, Jeff, it's rotten. Why should one man have all the grain of life, and another all the husk." He coughed; then laughed bitterly. "I don't want to make a song about it. I can take my medicine. But, by God, I'll give Boyd a fight for it before I'm through."

“ Take care of that cough of yours,” said Jeff abruptly. “ It ought to be getting better; not worse.” His hand tightened on the lad’s shoulder. “ Don’t worry about Boyd. He may, or may not, be what you think him. But there’s more in the world than greed and roguery. A man’s his own worst enemy. Not even Boyd can rob you of the future.”

“ The future! ” echoed Dan, with a queer intonation.

“ You’re young,” said the breaker mildly. “ And the luck will change.”

Dan shook his head. “ I don’t know. It’s what a man sets his heart on, that counts. I could give up everything—even this . . .”—he raised his hand with a passionate gesture towards the brightening slopes—“ if I knew . . . if I could be sure . . . I reckon you must think me a silly young fool. And yet, if it wasn’t for the thought of her . . . ”

“ She’s a fine woman—your mother,” said Jeff slowly, after a little pause.

“ My mother! ” Dan looked at him in bewilderment. He gave a little, half-ashamed laugh. “ I wasn’t thinking of my mother. I thought you knew. I thought you’d guessed.” He took a deep breath, and looked up at the breaker with shining eyes. “ Jeff . . . Jeff, there was never another girl like her in all this dear world.”

Something seemed to rise in Jeff's throat—choking him, stifling the cry on his lips. He looked aside; wondering dully at the strange sickness that crept over his senses. He never doubted of whom Dan spoke, and all the old, bitter thoughts surged over him like a flood. He heard again the soft, anxious tones of Yetta's voice, saw the quiet beauty of her parting smile. Like flame the vision leapt upon his mind, leaving it numbed, exhausted. Tiny beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

“She's as God made her, Danny.”

The thickness of the utterance was unheeded. Dan had no thought beyond the eager dream of the moment. He faced his friend almost impatiently.

“You're not interested. You never did care much for women. But I just wanted you to know . . . to be the first to know . . . even if you couldn't quite understand. Because you're the finest friend I've ever known. You've been almost a father to me. You'll never know how grateful I am for all you've done.”

Jeff made a little gesture of dissent, but he did not speak for some moments. Youth was for youth. Bitter though the thought was, he caught at it with the strength of a new found courage. And suddenly, miraculously, he felt some subtle element of his unrest was gone from him. Thought of self was stilled. He knew a strange sense of peace, a chastening of spirit, such as he had not conceived possible. His groping mind touched it,

clung to it. He caught Dan's hand in his own, speaking almost fiercely.

"But you're all wrong, Danny. I do know. And the other . . . I've guessed . . . I've known. Only I didn't like to speak of it. But now . . . you know I'm glad. Yes, I am. Damned glad."

As he ceased speaking the moon cleared the jagged barrier of the timber. The darkness of earth receded; unfolding wave upon wave, to reveal a spectacle of incomparable beauty; flooding the air with a pulsing radiance that swam onwards to vanish in the black smudge of the valley's end.

"I'm damned glad," repeated the breaker.

He laid his hand again gently on Dan's shoulder, and in silence they turned to breast the hill.

COPPER CREEK received news of the fracas at Grant's with mingled feelings. Boyd alone failed to see humour in the situation. Swift resentment at what he conceived to be a direct challenge of his authority, was followed by a cold determination to punish. His first impulse was to seek Dan out and demand an explanation. Calmer judgment convinced him of the futility of so doing. His instinct told him that such a course would be regarded as weakness. Obviously the thing to be done was to lay an information against Dan, and let the law take its course.

In coming to this decision Boyd had taken into account the probable outcome of a personal remonstrance. He was conscious of the fact that between himself and Dan Grant existed a kind of natural antipathy; in short, one of those strange, inborn antagonisms for which there appears to be no explanation other than that it is a sort of primal impulse—as it were an enmity spawned and carried in the womb of time, lying dormant through countless centuries, to burst into living flames at a touch.

So much Boyd sensed ; without regret, or even reluctance. His practical nature served only to foster the belief. He viewed this ancient enemy with the same seriousness which he had brought to the overthrowing of other, if less subtle, obstacles in the way of his ambition. Compromise was unthinkable. The very thought was a noxious affectation which must destroy, if it be not itself destroyed. Boyd had no illusions regarding the purpose of his work. Ambition was the dominant factor in his life. It was become axiomatic that he should succeed where others failed. And in Dan Grant he recognised a serious menace.

Jim Howth was sprawled on the verandah boards of his home, pipe in mouth, alternately dozing and waking, when Boyd rode up to the picket fence and dismounted. At sight of his visitor the trooper sat up and rubbed his eyes. He was as little curious as any man, yet now he felt a sudden impatience to learn why Boyd had come. Something in the attitude of the approaching man brought him a hint of uneasiness.

“ I’m lucky to find you at home, Mr. Howth,” was Boyd’s greeting, as he stepped on to the verandah. “ You’re supposed to be more or less a bird of passage, you know. Don’t you get tired of the everlasting round? ”

Howth smiled, and pointed to a cane chair. “ Take a seat. Oh, the life’s none so bad when you get used to it, Mr. Boyd. Of course, it’s a bit

monotonous at times; riding around with no company but your own. Still, that's all in the game. And a man must do something for a living."

"And so long as he does it well, the nature of it doesn't count," suggested Boyd. "Smoke cigarettes?"

"Pipe," said Howth laconically.

Boyd nodded agreement. "Right. It's the only smoke for a grown man. I left mine at home, and had to buy these things as I came past the store. They're a poor substitute; still" He lit up, and inhaled deeply. "Look here, Mr. Howth, I'm come on a rather unpleasant business. I'm not anxious to make enemies. At the same time, I can't afford to give the impression that I don't count in running my own business. The people around Copper Creek seem decent enough. I've no doubt I shall rub along fairly comfortably with most of them. Still, most communities boast a hard case or two; and it's been my luck to run against someone of the kind almost at once."

"Too bad," said Howth, politely stifling a yawn.

"In short," pursued Boyd, "I want to lay an information against young Dan Grant."

The trooper stirred a little at the name, but the expression of his face did not change. He took the pipe from his mouth and looked thoughtfully into the smoking bowl.

"Why Dan Grant? And what's the charge?"

“Charges,” Boyd corrected. “First, a breach of the Mining Act; second, shooting with intent to wound.”

“So!” said Howth. “You’ve got proof, of course, Mr. Boyd?”

“I should hardly be here otherwise,” Boyd reminded him.

“Well . . . I don’t know,” said Howth, hesitatingly. “You were an actual witness, say, of the shooting. Is that it?”

“No. I can’t say that.” Boyd was slightly taken aback. “But two of my men can vouch for what happened.”

“Which two, Mr. Boyd?”

“Absolam and Kling,” said Boyd promptly.

“So,” repeated Howth. The suspicion of a smile came on his lips. “Well, Mr. Boyd, it may be as you say. All the same, I know the men you speak of; and I also know Dan Grant. From what I can make out a shot was certainly fired that night, but there’s no direct proof who fired it. If I were you I shouldn’t rely too much on hearsay. It has a knack of letting you down.”

“Oh, for the matter of that, I could bring Grant’s own words to show that he threatened reprisals if I entered his land,” retorted Boyd, with a touch of asperity. “I’ve been expecting something of this kind to happen.”

“Just what did happen?” asked Howth quietly.

Boyd entered on the narration with a feeling of

annoyance. He had a suspicion that the trooper was anxious to discredit him, and the thought stiffened his caution. For aught he knew Howth and Dan Grant might be sworn friends. Accordingly, he endeavoured to make the story as impersonal as possible. He chose his words carefully, sparing no detail, yet avoiding anything in the nature of comment.

In spite of this he reached his conclusion with a queer sensation of disappointment. It was not that the tale lost anything in the telling. Nor was it that he himself found his resentment grow less keen on a cold recital of the facts. Yet all the time he was speaking he was irritably conscious of something lacking—some indefinable quality of thought which his perceptions failed to grasp, but which he somehow knew Howth to be keenly aware of.

“ This other matter . . . this matter of the water-race? ” asked Howth, presently. “ I suppose it’s really necessary to enter Grant’s land? ”

Boyd flushed. “ I’ve already said so. I mean to try-out on a new face, and we must have water. You surely don’t suppose we can dig a new dam altogether. For the matter of that, the catchment we have now is sufficient for the needs of a dozen shows as big as the Ajax.”

“ It would be, ” said Howth. He had a vision of the huge dam which supplied the needs of the mine; a body of water far in excess of requirements, yet obtained at comparatively small outlay.

The formation of the country at the head of the mine property had enabled the management to form a catchment by the simple expedient of walling the lower end of a deep gully; thereby obtaining, at a moderate estimate, pressure from upwards of six or eight hundred thousand gallons of water.

“ Yes, you’ve got a small lake up there in the hills. Well, Mr. Boyd, what is it you want me to do? ”

“ Do! Why, I’ve already told you. I want your help in swearing an information.”

“ That’s as maybe,” said Howth. He frowned a little. “ If you insist, I’ll make out the papers, and take you along to Peter Mannin, the only J.P. we’ve got in the district. But I tell you frankly, Mr. Boyd, I don’t think you’ll get very far with it.”

“ Why not? ” demanded Boyd bluntly. “ Good Lord, man, it’s a plain enough case.”

“ I know old Peter Mannin pretty well,” said the trooper. “ He holds no brief for Dan Grant, or anyone else; but he won’t sign a warrant unless he’s satisfied. And I doubt he won’t give you much of a welcome on the facts.”

“ You’re suggesting that I’ve no remedy, is that it? ”

Howth looked at Boyd with a queer expression. “ I don’t say so. You can make it a civil action, if you like; though I shouldn’t advise you to. You can’t prove a thing on Dan. I’m speaking as a friend.”

“ I don’t doubt it,” said Boyd, his temper getting the better of him. “ But whose friend—mine, or Grant’s? ”

“ Of you both,” said Howth sternly. “ Hold on. Let’s get down to tin tacks, as they say. Granted, if you like, that someone is damaging the mine property. Have you any direct proof as to who it is? You know you have not. You can suspect as much as you like, but that’s neither here nor there. Again—some of your men visit Grant’s farm after dark. They are attacked, and a shot is fired. That’s a serious thing. But the point is are any of you prepared to swear that Dan Grant fired it? I fancy not. On your own showing the conditions were such as to render identification impossible. And while I’m at it, I might as well ask you this. What were your men doing at all on Grant’s land after hours? Who sent them? What did they go for? If you ask me, it’s a clear case of trespass.”

“ You argue like a lawyer,” sneered Boyd. He threw his half-smoked cigarette to the ground, and stood up. “ Suppose you tell me what it is you’re driving at? ”

The trooper’s eyes hardened. “ I’m trying to view the thing fairly, Mr. Boyd. I’ll blacken no man’s character on hearsay.”

“ Then you’ve got a curious idea of what constitutes fairness,” Boyd retorted. “ The long and short of it is, then, that you refuse to help me? ”

“ I’m here to give the public assistance. If you

can convince me, I'll make out the papers." Howth continued to look at Boyd sternly, though not unkindly. "But so far I'm free to say that no Justice of the Peace would consent to what you wish."

"I'll take your word for it," said Boyd. Strangely enough his ill-temper had left him. In the grave, steady eyes of the trooper he found no malice; only friendly interrogation, and a kind of wondering intentness whose meaning he could not fathom. He shrugged his shoulders and turned to go. "Well, in a way, I can't say I'm disappointed. I've been used to relying upon myself, and it's a habit that clings. But as sure as you're there I'll land young Grant one day, and land him for keeps. Good-day to you."

"Just a moment," called Howth.

"Well!" asked Boyd curtly.

"Mr. Boyd," said Howth earnestly, "don't let your anger trick you. I wish I could make you understand the thought that's in my mind. I can guess how you're feeling; and I won't deny you've some cause for it. But I'm an older man than you. I've seen more of life, and all that goes to the making of life. And if it's taught me nothing else, it's taught me to go slow in my judgment of others. It's a curious thing—but if you want to understand another man properly, you've got to begin by making sure that you understand yourself. And that, let me tell you, is the hardest job I know."

Boyd looked at him in open astonishment. Philosophy on the lips of a wayback policeman was something new to his experience.

“ What do you mean by that? ” he asked.

“ Nothing but friendliness.” For the first time Howth showed a trace of emotion. “ Mr. Boyd, believe it, or not—there isn’t a whiter-souled boy in the Island than Dan Grant. He’s hare-brained and impulsive; but there isn’t an ounce of vice in the whole of his body.”

“ The fact isn’t too evident,” said Boyd; but with less irritation than formerly.

“ You’re relying on the word of men like Kling and Absolam,” continued Howth. “ Don’t do it, Mr. Boyd. You say they’ve been watching the mine workings for you; and it’s on their say-so that you believe what you do. But have you ever thought it worth while to take a hand in the game yourself? Why not set *yourself* to see what’s doing up there; without telling a soul what you’re about. It’s worth trying, isn’t it, if you really want to get at the truth? ”

“ There’s something in what you say,” confessed Boyd, frankly. In spite of himself he was impressed by Howth’s earnestness. “ I don’t mind telling you that I’m not as satisfied as I was when I came to see you. I’ve had some hard thoughts about you, and perhaps they were not justified. But I believe you’ve been honest with

me. Tell me one thing. Is Dan Grant your personal friend? Is that a fair question?"

"I don't object to it," said Howth. He looked at Boyd squarely. "Dan Grant is my friend. For all that, I make no unfair distinction. If Dan broke the law grossly, I would not hesitate to do my duty. Dan knows that. I have spoken for him now simply because I feel that you have got him in all wrong in this matter. And I tell you plainly that I will go to the last resort to help him."

Boyd nodded; an unaccustomed feeling of loneliness at his heart. "I believe you would. You outback people form wonderful friendships. I have sometimes wished that I myself took life less seriously. I seem to miss something . . ." He broke off, with a quick contempt for his own weakness. "Well, I must call along for my mail. Good-bye, Mr. Howth."

"Good-bye," said the trooper quietly.

Boyd took the reins on his arm and walked in the direction of the post office. He was wondering a little to discover the calmness with which he received this set-back to his plans. Somehow a new view-point obtruded itself. For almost the first time in his life he found himself looking beyond self, and the interests of self. Never before had his own loneliness appealed so strongly. That he should now experience a pang of envy at the comradeship of others, brought him a vague uneasiness.

A quick clatter of hoofs scattered the sequence

of his thoughts, and he looked up to see Dan Grant riding almost abreast of him. The young fellow was clad in bluey and leggings. About his shoulders was a light coil of wire, and a small leather bag, which evidently contained his repair outfit, was strapped to the back of the saddle. As he passed he looked straight at Boyd, and for one brief instant their eyes met in a challenging stare. The next moment he had vanished around a gum thicket, and Boyd was left gazing after him, the hot blood pounding at his temples and his fingers clenching at his sides. He had a wild impulse to mount and pursue; to wreak with his own two hands the vengeance of which he felt himself to have been defrauded. An instant later, however, his anger was lost in wonderment. He found that he was actually combating himself, and his desires. It was not that he felt Dan to be less his enemy than formerly. But now the thought was accompanied by a strange reluctance to do more than accept things as they were.

The mood still held when he arrived at the post office. He tied his horse to the fence and walked soberly across the deserted playground. He found Joan busily engaged with the out-going mail.

“Quite a budget came for you last night,” she observed, recognising him. “I was wondering if you would call.”

“Thanks,” said Boyd. He took the letters she held out to him, and looked them over idly. “It

isn't often I get as many as this. But then these are all business letters, and that means that I shall have to write nearly as many in reply."

Joan looked up with a smile. "You don't like writing letters then?"

"I hate it," said Boyd, truthfully. He thrust his mail into a pocket and sat himself on an up-turned box. "Don't you?"

"It depends a great deal who I'm writing to," Joan admitted. "Upon the whole, though, I think I side with you." She gave an exclamation of annoyance. "Now see what I've done. Here's another letter for Mrs. Grant. And I told Dan not ten minutes ago that there was only one."

Boyd was conscious of a quickening interest. Somehow Joan Norris was quite different to other women he had known. The frankness of her eyes, the firm set of her lips, denoted poise and self-reliance. There was, too, about her a freshness, an appeal, for which he was puzzled to account. He wondered if this might not be due to her extraordinary vitality, the almost masculine alertness of her mind and body.

"Will it matter very much?" he asked sympathetically.

Joan glanced at him again, as if surprised at his tone. "It matters a whole lot, Mr. Boyd. You know what a letter means to a poor wayback mortal. Mrs. Grant has so few letters. And the worst of it is that I am not going home to-night.

I promised to keep Mrs. Howth company while her husband is away. I've a good mind to punish myself by riding out to Grant's as soon as I close the office."

"No, don't do that," said Boyd. He held out his hand impulsively. "Give me the letter. I'll drop it in at Grant's on my way back."

"Is it fair to ask you?" said Joan, hesitating. "I don't want to . . . I mean, perhaps you mightn't care about . . ."

"Oh, I've no quarrel with Mrs. Grant, that I know of," he assured her lightly. "In fact, I haven't yet seen the lady; nor she me. And young Grant is away from home. So you need not fear any unpleasantness."

But Joan continued to look at him seriously. "Mr. Boyd, I wonder if you've really tried to see their point of view? Honestly—now have you?"

"Why should I?" Boyd demanded.

"Ah! there—you see. I have no patience with you. Don't you ever look beyond yourself? Surely the very fact of your adopting such an attitude proves you to be at fault somewhere. And yet you don't seem unkind . . . uncaring. What is it you lack? What is it?"

Boyd shifted irritably. In her wide-open eyes he seemed to read something of the same wondering reproof which had been evinced in Howth's attitude.

“ I’m afraid you don’t understand,” he said, a little lamely.

“ Indeed . . . it is you who do not understand,” said Joan spiritedly. “ What right have you to so overlook the feelings of others. Oh, yes, Mr. Boyd; I know the old, conscience-soothing catchword ‘ there is no sentiment in business.’ But why should there not be? Is your own need always so urgent that you must tread others underfoot as you pass? Or do you find pleasure in setting yourself above a common charity? Is it right? Is it even honest? ”

Observing her warm cheeks and sparkling eyes Boyd could not repress a little secret thrill of admiration.

“ I suppose I ought to resent that, Miss Norris,” he said. “ But I am not going to, all the same. Definitions are confusing at any time. After all, honesty is merely a matter of comparison. No two men think exactly alike upon any one subject. You accuse me of being unjust. You suggest that I am wholly to blame for what is happening. And yet I can assure you that I am not anxious to quarrel with anyone. Can I help it if young Grant resents it that I place loyalty to my employers before a sentimental consideration for himself? You know that I cannot. I am keeping strictly to the letter of the law. Can he say as much? I think not. His conduct is that of a spoilt child.”

Joan looked at him silently. In spite of every-

thing, there was something about this man—something in his attitude towards life, his absolute confidence in himself, yet, withal, his supreme loneliness of vision, that stirred her imagination deeply. She did not understand the feeling, but her woman's instinct told her it was very real. Was it pity she felt?—was it? She did not know. At one moment she was sure that she both disliked and distrusted him; the next, she caught herself warming to thought of his courage, his dogged self-reliance, his refusal to compromise. . . . Had he a right, then, to such utter dependence upon self. Was he, alone among men, without weakness. . . . And suddenly she knew he was not. Self was his vanquisher—self, and none other. Self blinded him, bullied him, drove him onwards with unceasing flagellation towards the goal of his ambition; stifling the best that was in him, withholding even the charity of understanding. . . . The pity of it . . .

“Miss Norris,” continued Boyd earnestly, “it has never been my habit to seek to excuse myself to others. You may call it egotism, or what you will. I am content to be misunderstood. And yet, do you know, the present seems different. Others may judge me as they choose. But you . . . I am unwilling to lose your good opinion.” He hesitated; the blood reddening his cheeks. “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I am wanting

in some way. But at least believe that I do so unwillingly.”

The unlooked-for appeal surprised and softened Joan. She forgot her indignation in a sudden rush of pity—pity, and some other emotion that she did not understand. What was it, she wondered. For a moment the thought seemed to press upon her, quickening her breath, making her pulses leap strangely. Was it disloyalty to Dan that the loneliness of this man should touch her compassion so strongly. The doubt brought a keen distress. She began to wish that Boyd would go; that she might be alone to probe the meaning of her uneasiness.

“I do believe it, Mr. Boyd,” she said, with an effort.

Boyd looked at her doubtfully. “Thank you. But isn’t it only your kindness that makes you say so?”

“But I do; indeed, I do.” On a sudden impulse she moved closer to him, an eager ring in her voice. “Mr. Boyd, is it too late even now to reconsider? Yes, if you like, it is no business of mine. But the Grants are my friends. Why should they not be yours also! It rests with yourself. Surely you must see that.”

“No doubt,” said Boyd curtly. “Unfortunately I am not disposed to pay the price.” Unconsciously he drew himself back, his face full of a quick distrust. “Miss Norris, I would do much to please you, but I cannot consent to alter the exist-

ing arrangement. You force me to say that I think your sympathy rather ill-judged. I don't mean that unkindly. But a man who has as little control over himself as Dan Grant, need expect small consideration from me." He made a gesture of contempt. "Why, indeed—is my work to be thrust aside for the whim of a drunkard!"

"A what?" asked Joan incredulously.

Boyd chose to ignore the anger that leapt to her eyes. "Do you really say you did not know Grant drinks? It is common talk among the men."

Joan threw out her hands, as if not trusting herself to speak. She turned away. But as suddenly she faced him again. "How dare you say such a thing. Are you so ignorant of the truth that you do not fear to lend yourself to so vile a calumny. It was your own men who set a trap for Dan . . . who tricked him for their own purpose; though God alone knows what that purpose is. Of himself Dan does not drink. He never has drunk . . . as men use the term. What is it you lack? Oh, what is it you lack? . . . that you should believe the foul lies of men such as Kling and Sjoberg . . . men without an honest motive in the whole of their lives . . . the offscourings of the city slums . . ." Her voice broke. "Because Dan is poor, you would make him poorer still. Because his life has known failure, you would take from him what pitiful success he has had. Shame on you, Mr. Boyd. Have you never known the

bitterness of defeat! But no—I have your own boast for that. Yet one day you shall. I feel it . . . I know it. One day you shall come to want something . . . want it as you have wanted nothing else in life . . .” She flung out the words like a challenge. “Yet it shall not be yours for the taking. And then, God help you, what will you do then . . .”

The amazing vigour of her indictment staggered him. For the moment he could do no more than shake his head at her in angry bewilderment. Then all his stubbornness rose defiantly. He stamped to his feet.

“You may be right, Miss Norris; but I doubt it. If I want a thing badly enough I generally get it. And what I have, I hold.”

Before her trembling lips could frame a retort he was gone. She heard the clatter of receding hoofs, and then silence. She sat down and buried her burning cheeks in her hands.

IT was dark when Boyd came in sight of Grant's house. A light twinkled mistily from the kitchen window, and a pleasant odour of burning musk-wood greeted his nostrils as he approached the door. In spite of his resentment he was not unmindful of his promise to Joan, and his hand fumbled now in search for the letter she had given him. He had almost decided to push it, postman fashion, under the door, and there leave it to be found, when he caught the tread of light feet coming along the passage. Stepping back, he waited. And presently the door was opened timidly, and a woman stood before him.

"Who is it?" she asked, in a gentle voice.

Boyd held out the letter. "I was asked by Miss Norris to give you this. You are Mrs. Grant, are you not? Thank you. Miss Norris wishes you to know that she is very sorry to have overlooked it."

Even to his own ears the little speech sounded forced and stilted, and Boyd wondered irritably that it should be so.

"I am obliged to her . . . and to you," said the widow.

Boyd could see her peering at him through the darkness, as if wondering at the unfamiliar voice. He had an impression of a frail body, with narrow, drooping shoulders. Her face he could not distinguish, since she was in heavy shadow. Yet something in her attitude stirred him uncomfortably. Standing there in the doorway, one hand clasping the shawl at her throat, she seemed a lonely and rather pathetic figure.

“ I am glad to be of service,” he said quickly. There followed a little awkward silence. Boyd raised his hat and turned to go. “ Good evening, Mrs. Grant.”

“ Good evening,” returned the widow. “ And thank you for your trouble.”

Boyd noted that her voice was surprisingly clear and sweet, although tinged with an evident weariness. He glanced back as he went through the gate, and saw that she remained as he had left her; a fragile shadow framed by the heavy lines of the doorway, and cast in delicate silhouette against the light of the passage beyond. No doubt she was still puzzling over his identity, and a grim smile came on his face as he tried to picture her greeting had she known. He reflected that his chance of popularity in Copper Creek was daily diminishing. The thought, however, troubled him but little. He was still smarting from his encounter with Joan Norris, and the prospect of having to continue the fight single handed rather attracted him than other-

wise. There was much that puzzled him; and a little that angered. He felt, too, a hint of uneasiness: as if the events of the past few weeks had touched some long hidden chord of memory, so that his mind vibrated responsively whilst groping far short of the truth. For all that, his resolution had not slackened. It seemed rather to be moulded more firmly than ever by the pressure of his indignation, and the certain belief that success alone was beyond reach of misunderstanding.

The mine workings were indistinguishable as he rode past on the way to the yards. High on either side he could make out the shoulders of the bordering hills, massed in thick shadow, the outline of the timber rising stark against the limitless region of the horizon. But here in the valley itself earth slumbered inert, formless, sunken in the vast pit of night. The grave undertone of the distant waterfalls seemed less a presentment of reality than a kind of ghostly reaction from the enveloping silence.

Lights sprang to meet him as he came in sight of the men's huts. Someone was singing in a high, throaty tenor; Kling's voice, he thought. And once his ears caught the loud, booming tones of Nat Absolam in some jest that raised a roar of answering laughter. He slipped past unnoticed, turned his horse into the night paddock, and climbed the rise to his own quarters. In a few moments he had a fire going in the open hearth of

the kitchen. While the water heated he shed his outdoor gear and set about the simple preparations for his meal. Later, as he sat with muscles relaxed in front of the flames, he made shift to sort and read his correspondence.

The first few letters related solely to business matters. He scanned them over listlessly; promising a closer attention next morning, when he should be less tired. Presently, however, he came to one which brought a sudden interest to his eyes. He read it through carefully, his whole manner expressive of a growing satisfaction. When he reached the signature at the foot he repeated the name aloud, as if his feelings demanded that it should find audible expression.

“ Craigen. By Jove, that man’s head is screwed on the right way, sure enough. Now I wonder . . . ”

Boyd tossed the letter on the table at his elbow, and gave himself up to an eager rush of thought. For the time being the rest of his correspondence was forgotten. Success greater than any he had yet attained was approaching his grasp, and he felt himself thrill with pleasurable anticipation. If any doubt arose to disturb his triumphant visioning he swept it aside impatiently. At that moment his confidence reached its zenith.

The fire had burned low, and he rose to replenish it from the stack in the angle of the chimney. As he turned back to his chair a knock came on the outside door.

“Come in,” called Boyd mechanically.

Who it was he expected to see he could scarcely have said. Kling, perhaps; or Absolam, with news of the day’s clean-up. He only knew, with a sense of profound astonishment, that confronting him was the one man in all Copper Creek whose presence at such a time was least likely or desirable. With a sudden tightening of the flesh at his temples Boyd recognised the dark features, and thin, stooping figure of Dan Grant.

The young fellow closed the door gently after him, cutting off the blast of icy air that accompanied his entry. He was still clad as Boyd had seen him that afternoon; with oilskin coat buttoned close over his chest, and a scarf twisted about his neck.

“You’re surprised to see me, Mr. Boyd!” said Dan, advancing slowly.

Boyd pointed to the chair. “Under the circumstances you could hardly blame me. Take a seat.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll stand,” said Dan. He appeared to be unaware of Boyd’s restraint, and took up a position quietly with his back to the fire. “I’ve been in the saddle all day, and I’m glad of a chance to stretch my legs. As a matter of fact I haven’t been home yet. I came straight on here. Yes, sit down yourself. I shan’t keep you long.”

“You wanted to see me about the water-race?” suggested Boyd, with a look of cold enquiry.

“That—of course,” said Dan. He waited for

Boyd to settle himself. "You can say, if you like, that I'm here to make a last appeal. The last few days I've been turning things over in my mind. It hasn't been easy to see just what I ought to do. But I always like to play the game. I'm willing to admit that I owe you some sort of apology for the way I met you before. I lost my temper, and I'm sorry for it. But I was hard hit, and I'm like that when I'm rattled. As I said, I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you that first."

Boyd lifted his shoulders slightly, but made no reply. Had he known what it cost Dan to make the admission he must have relaxed something of his uncompromising attitude. As it was, he immediately suspected a trick, and his eyes became watchful.

"Yes, I've been thinking things over," continued Dan, after a moment of silence. "It's only fair to tell you that my attitude personally remains the same. But I've my mother to consider. And the thought has come to me that if you would let me go a little more into detail, perhaps you may come to see the injustice of what you are doing. I find it hard to believe that you will persist in your refusal to reconsider."

"I scarcely see the necessity to reopen the subject," said Boyd impatiently. "In any case, the matter has advanced beyond a personal settlement. Following on your avowed intention to oppose the work of the Company I set about having an arbi-

trator appointed to decide the matter of compensation. In due course you will hear from him. But until then I prefer to let things stand."

"Still, Mr. Boyd," I would like you to hear what I have to say," said Dan. "This means a great deal more to me than you imagine. I can"

"No doubt," interrupted Boyd. "But I have tried from the beginning to make it clear that I can in no circumstances consent to vary a course which both experience and commonsense tell me to be the only correct one. You are not the first person to suffer inconvenience of the kind. Well, you must make the best of it. I have already told you that you will receive full compensation for the trifling damage done to your grass-land."

"Mr. Boyd," said Dan gravely, "my objection goes further than a mere question of money. A pound or two, here or there—well, I reckon that wouldn't worry me over-much. But, look here . . . there are things altogether beyond and above money's worth. In your heart you know that is true. And I would like to ask if there is no corner in your own soul that holds a kind of reverence for some one spot on earth against all the rest . . . it might be the home where you were born; or, maybe, some little street you played in as a kid. . . . I wonder if you understand. And this place of mine . . . why, Mr. Boyd, it's about the only real home I've ever

known. I worked for it; yes, and starved for it gladly, more than once. I love every inch of it. In a way it's become part of me . . . of my life. Why . . ."—he threw up his hand with a nervous gesture—"it's like mutilating my own flesh and blood. I could sooner part with the whole of it, than to see the best of it gouged with gutters and turned into a stinking mud heap. And it isn't as if it were really necessary. You could suit yourself just as easily by another route. You can't deny it."

"But I do," said Boyd, instantly. "Mr. Grant, I'm afraid you're wasting your time—and mine. Nothing that you have said has any real bearing on the matter. A man, if he's wise, will learn to take the rough with the smooth, and count himself lucky that things are no worse than they are." He gave a short laugh. "No business man can afford to discount sentiment. Will you take a final word. That water-race is going through as it stands."

"Well, by God . . . but you're hard," Dan burst out; but at once regained his control. He stood looking at Boyd for a long minute. "All right. You ought to know your own business best, though I doubt it. It wasn't only for myself that I came to see you to-night. Go ahead and dig as many of your damned ditches as you like. I shan't put a finger in your way."

"I'm glad you're coming to see sense," said Boyd, brusquely.

“ Yes, you can call it that, if you want to,” said Dan. But I suppose now, if I told you it was more to your interest than mine to keep off my land, you wouldn’t believe me. Yet it’s true.”

Boyd showed anger for the first time. “ Is that a threat? ” he demanded.

Dan remained silent. His brooding gaze had gone past Boyd and he was now staring about him listlessly. Suddenly, however, a little frown came on his face. His attention had been caught by the pile of letters on the table at Boyd’s elbow. One letter lay a little apart; and this he regarded with a singular intentness. The big, scrawling characters challenged his eye. A single line, heavily under-scored, seemed to leap at him from the open page :

“ I’ll wire location the afternoon the Bill comes up.”

His glimpse was brief, fragmentary; but the words appeared to burn themselves on his vision. He looked away quickly, as Boyd’s voice, coldly emphatic, broke on his hearing.

“ I asked you if that was a threat. Because, if so, I’m glad to know where I stand. You appear to have a great many friends in the district, Mr. Grant; but take care you do not over-tax their generosity.”

Dan smiled queerly. “ I’m obliged to you for the warning. You’re mistaken though. It was not a threat.”

“ Then what was it? ” Boyd slammed his hand on his knee. “ What else can you call it? ”

“ I meant no more than a decent hint that perhaps there was more at issue between us than you might suppose,” said Dan, quietly. “ Yes, that is true. I wanted to make a last effort to straighten things out. I hope you’ll remember it later.” He took up his hat with a sigh. “ Well, I reckon I’ve done my best. Good-night.”

“ Good-night,” returned Boyd; but without looking up.

He sat in silence for some time after Dan had gone, his gaze fixed on the glowing hearth. At the back of his mind a thought was clamouring for recognition, but he seemed unable to focus it. Dan’s concluding words had left him with a feeling of irritation. In some way that he did not understand he found himself connecting them with Joan Norris, and his ill-humour grew. The impression was distinctly distasteful, and he did his utmost to shake it off. Yet somehow the girl’s personality seemed to permeate his whole consciousness.

With a gesture of annoyance Boyd turned to his unfinished correspondence. Suddenly, however, a new thought occurred, and he sat up alertly. He recalled Howth’s suggestion that he should set himself to watch for the marauder whose nocturnal visits resulted in so much damage to the mine property. In view of his convictions surely no better opportunity would present itself. If Dan

Grant were indeed the man, what more likely than that his renewed animus would urge an immediate repetition of the offence.

Boyd's lips set grimly. He rose instantly and put on his boots and heavy overcoat. From a drawer of the table he took out an automatic pistol, which he slipped into a side pocket. He was on the point of turning out the lamp when he reflected that to do so would in all probability betray his mission, since he was known to be a keeper of late hours. Accordingly he left the light burning; even going so far as to raise the shade of the blind a trifle, so that the lighted interior would be more in evidence.

In the open the darkness was intense. The air was heavy with threat of frost. The dome of night sky seemed hewn from polished ebony, whereon were embedded innumerable pin-points of iridescent steel. The silence was almost cathedral.

He buttoned his coat more tightly about him and began cautiously to feel his way down the slope.

“WELL, it’s a devil of a fine scheme, ain’t it,” said Nordsen. He slapped his hand on the newspaper in front of him. “Can you beat these big bugs for getting away with a bag-full. What do you think, Mike?”

Kling laughed. “What’s the matter now, George? They can’t pull it off without it doing you some good.”

“Good!” echoed the hotel-keeper, disgustedly. His mouth twisted in a sneer. “A lot of good it’ll do me. If this crowd really mean it, they’ll be building pubs of their own, won’t they? Where do I come in? Of course, you never thought of that.”

“There’s only one license allowed in a district of this size,” Kling reminded him. “They can’t shift you. You ought to know that.”

“But they’ll try,” grumbled Nordsen, pulling at his rubble of red beard. “Oh, they’ll try. I know these land-boom hogs. They’ll cancel my license on a fake. Jim Howth would do it tomorrow if he could.” He laughed at the expres-

sion of Kling's face. "He's got it in for you and Dutchy too. Too right he has."

Kling swore softly. "What's the good of talk. You can't kill him with your mouth. Did you know Boyd was over to see him awhile back. Boyd's been sitting up all night alongside the sluiceway with a gun in his fist. He was at it one night last week, anyhow; but they tell me he never even got a nibble. Not a sign of one." His eyes twinkled maliciously. "What do you know about that?"

"Must be using stale bait," Nordsen grinned.

"It's got him rattled," said Kling. He took the paper from Nordsen's hands, his eyes going curiously to the caption sprawled across the head of the page:

"GREAT NOR-WEST DEVELOPMENT SCHEME.

"CONCESSION BILL COMING BEFORE PARLIAMENT

"EARLY NEXT MONTH.

"CAPITALISTS IN CONFERENCE."

Nordsen fidgetted in his seat. "Well, what d'you make of it? What do you think, Dutchy?" Sjoberg, smoking silently by the open window of the dingy parlour, looked across and nodded.

"I think it is vort a fortune to somevon," he said, in a thick, guttural voice.

"Yes, but that someone ain't us," complained

Nordsen. He called to the man in the bar. "They're on me, Charlie."

"Listen to this," interjected Kling. He read aloud for a moment. "There's brains behind that. But will you tell me how we stand if it goes through at all? Suppose Boyd don't weaken? With this thing in sight it's a hundred to one the Ajax crowd sit pat."

"It is vort a fortune," said Sjoberg again.

Kling looked at him with a puzzled frown. "Yes, if it hits anywhere near us. They don't mention where they mean to make a start. All we know is that it's somewhere between Cape Haven and Lewistoun. And that's a matter of nearly ninety miles. I'm asking myself if this is the clean potato, or is it more graft."

"What does it matter," said Nordsen, impatiently.

"Matter! It matters a whole lot. Suppose they pick on Shark Bay. They'll build a jetty, won't they; and run lines back to the mills; and play hell generally. You can read all about it for yourself. They're going to boom for all they're worth. And how long d'you think it will be before it sets people to asking questions about the Ajax?"

"Well, let them," said the hotel-keeper. "It ought to be too late. Boyd . . ."

"That's it—Boyd," said Kling, cutting him short. "If it was McFarger, I'd not say. But this man is different. Will he scare? Not by a

jug-full. He's thirsty for trouble; and it certainly looks as if he'll get it before he's done. Either McFarger left too early, or Boyd came too soon. You can have it which way you like. But it spells hurry up no matter where you begin reading. Eh, Dutchy?"

"Yah," said Sjoberg stolidly.

"You're a man of ideas," said Kling, with thinly veiled sarcasm. "Well, brawn has its uses. So long as you steer clear of Howth you'll not come to much harm. But as sure as God made little apples he'll run you up if you get in his way. Didn't he tell you so. I wonder you stand for it."

Sjoberg said nothing, but his eyes seemed to flame. Kling rubbed his hands, and laughed. He took a spiteful pleasure in feeding the fuel of Sjoberg's hatred for the trooper.

"I do, indeed. Oh, you can't touch him outright. But you can get at his heart all right, if you've guts enough. Did you ever hear tell of the way they catch finches for the market. They skewer one live one on a spinner and set it in the open with the cage door open. The rest is easy." He turned back to Nordsen indifferently. "Well, but about Boyd. A little discouragement ought to be good medicine. But supposing it isn't? What's the answer then?"

Nordsen began to speak, but checked himself as the barman thrust his head in at the door.

"Dan Grant," said the man.

“What about him?” asked Kling sharply.

The barman jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “He wants to see the boss. How about it?”

“Tell him to come through,” said Nordsen. He exchanged a glance with Kling, and raised one hand quickly to his beard. “Hell! what sort of an answer is that?” he exclaimed under his breath.

Kling was bending once more over the paper when Dan entered the room. He seemed not to notice the entry.

“How goes it, Dan?” asked Nordsen.

“I’m all right,” said Dan. He looked slowly from one to the other; contempt on his face. Sjoberg was gazing sullenly out of the window, his hairy arms crossed on the edge of the table. An immense physical strength suggested itself in the crouching set of his huge shoulders. The profile turned towards Dan was heavy-jowled, gross, sensual.

Nordsen smiled with affected geniality. “That’s fine. Charlie said you wanted to see me.”

“Not you more than the others,” said the young fellow, quietly. “I knew that since it was Sunday I’d find you here together. And that saves me the trouble of having to repeat myself.”

Kling suddenly tossed his paper aside and looked up. “Good day, Dan. You’re just in time to join us. It’s dry work talking between friends. Sit down while Charlie fetches the drinks.”

“Not three times,” said Dan, smiling. He remained standing near the door, his thin body poised alertly. “Not three times, Kling. Twice is your limit. I thought I’d give you a chance to explain. That’s why I’m here now.”

“Explain what?” asked Kling smoothly. “What’s the matter with you?”

The corners of Dan’s mouth showed a little disdainful droop. “Nothing; except that I’m awake. I said I was willing to give you a chance to explain why you’ve twice tried to dope me. I’m curious to know.”

“Oh, that!” exclaimed Kling, as if he only then understood. He hesitated; then began to laugh softly. “Why, I suppose it’s of no great use to deny it, eh? You wouldn’t believe me if I did. Give a dog a bad name, you know. . . . It does seem rather rotten, I’ll admit. I told him so at the time, but of course he couldn’t see things my way.”

“Told who?” said Dan sharply.

Kling appeared surprised. “Why—Boyd, of course. Who else. I thought you knew he was the man behind. Yes, that’s right.”

“You mean to sit there and tell me Ralph Boyd is as dirty as all that?” demanded Dan, incredulously.

“I don’t mean to tell you anything you don’t want to know,” said Kling. “Please yourself what you think.”

Dan laughed scornfully. "What a bluffer you are, Kling."

"Am I? Am I a bluffer?" Kling's pale eyes seemed to jump. "All right. But I can tell you what I'm not. I'm not one to stand on one side while another man gets away with my girl."

It was impossible to mistake the sneering inference; yet, other than a dull flush that mounted slowly on Dan's cheek, the lad gave no sign that he understood. No one but himself knew of the hell of anger that stirred within him—primitive, elemental, leaping from volcanic depths. The violence of his restraint turned him physically sick. Yet he continued to hold himself in check.

"Of course you wouldn't. You're a wonderful chap. Still, I can't say I know what you're driving at. Is Boyd cutting in on your courting, then? That's too bad."

The directness of the reply took Kling aback. Instead of the wild outburst he had expected, he found himself met with a plain invitation to speak out. A second earlier, he might have done so; but now he hesitated. The look in Dan's deep-set eyes held a warning that might not be disregarded.

Kling's teeth showed in a baffled grin. "Did I say that? I must have got things mixed up. Well . . . but about Boyd. He must get tired of having his own way always. I'd like to see any man jump my farm like that. Listen,

Dan; why don't you get some of your friends to help you?"

"Still bluffing?" said Dan coolly.

"Not a bluff within a hundred miles. Look here, I'm going out of my way to try and help you. If you won't listen . . . why, then, don't. That's the end of it." Kling shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "And when Boyd's finished beating you up, come round here again; and I'll tell you that it was all your own fault."

"I'll try to remember," said Dan, with amusement.

"Oh, you can laugh," Nordsen broke in. "But I tell you this. Some men don't know B from a bull's foot. I thought you were smarter, Dan." He turned to the silent Sjoberg. "Am I right, or ain't I?"

"Dan is no vool," said Sjoberg heavily. "We would be frients. And one frient is vort many enemies."

"That's quite a speech from you, Sjoberg," said Dan. The cumbersome attempt to hoodwink him merely added to his diversion. "It doesn't exactly flatter your reputation for truth; but I get your real meaning, all the same. I came here to give you three a chance to speak out. Well, you haven't done so. I reckon we each know where we stand now. So long."

He made as if to go, but paused at a sharp question from Kling.

“ And Boyd? ”

Dan faced them with a pale smile. “ Boyd seems to be on your nerves. Because we each have a knife into him seems to have given you the idea that you can make use of me to foot the bill for the lot. Well, you can't. You can do your own dirty work. For all I don't like him, Ralph Boyd is more of a man than you'll ever be. I'll fight him on my own; but I'll fight him fair. You can go to the devil.”

He backed to the door, turned sharply, and passed through the bar-room into the open, where he mounted and rode for Jeff's hut. He entered to find the breaker and Jerry Slott sharing a billy of freshly-drawn tea. Dan took a mug from the shelf and dipped himself a drink. He felt that he wanted to wash a taint from his mouth.

Jeff looked at him kindly. “ Well, Danny. I didn't know you were in town. What's the latest? ”

“ I'm going to Hobart,” Dan told them abruptly.

The breaker digested this piece of news with imperturbable face.

“ Since when, *and* when? ” he demanded finally.

“ An hour ago; and to-morrow morning,” said Dan, equally brief.

Jerry Slott shook an amazed finger. “ Going to Hobart! Well, what d'you know about that.

It beats the very Old Harry. What d'you want to get trapesing along there for." He waited to sniff his disgust. "Hobart, is it. I'll bet there's a skirt in it somewhere."

"Hobart's full of them," said Dan, grinning. "But you're out by a mile, Jerry. I'm too old to bother about such things."

The rotund cook waved his pannican sceptically. "Are you? Huh, I'm learning things to-day . . . so I am. Young-feller-me-lad, a man's never too old but what some woman can come along and make a damn fool of him. Look at me! Ain't I rumsidious? I don't think."

"Married, are you?" said Jeff, performing a miracle of interpretation.

Jerry blinked and nodded. "Yeh. Too right I'm married. Worse luck."

Dan helped himself to another cup of post-and-rail tea. "Didn't she treat you well? Or what was the matter?"

He winked slyly at the breaker as he said it, and Jeff frowned back reprovingly. He knew only too well Jerry's propensity to "get going" on the subject of his matrimonial adventures; and while at any other time he would have welcomed the diversion, just then he was anxious to get about his work. He began to speak, but had scarcely begun than he was interrupted. The flood-gates of the cook's oratory were opened wide.

"Matter? Listen—there was so much the

matter that whenever she come in at the front door I went out at the back. Have you ever heard me pride myself on my looks? Or did she marry me fer my money? I dunno. I never ast her. Maybe I was kind of rattled on her good complexion, and missed tasting the vinegar on her lips. A woman is like a negg. You never know how she'll hatch out until you sit on her. When I told her off fer looking twice at the milkman she bust through the shell of connubialization and spread her feathers on the trail that leads from home. The last time I seen her was in the Flagstaff Gardens over in Melbourne. I'm down from the country, and trying to overhaul my sleep on a bench alongside the fish pond. Rubbing my elbow is an old bloke with one good eye and a clay pipe. And further on there's a couple smoodging behind a naked statoo of Turpentine broken short off at the butt of her neck. The old bloke looks at the couple, and then he looks at me, with a kind of snicker lifting his ears. 'Cupid's on the job,' says he. 'Go on,' says I. 'It's a fack,' he says. After awhile he shakes more dust out of his whiskers, and says he: 'I see by the eggspression of your signification,' he says, 'the same thought is busy in both our insides,' he says. 'Every man's girl is no man's wife,' he says. 'She was *my* missus two years ago,' says I. He corfs once or twice, and don't say no more. When I look at him again he ain't there. He'd sort of faded off the seat and vanished."

“ Was your wife so hard to get on with, then? ” asked Jeff, as the cook paused for breath.

Jerry Slott shook his head. “ She was, and she wasn’t. She’s one of these here wimmen that takes things as they come. They calls them phil . . . phil . . . Eggscuse me. It’s on the tip of my tongue . . . ”

“ Philosopher—was it? ” prompted Dan.

“ No—philanderer, ” said the cook mournfully. He rose to his feet. “ Well, I better be jogging. ”

Jeff held up a restraining hand. “ Just a minute. I heard a rumour yesterday that Boyd has bought an option from old Sam Pickens. Know anything about it? ”

“ What’s that? ” exclaimed Dan quickly.

“ I was told so, ” said the cook. “ An option of Sam’s worm farm at Sandy Cove, you mean? That’s right. They say the boss give him twenty pounds for a six-months’ preference. I wouldn’t say it was true though. It don’t hardly seem likely. And Boyd ain’t the kind of man you feel like putting the acid on to find out why he done it. ”

“ No, he’s not, ” said Jeff, with decision. “ What do you suppose the idea is, Jerry? ”

“ Why, if it’s true, I reckon it out this way. The Ajax folks must have a notion to put up sheds of their own. For long enough the ore’s been stacked in the open, and maybe they think there’s

a better way of doing things. But if you ask me, it's a plain waste of money."

Jeff looked at him reflectively. "That depends. Very likely Boyd means to store his reserve ore there. I suppose he has a reserve. Most managers have; though the shareholders don't know it. But a man's got to regulate his output somehow, or else the market would start to kick. Isn't that so, Danny?"

"I daresay," said Dan. He turned away, as if the matter held no further interest for him.

"Down south of the Island they say that Boyd never made a bad mistake in his life," the breaker continued. "You can bet that if he's bought an option he knows what he wants to do. I understand he's a shareholder, anyhow."

"I never knew that," said Jerry. He grabbed his hat from the table and made for the door. "Well, we live and learn. That's another wrinkle on my horn. So long, boys."

Jeff glanced at Dan, who was staring through the window at the fast darkening sky.

"Who'll be doing the line work while you're away, Dan?"

"Bill Utting. I'll be back inside of a week."

"I see," said Jeff. If he felt any curiosity regarding his friend's mission, he showed no sign of it. "Another thing, Danny. Boyd will get past you with his water-race, won't he?"

Dan faced the breaker with a gleam of excitement in his cavernous eyes. "Let him. Jeff, old man, I'll give him that in. I've got beyond caring about that part of it now. I'm flying higher than that. Let him dig his own grave, and be damned to him."

"Take care what you're at," said Jeff, a little sternly. But almost instantly his eyes softened again. "You're like a crazy steer sometimes—the way you tear round the yards. Boyd isn't a man to forgive, or forget. Don't give him a chance to put the branding iron on you. He'll do it if he can."

"Lord, I know what I'm doing," said Dan. He grinned reassuringly. "I've got my own fire-pot going, if it comes to that. I reckon my hide's as tough as his, any day. I never smeared a brand in my life."

"Well, don't begin now." Jeff glanced at the tin clock. "It's time I started in to do something. There's a whole lot of gear wants overhauling."

"What! On Sunday!" exclaimed Dan, with mock severity.

"It's either that, or sit twiddling my thumbs. And I never heard that idleness made a man more Christian. Want to help me?"

"I can't. I'm going home. I'll need to leave early in the morning, and it looks like a lot of rain." Dan dropped a hand lightly on the breaker's shoulder. "Never mind the harness. Come out

home with me. You're sure of a welcome from my mother."

"I know that," said Jeff, with a smile. "And there's nothing I'd like better. But I've promised to have my tea with the Howths. Some other time, Danny . . . when you come back from your jaunt."

"I'll keep you to that. Well, I'm off. Don't make too many eyes at Betty." Dan halted in the doorway. "By the way, are you any good at riddles?"

"Why?" asked Jeff suspiciously.

The young fellow grinned. "Here's one to set your brains at, anyhow. Where does Sam Pickens get his ore from?"

He went out whistling, and a moment later Jeff heard him ride past the corner of the hut into the open, where the quick tap of hoofs was lost in the slam of the rising wind.

The breaker remained for some moments with his eyes fixed on the rafters. He was frowning a little, but presently he lowered his gaze and laughed.

"What, another mare's nest, Danny!" he said aloud, in an amused tone. Next second, however, he frowned again and shook his head. "I don't know, though. I'll put it to Jim when I go around. Perhaps there's an answer after all."

It was almost dark when he finished his work, and he made haste to clean himself and don his out-

door clothing. With a final glance about the hut, he passed without, locking the door after him. On the plains the wind came with increasing violence. Westwards loomed a vast chaos of storm-cloud, with jet-black core shading to purple and grey and the whole outlined by a gleaming aureole. The booming of the timber sounded above the spiteful treble of the wind like the bass chanting of giants. A few drops of icy sleet stung his cheeks.

Presently, as he struggled with lowered head towards the light of Howth's cottage, the inky horizon was traced by a pencil of crooked fire. The succeeding concussion was curiously repressed. It came sullenly, menacingly; burdening the air with its snarling diatone.

"Going to be something of a storm," mused Jeff.

At Howth's gate he almost collided with a muffled figure that emerged suddenly from the gloom, and a girl's voice arraigned him laughingly.

"Gracious, Jeff . . . isn't the wind enough, without you helping it. Between the two of you I can hardly keep my feet."

"Why, Yetta!" exclaimed the breaker. He stood a moment in sheer surprise at meeting her. "Did I hurt you? I wouldn't hurt you for the the world. Kling must be right. I was born clumsy." He steadied her along the narrow path. "Please forgive me."

"I will, if you don't quote that horrible man's

words," Yetta gasped from the folds of her wildly-flapping cape. "How dare Kling say such a thing of you. What a night it is."

They went in at the door with a rush, the wind volleying and shrieking at their backs. Betty came dancing down the passage to greet them.

"Did you see any witches or hobgoblins, Jeff?" she asked, with wide-open eyes. "They love storms, don't they?"

"So the books say," returned Jeff, solemnly adopting the child's mood. "But we never saw a feather of any of 'em. I reckon maybe the wind's blown them all out to sea, where they'll be drowned. And good luck to them." He called to Jim Howth, who appeared at the door of the sitting-room. "Well, I got here after all."

"So I see," greeted the trooper. He lifted a finger admonishingly. "Betty, can't you leave the poor man alone. He's not a toy. Sit down, Jeff, and thaw yourself out before you eat. Well, what d'you know?"

"I know that it's thundering cold. Oh, that reminds me. Tell me, Jim. Where does Sam Pickens get his ore from?"

Howth stared. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing. But what's the answer?"

"Is it meant for a riddle?" asked Howth, waving his pipe stem. "You'll feel better after tea."

"Well, it's Dan's riddle, not mine," said Jeff,

with a comfortable chuckle. "I thought you might know something about it."

"Pickens gets his ore from that pot-hole of his on the Devil's Web," said Howth, promptly. "At least, I suppose he does. I can't say I've thought much about it. Where else would he get it?"

"Why . . . why . . ." began Jeff; but ceased suddenly and slapped his knee. "By heck, I believe I know what Dan was driving at. I'll bet he means that Sam has been ore stealing from the Ajax. That's it."

"Well, they've certainly missed some, if you judge by their output," Howth admitted. "But still . . . What is it, Chicken?"

"Can Jeff tell me stories after tea?" asked the child eagerly.

Howth looked from one to the other with twinkling eyes. "Why, yes, if he wants to. But how you do bully-rag each other."

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that," defended Jeff.

An hour later saw him with Betty on his knee. To his confusion, however, the trooper insisted upon adding Mrs. Howth and Yetta to the audience.

"We shan't say a word," Howth declared. "Go right ahead with it, Jeff. It's years since I listened to a fairy tale."

Thus encouraged Jeff took hold of his imagination with highly creditable results.

“That’s the best ever,” commended Betty sleepily, at the conclusion. She snuggled closer in his arms. “Now the one about the Princess and the poor man, please, Jeff.”

“Not to-night,” said the narrator hurriedly.

“Oh, Jeff—please. It’s such a lovely story.”

But the breaker shook his head, confusion on his face. “Honest, I can’t. Not to-night, partner.”

“What is it? The Princess and the what?” asked Yetta from across the hearth.

“And the poor man,” said Betty. Her voice trembled with disappointment. “Oh, please, Jeff—dear.”

Jeff reached for his pipe in a kind of panic. “I’ve . . . I’ve forgotten it. Listen—there’s the dinkiest little whip you ever saw waiting for you down at my hut. I plaited it for you this morning out of a piece of old Darkie’s hide. I meant to fetch it with me to-night, but it slipped my mind. You come down to-morrow and get it, will you?” His kind heart began to fail him at sight of the tears on her lashes, and he looked at Howth almost piteously. “She can, can’t she, Jim?”

“Only if she’s good,” decided Howth. “Now, Chicken, don’t worry him. Give us a kiss all round and toddle off to your nest.”

Betty obeyed silently. Jeff, catching the hurt wonder of her parting look, reviled himself inwardly. For all that, he drew a breath of relief when she had gone. Yetta’s eyes were on him

curiously, and he made haste to change the subject.

“Did you know Dan is off to Hobart in the morning?”

“Is he?” Howth was instantly reminded of their previous conversation, and he reverted to it forthwith. “Well, but about Sam Pickens. So it’s Dan’s idea that he steals from the Ajax, is it? By Jove, and he might, too. He seems to be doing pretty well, and I never heard of him having any assay made. What do you think?”

Jeff considered a full minute. “It’s possible Danny’s right, but it don’t do to say off-hand. I’ve noticed that Sam isn’t getting as much ore out as he used to. Well, in Harris’s time it was easy enough to get at the sluiceways. So it was when McFarger was manager. But Boyd is different. He cleans up every night, and shoves the stuff under lock and key. About all that anyone could get their hands on now would be the silt from the tail-race. That is, unless there were one or two more in the know. But Boyd is fairly wide awake. You knew he was thinking of putting up a storage shed at Sandy Cove, I suppose?”

Howth shook his head.

“So they say.” Jeff broke off to answer a little, quavering, reproachful call from the end of the passage. “Good-night . . . good-night. My regards to the fairies, partner. That whip is a real beauty. Honest it is.”

Mrs. Howth arose and gathered her sewing from

the table. "Jeff, you're not to spoil my child. I'm going along to tuck her into bed, and then Yetta and I mean to look at some patterns in the other room. You men must get along without us for a little while."

"Oh, I daresay we'll manage, mother," said Howth teasingly. "Eh, Jeff?"

Jeff nodded, but did not look up. For some reason he appeared anxious to avoid Yetta's eye; and the girl, after studying him quietly for a moment, followed Mrs. Howth from the room.

"Jeff," said the trooper suddenly. "I've had a queer thought this last week or so. I'd like to tell you what it is. I couldn't do so before because of Yetta being here. You'll understand presently what I mean by that. You see, it concerns Nordsen among others."

"I think I can guess what it is," said Jeff quietly.

"Can you? Well, try how near you can get."

The breaker looked his friend in the eyes. "I will. Kling, Nordsen, Absolam and Sjoberg, and maybe one or two more, are after the Ajax Mine for themselves, and have been after it ever since Harris left. Am I right?"

"By Jove," said Howth, in astonishment. "What d'you know about that. I give you my word I thought I was the only man that had any idea that way, unless it was Dan Grant. He's as deep as a well, that lad. You never know what

he's got in that top-piece of his. So that's your idea, is it?"

"I've thought so for some time," Jeff told him. His manner showed a quickening interest. "Look here, Jim, there's a regular game playing. Kling and the rest of his mob are working hell-for-leather to get the Ajax closed down and the lease thrown up. Then they'd apply for it themselves—see. The Ajax is in bad odour. All these things that have been happening up there in the hills—who d'you suppose is really at the bottom of it. I'll tell you. It's Kling. And to cover his tracks, and to work off a personal spite, he's tried all along to put the blame on Dan Grant. I think Dan knows that now."

"And Boyd?" suggested Howth quietly.

"Boyd! I'll own I'm puzzled there," said Jeff, with a little movement of his hands. "Boyd isn't in the know with Kling, that's certain. All the same, he's not where he is just to manage a way-back mine. There's something else at the back of it. But for the life of me I can't discover just what it is."

"So!" ejaculated Howth. "I think you're right. Well, so far it hasn't been any of my business. They can fight it out among themselves. But I'd like to get a line on what's coming. It seems to me that they're just cross-bluffing each other as hard as they can go." He frowned heavily. "Somehow I can't believe Boyd crooked.

He's selfish, and he's got an unfortunate manner, but at heart I think he's sound enough. I think he wants to be decent, but doesn't know how to go about it. Yet if he's as smart as they say, why hasn't he wakened up to what's going on. Kling—that's the man at the back of it all. And Sjoberg runs him a good second. He hates me like the devil, but he's got sense enough not to start anything. It wouldn't pay him."

"I wouldn't be too sure of it," warned Jeff. "Don't forget that Kling is behind him. That's a man with more education than most. And an educated bad man is something to reckon with."

"Oh—Kling," said Howth, as if the idea amused him.

The two men fell to silence. From the direction of the sitting-room came the voices of Mrs. Howth and Yetta. The girl's clear laughter caused Jeff's eyes to brighten momentarily, and for a second his long fingers ceased their restless tattoo upon the boards of the table. But presently, as he once more took up the threads of thought, his eyes lost their softness and became faintly troubled. The lines of his face seemed all at once to score themselves more deeply, and his lips were tense set. He glanced from the face of his friend to the leaping flames on the hearth, and then at Howth once more. But he did not speak. And suddenly he sighed, and his fingers went slowly out to take up the pipe from his knee.

“By Glory, how it blows,” exclaimed Howth. He settled back in his chair. “I’m glad I don’t have to turn out in the morning like Dan. Now I wonder what that lad is really after. Some mischief, I’ll be bound.” He grinned drowsily. “Well, good luck to him. And devil take Kling and all the rest of his hide-outs. Kick that box a bit nearer the fire, Jeff, and draw your chair up, while I get out the crib-board. You’re three games ahead of me, and I want to even the score.”

It was not until two days later that Boyd heard of Dan's trip to the city. Nat Absolam, calling in at the tin office on his way to the pump-house, made known the news with a wide grin.

"Did you know Grant left for Hobart on Monday? That's a fact. I got it from Nordsen."

Boyd looked up impatiently. "I'm not interested in what he does, so long as he doesn't interfere with me."

The foreman's eyes twinkled maliciously. "They say he's gone along to see his solicitor on this water-race business. Would you call that interfering, Mr. Boyd?"

"Who told you that rubbish?" asked Boyd sharply.

"It's what they say," repeated Absolam. He met Boyd's annoyed look with assurance, and proceeded clumsily to light his pipe. "I dunno if it's true. But I shouldn't be surprised. He's as cunning as a starved cat."

"I can hardly credit Grant would be so foolish," said Boyd doubtfully. "No reputable lawyer would listen to him for a moment. He hasn't got

a legal leg to stand on, and he ought to know it." He thought a moment. "This is all a yarn, Nat. I have Grant's own word for it that he does not intend to meddle further. What is more, he made the promise of his own accord. I think if I were you I shouldn't pass on all you hear until you make sure it isn't just bush gossip."

Absolam grunted sceptically. "All right, Mr. Boyd. So long as you're satisfied, I reckon it don't matter. I'm only telling you what they say. And maybe you ain't as fly to some things as the rest of us."

"That remains to be seen," said Boyd dryly. He took his overcoat from behind the door, and motioned the foreman to precede him. "By the way, Kling sent down for some gelignite about an hour ago. What does he want it for?"

"Oh, it must be that rock bottom on the new face," said Absolam vaguely. "I told him yesterday the only thing to do was to blast her out, and maybe that's what he's aiming at."

"I haven't heard any shots," Boyd commented. He lifted his head suddenly. "Who's that?"

A man was beckoning from the sheds, and Absolam exclaimed at sight of him.

"It's McGurr. He's on the pump with Sjoberg."

Boyd said nothing, but his frown deepened. He called to the waiting man: "What's wrong with you?"

McGurr looked at them uneasily.

“The suction pump is choked.”

“The hell it is,” Absolam interjected.

Boyd threw the foreman a quick glance. For some reason the words grated. They sounded over-emphasised, and he thought to catch a personal note in the big man's evident anger.

“When did it happen?” he asked.

“Ten minutes back. We'd just got her going, but she was queered from the jump. Sjoberg sent me along to find Nat.”

“Well, we'll go and look at it,” said Boyd.

He led the way without another word, and Absolam followed muttering. Sjoberg, heavy featured and sullen, his scant clothing splashed with yellow water, was bending over the pump. He straightened up and gave a surly nod.

“It is somevonh as drobbed a stone down der bibe. She vos all set last nide. Undt now she is shoked der teufel.”

“How do you know it's a stone that's doing it?” asked Boyd quickly.

Sjoberg's eyes fell away, and he shifted his weight awkwardly. “Vod else vould it be. I haf before seen a stone fall in der bibe schust as this, undt it is der same.”

“It strikes me you could be a damn sight more careful than you are,” said Boyd, in sudden anger. The man's halting speech and shifty manner stirred him to a queer suspicion. “I put you in charge

here at your own request. If you can't hold the job say so, and I'll find someone that can."

"I am nod responsible for oders they do to der bump," retorted Sjoberg insolently.

Boyd's mouth set grimly. "I'm not here to argue with you. If this happens again you're out of a job. There's been a great deal too much of this kind of thing lately. It's going to be stopped. My patience is about exhausted. Get to work and take the thing to pieces. And when you've found out what really is wrong, report to me."

He bent to an examination of the pump. When he looked up again, it was to see Absolam regarding him sullenly.

"Anyone would think it was my pigeon," mumbled the foreman, as if to excuse the look.

"Well, you're paid to see things go right," Boyd snapped. He looked at Sjoberg with dislike. "With reasonable care, this could not have happened. And you know it."

"I tole you it vos a stone dropped in der bibe," repeated Sjoberg.

"Then who dropped it?" Boyd demanded. He added maliciously: "Well, you can't blame Dan Grant for this, can you. That's unfortunate—for you."

As he passed the cook-house on his return to the office, Jerry Slott hailed him from the doorway. The rotund cook was busily kneading a huge pan of dough set on a slab against the wall.

“Busted, ain’t she, Mr. Boyd?” he enquired, anxiously.

Boyd halted, his momentary spleen turning to amusement. “I hope not. What do you know about it, any way?”

“Not a thing,” said Jerry solemnly. “But that Sjoberg is a big blob. You hear me say so.”

“I’m beginning to think it myself,” Boyd assured him.

“But you can take it from me he don’t notice nobody but Kling,” said the cook, with the air of one announcing a discovery. He added with sudden irrelevance: “What do you think I got the other day?”

Boyd looked at him inquiringly.

“A letter from my missus,” said Jerry, with mild triumph. A slow grin distorted his hairy features, and he winked and nodded. “It’s gospel fack. She wants me to take her back. How’s that fer noos. Ain’t I the mug?”

“Then you’re going to?” suggested Boyd.

“I dunno. I ain’t decided. A question like this here is too . . . is too . . . well, never mind. You know what I mean. I’ll have to think about it. My old man used to say, ‘Gerald’—yes, that’s the handle they give me—‘Gerald, me boy,’ he’d say, ‘don’t do nothing in a hurry.’ And I ain’t, neither.”

“What you might call a state of furious inaction, eh?” Boyd murmured, grinning.

“I don’t get you,” said the cook. “Yes, I’ll have to think it over. Maybe I will; and then, again, maybe I wont. But can’t you see me giving notice and making back to town by the mid-day train stopping at all stations. ‘Don’t get eggcited,’ says the railway porter. ‘This here train don’t go till she starts,’ says he. Yes, Mr. Boyd, I’m like that when I’m travelling. I’m all nerves and enthoo . . . enthooosiasm, like a barn-door rooster.” Jerry regarded Boyd with friendly intentness. “Talk about being protoponascus—that’s me. Did you know Sjoberg was hitting the booze agin. He starts slow, but when he gets on a down grade, by gosh, he jumps the rails. Keep your eye on the signals.”

Boyd laughed and turned away.

“Thanks, Jerry, I will.”

He continued thoughtfully towards the office. Recollection of Sjoberg as he had last seen him—heavy, gross-lipped, reeking of animalism—filled him with disgust. He decided to watch the man more closely.

In some fashion, too, his own complacency was disturbed. He was nearing the point where instinct approaches reason. But if he were uneasy, he was not yet alarmed. By this time he had come to gauge Absolam and those with him fairly accurately. It was evident that, however promptly and circumspectly they might appear to carry out his orders, there remained in the background a

certain contemptuous regard of himself. Hitherto Boyd had determined this to be the inevitable outcome of the relations between them. But now he had a queer suspicion of something further, some carefully concealed antagonism actuated by motives quite impersonal. And he began to wonder if, after all, his deliberate usage of any means to his hand was not likely to react upon himself. He took comfort in the thought that the issue could not now long remain in doubt. He experienced no remission of the curiously contorted outlook which had claimed him from the first. Momentarily saturated with self, achievement was the sole purpose of existence. If he had any qualms of conscience at the ruthlessness of his own designs, he suppressed them instantly. That the letter and spirit of the law might be one and indivisible did not occur to his morbidly engrossed sensibilities.

The storm which swept the district on the eve of Dan Grant's departure had passed on, leaving in its wake a sodden landscape and the chill depression of wind-racked steep and vale. The rain had ceased, but the peaks of the hills remained wrapped in heavy cloud, and the air was soaked in moisture. To Boyd, however, striving as he was with added problems, and rather bitterly conscious of a shrinking from the task ahead, the season was of small account. He held steadfastly to his work, although aware at times of a growing desire to make his peace with Joan Norris. The girl was never far from his

thoughts; a circumstance which alarmed him vaguely.

Joan herself was freer to express resentment of the weather. The dreary insistence of the north-west winter never failed to strike at the roots of her cheerfulness.

“Jeff, I declare we’ll soon be walking sideways like crayfish, if this continues,” she told the breaker, who had called in at the school-house one afternoon. “If it were not for the delightful summer months, Copper Creek would be intolerable. What on earth are you smiling at?”

“Was I smiling?” Jeff excused himself. “Well, but look here—I was watching Betty’s tongue poking out while she added up her sums. And she’s smart, too, ain’t she? About the weather. . . . Why, yes, it isn’t much to brag about, is it? It’s perfectly rumsidious, as Jerry Slott says. Can I leave a message for Dan? He’ll be back any day now. He’s been gone over a week.”

Joan glanced to where his horse stood tied to the fence. The saddle was packed as if for a long journey, and she faced the breaker accusingly.

“And where are *you* going to?”

Jeff threw up his hands comically. “It isn’t any use to blame me. I hate the idea of riding out in this weather, but some things have to be done. I’ve a couple of fillies to break to harness over at Peter’s Dip. I’ll likely be away ten days or so.

But I hope to be back by the time we get news of this development scheme. They say the latest idea is to fetch folks out from the old country to settle on the holdings. If there's to be any fun going, I don't want to miss it."

"Fun, Jeff!"

"Well, we'll hope it will be nothing worse. Things are due to boom shortly, and we might as well be on the spot to grab our share. Will you let Dan know that his gear is at my hut. He knows where I plant the key." Jeff backed to the door and resumed his hat. "Well, I'll be jigging. Good-bye. Good-bye, partner."

Joan returned rather wearily to her teaching. Her head ached slightly, and she longed for school hour to close. It was late in the afternoon when the last of her charges had gone, and she hastened to set the room in order for the morrow. Thereafter, since it was not a mail-night, she would presently take her pony from the shelter shed at the end of the playground and set out for home. In general she took a keen delight in these daily rides. But now, for some reason, she felt reluctant to face the return journey, although a sudden chilling of the air warned her that night was not far distant. She went to the door and stood gazing rather wistfully over the shadowing landscape.

In the near distance the foot-hills were plainly discernible, lifting themselves in slow, serried outline to clasp the shoulders of the Carfax Ranges.

A solitary peak, gleaming coldly above the crest of the timber, thrust a steely finger at the arc of sky beyond. Elsewhere the reaches of the hills lay silent and colourless, an emptiness of desolation, naked save for the wet blanket of fog that spread itself in an immeasurable tide from horizon to horizon.

Yet this for but an instant. On a sudden the sun struck through the mists of earth. The sodden air was cleft with myriad shafts of dancing, palpitating light. The west flamed opalescent to its zenith, changing from grey to faintest blue, to pink, to turquoise, to a thousand hues of iridescent gold. It was as if the whole vast amphitheatre of the universe shook to the glory of the dying sun-god. The transcendent beauty of the scene held the girl enthralled. Even when sombre shadows once more blotted the range and the great column of the sky dwindled and shrank in the enveloping arms of the dusk, a transfiguring warmth remained at her heart.

Presently, as she remained wondering, she caught the sound of approaching hoofs. A man rode to the fence and dismounted stiffly. Joan uttered an exclamation of pleased surprise.

“Dan! Why, we haven’t heard a word of you since you deserted us all so mysteriously. How glad your mother will be. Did you have a good trip?”

The young fellow halted by the door, looking at

her eagerly from under the brim of his wide felt hat. The drooping ears and heaving sides of his horse testified to the long journey he had made. He himself was splashed with grey mud, and his heavy bluey was saturated. But his deep-set eyes gave no hint of weariness, and his voice sounded strong and vibrant.

“You’re glad to see me, then? You really are? It’s fine to be home. The first two or three days were all right, but after that I just ached for a sight of the Tiers and some place where they gave you a real meal. Lord, the way the city folks peck at their food makes me ill. You’re looking pale, Joan.”

“Am I? I expect it’s just because I’m a little tired.” Joan smiled back at him, although wondering a little at the nervous movement of his hands, and the strange glow in his eyes. “When you came I was trying to persuade myself to make a start for the hills. I should have gone long ago, but somehow I didn’t. I just stayed on. Jeff was here this afternoon. He has gone to Peter’s Dip. He asked me to tell you that your things are at his hut.”

“Thanks,” said Dan absently. “I don’t need them to-night, anyhow. So Jeff has gone breaking, has he? I’m sorry I missed him. I wanted to see him rather badly.” He followed the girl inside. “No, I won’t sit down. I want to walk about and stretch myself. I was hoping to get

here before you closed school. We can ride out home together. Anything fresh since I've been away?"

Joan shook her head. "Nothing at all; unless it's that old Mr. Pickens seems to have vanished. I heard Bill Utting talking about it. They don't know where he is. Otherwise I've scarcely seen a soul to talk to except Mrs. Howth and Yetta."

"How is my mother?" asked Dan abruptly.

"Quite well; but a little anxious about you, I think. She has missed you."

"And you, Joan?"

His voice held an odd note which caused her to glance at him quickly. And she was again conscious of the queer little undercurrent of excitement which seemed to possess him, as if he were holding something in check. She laughed in an attempt to shake off a sense of foreboding.

"And I, too, of course. You know we all missed you." Joan watched him uneasily as he paced up and down the room. "Were you . . . I mean, was your trip a success, Dan? Are you pleased you went?"

"Pleased!" exclaimed Dan, halting in front of her. "Why, Joan, it's the best piece of work I've ever done in my life. I should say I was pleased. One day I'll be free to tell you all about it, but not just yet. I wish I could. The joke is too good to keep to myself." He coughed and exclaimed irritably, "Confound the thing. It's

the warm air inside here that does it. Joan, I want to tell you something. Joan”

She interrupted him hurriedly, aware of a sudden dryness in her own throat. “Yes, I know. You must take more care of yourself. So much depends upon your keeping well. I . . . your mother. . . . If anything happened to you”

“Would you care?”

Again that curious tremor in his voice, that little eager movement of his hands towards her. His manner showed a strangeness she did not understand, and she looked at him with misgiving.

“How should I help caring. Because we are friends because”

What more she might have said she did not know. For suddenly, terrifyingly, she saw that he was trembling. She drew back a little then, her heart in her throat, a faintness flooding her veins.

“Joan. My God, Joan. Would you care, then would you would you?”

She tried to answer, to move; but could not. Dan’s eyes were blazing on hers; she felt his hand shaking to the touch of her own. And all at once, as if yielding to ungovernable impulse, he bent and kissed her full upon the mouth.

Only then did she waken from the spell that bound her senses. She thrust him from her with almost violence, a cry of overpowering hurt breaking from her lips.

“ Dan ! ”

But for her expression, the reproach must have gone unheeded. With his passion surging over him like a flood, the young fellow was already pressing forward again, a torrent of madly pleading words striving for expression. But now suddenly he was checked. He saw that she was looking not at himself, but beyond him. And as he swung about there came Ralph Boyd's voice from the doorway.

“ I beg your pardon. I . . . had no intention of intruding. I will call again.”

The tone seemed to rouse Joan from her paralysis of inaction. She caught her breath convulsively.

“ Please . . . will you wait. Was there something you . . . you wanted, Mr. Boyd.”

The silence that waited his reply seemed to her intolerable. She felt outraged, humiliated beyond belief; as if all the finer instincts of her womanhood had been dragged in the dust.

“ Thank you,” said Boyd icily. “ I need not have troubled you. I merely wish to say that I expect an important message within the next few weeks, and would be glad if you will arrange to have it sent out to me. The signature will be Craighume.”

“ I will remember,” said the girl mechanically.

She continued to look towards him with blurred eyes. And suddenly she realised that he was no

longer there, and only the beating of her heart, and the sound of Dan's heavy breathing, remained to stir the silence of the room. With a little hysterical laugh she turned towards him.

"Dan! What have you done . . . what have you done!"

The subtler meaning of the cry escaped him. He stretched out his hands, his voice hoarse with emotion.

"I love you, Joan . . . Joan. Don't turn from me. Have I frightened you. Joan, listen . . ."

"Ah, how could you!" she said. The one thought was paramount. That Boyd of all men should see and misinterpret. The heavy tears started in her eyes. "Mr. Boyd . . ."

Dan caught at the name. "Boyd! Always and forever Boyd. Dearest, what does it matter that he saw us—that all the world might have seen us. A fig for Boyd. I tell you I hold him in the fingers of one hand. He can do me no more harm, even if he wished." With a swift movement he took her by the shoulders, turning her gently to face him. "Joan . . . little Joan, marry me. Don't you know I love you. You must know it."

"No—no." She tried to free herself. "Oh, Dan, I can't listen—I can't."

The young fellow interrupted her almost fiercely. "You shall listen. Can't you understand. I love you. I love you more than God."

“ Dan, don’t. Dear Dan ! ”

There came upon her an influx of weakness that set her limbs to trembling pitifully, and brought a haze before her eyes. Yet if she had ever doubted before, she did not doubt now. She knew that she could not marry him, that she would not marry him. And presently she found her courage again, and met his gaze unflinchingly.

“ Dan, listen. You must listen. You must never say this to me again. Oh, why did you speak. We were such friends. Yes, I do love you . . . but not that way . . . never that way. I’ve tried, but I can’t. There’s something at my heart . . . you wouldn’t understand . . . I don’t understand myself. Only I know it’s there. It won’t let me. I shall never love you that way.”

Dan bent closer above her. “ But you shall . . . you shall, by God,” he said, through clenched teeth. “ Joan, you’re sending me to hell. That’s what it means for me. But with you to work for, to fight for . . . Joan . . . ”

“ You are hurting me,” said the girl steadily, but with tears in her voice.

Dan’s face worked fiercely, but he did not speak. And all at once the strength seemed to go out of his body. The fire died in his eyes, his hands fell listlessly to his sides. He began to cough—long, racking breaths that tore themselves from his choking throat. At sound of it the girl cried out in a swift revulsion of feeling.

Dan, don't. Don't look at me like that. You'll break my heart."

A twisted smile came on the young fellow's lips.

"It's all right," he gasped. "I asked for it, and I got it. Joan . . ."

"Oh, Dan, why can't I? Why is life such a cruel thing. Or am I just a prude that you must scorn."

"Oh, it's cruel enough," said Dan, ignoring the latter part of her words. "But I reckon a man can stand it. Especially since, in a way, I'm used to . . . to standing it. Not that I'll ever give up hope of winning you. I couldn't do that and . . . and go on living. Just two things on earth that I want. To have your love—God, I'll make you love me. Just that. And to smash that man Boyd." His fingers clenched spasmodically. "I would give up every hope I had . . . every penny I had in the world, to see Boyd beaten at my feet."

Joan was appalled at the savagery in his voice.

"It isn't like you to speak so," she said, with difficulty. "You wrong yourself—indeed, indeed you do. I am sure that he bears you no real ill-will. It is only that his way and yours are so opposite in everything. Ah, couldn't you be friends. Is there so much between you . . .?"

In the half light of the dusk she saw him look at her swiftly, and her voice faltered and died away. A sense of desolation swept over her, and shame,

and terrified humiliation. Again she felt that burning kiss upon her mouth; her senses chilled anew at the contemptuous echoes of Boyd's voice. And suddenly she saw the construction that might be placed upon her words, and she put out her hand imploringly.

"Good God, Joan! Not that—not that."

She touched his arm, but he shook himself free with a gesture almost brutal. She could feel his eyes piercing to the very marrow of her soul.

"Don't touch me. You! You to love Boyd!"

"Dan. What are you saying!"

"You do. Yes, you do."

Joan faced him passionately. "I . . . I hate him."

"It was in your eyes, in your voice," muttered Dan. He looked at her with unspeakable bitterness. "God Almighty! what have I ever done to that man that he must always come between me and that I most desire. Joan, I can't believe it."

"You have no right to believe it," she retorted desperately. "Dan, this must stop. I will not listen further." Her hands clasped in anguish. "Oh, surely you can see how impossible you make it for us both."

The young fellow took a deep breath. When next he spoke the anger was gone from his manner. His voice was unutterably wistful.

"I wonder if you know how much you are to me. No—you needn't be afraid. I won't speak

of it again. I . . . but what can it matter now. Nothing can matter now.”

“I am not . . . not worthy of your regret,” said Joan faintly. She was sick at heart, and full of an infinite loathing of self.

“I want you to promise that this will make no difference.” Dan threw up his hand, as if guessing at her thought. “You can trust me. I shall not intrude myself unnecessarily. But my mother . . . if you left us now . . . I don’t ask for myself. But my mother is a lonely woman. Your going would grieve her. And I think that if she . . . she knew of this, it would be hard for her to forgive me. Will you . . . forget?”

There came to Joan’s mind remembrance of that other day back there in the hills when the little widow had pleaded in words almost exactly similar, and the tears blinded her eyes. Emotion choked her, and she could only incline her head dumbly in reply.

Dan sighed and turned to the door. “Thank you. It is like you to put others first.” He looked at her listlessly out of his sunken eyes. “I’ll get the horses ready. When you have locked up”

Night was come at last—cold, starlit, electrical. Joan rode in silence, her mind filled with weary dread of the morrow. Not until they reached the house and she had escaped to her own room under plea of a headache, was she able to give herself

freely to the thoughts that pressed upon her. From beyond came the muffled tones of Dan and his mother, and she shivered a little at the sound. Yet was their loneliness no greater than her own. She felt shut out by the silence and darkness.

Sleep was far from her fevered consciousness. She sat on the bed, her cheek pressed to the grateful coldness of the window-pane. The blind was not drawn, and she was able to distinguish faintly the black border of the encircling timber, and the well of sky above encrusted with stars. Down in the black hollows of the hills she had a vision of wild things stirring to the mystery of the night. So would they move through the long, weary hours—vaguely and stealthily as her own thoughts—until the whisper of dawn. And so presently would come the sun, striking warmly above the dim shoulder of earth, beating back the loneliness of long shadow that came as the dawn whitened, burnishing the mountain side with a coppery radiance and lighting the trough of the valley to an endless canvas splashed with russet and ochre and the silver gleam of a winding river. Morning would gather the hills in an exquisite solitude, and the air would thrill sweetly to the note of waking birds and the crooning of the dawn wind. Only in her own heart must the shadows remain, and the sadness and the loneliness press yet more contemptuously. . . .

She buried her suddenly streaming face upon the pillows.

JIM HOWTH, almost alone in this respect amongst the residents of Copper Creek, felt little more than a passing interest in the approaching activities of the now freely discussed Development Syndicate. The morning of the day on which the Concession Bill came before the State House found him imperturbably grooming his horse in readiness for one of his periodical excursions into the back country.

“ You see,” he explained to Bill Utting, who sat stolidly smoking on the edge of the chaff-binn, with Betty at his side, “ you see, Bill, I haven’t got any real stake in these parts. I’ve been here close on five years now, and I may get a shift at any time. Not that I want to go. This part of the Island suits me down to the ground, and the wife and Betty like it too. But a man has to go where he’s told. And it’s a level bet that I’m notified of my transfer before very long.” He regarded the effect of his labours with a critical eye. “ It’s not a curry-comb that’s wanted for mud like this. A man needs a steam plough to groom his horse with. Yes, they’re sure to clear me out of Copper

Creek. That's the rottenness of the present system. They reckon a man gets too friendly with folks if he stays in one district overlong. And so they shunt him off somewhere else."

"It's a mistake," said Utting indignantly.

"Of course it is. As if a policeman can't be known and respected without there being danger of him shirking his duty." Howth reached his bridle from its peg. "Still, there you are. They don't trust their own men. Bad cess to them."

The old prospector shifted on his seat. "Well, Jim, I hope you're a false prophet, as they say. Me! I don't care overmuch. I'm here to-day and gone to-morrow. But this place needs you. Things are going to be lively later on." He puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. "What time are you making a start?"

"As soon as I get saddled up," said the trooper. He looked towards his small daughter with a tender gleam in his eyes. "What's the matter, Chicken. Mother oughtn't to have let you up so early; even though it is nice to have you seeing me off."

"It isn't fair," said Betty, in her small voice.

"What isn't fair?"

"It isn't fair for you to leave us like this." Betty's mouth tightened rebelliously. "You know Jeff's away too. There'll be nobody to play with."

"God bless me—no one to play with you. That's too bad," said Howth penitently. "Why

—why, Bill will play with you, if you're good. Eh, Bill? ”

Bill Utting grinned uneasily. “ Well, you see, Jim ”

“ I don't want to play with Bill, ” interrupted Betty. She regarded the proposed emergency with disfavour. “ He can't play hop-sotch, becós his leg is too stiff. And, besides, he swears like anything when he loses. ”

“ Now . . . now . . . now, ” stuttered Utting, his face growing suddenly purple.

Howth laughed at the old man's expression of horror. “ So he uses bad words in the presence of ladies, does he? Then I certainly shouldn't play with him any more until he apologises. Still, you know, Jeff is due along home some time to-day. They tell me the way he has those fillies of Peter's nosing around the yard after him is a sight for sore eyes. He's got them trained to a frazzle. I've seen some men that could handle a horse as it ought to be handled, but never one of them a patch on Jeff. ”

“ Jeff's the cleverest in the world, ” said Betty, with shining eyes. “ Oh, Bill, why aren't you full of stories and things like Jeff is? ”

Utting rose discomfited. “ There you are, Jim, ” he grumbled good-naturedly. “ It looks like it ain't much use me trying to cut Jeff out. Well, Betty, you know we ain't all of us lit'ry folks. Stories is well enough, but there's other

things." He removed his hat and rubbed the bald surface of his head encouragingly. "Oh, yes, there's other things, right enough," he repeated vaguely.

"Don't worry, Bill," comforted the trooper. "Why, I've even got to take a back seat when Jeff is around." He bent and blew out the candle on the shelf of the binn. "Well, this won't get the work done. Betty, what are you going to do now? "

The child clung around his neck for a long moment. Her lips were a little tremulous. "When I've had breakfast I'm going to play on the road and watch for Jeff," she announced. "He won't be long, will he?"

"If he is I can see he's in for a bad time from one young woman, anyhow," laughed Howth. "Be careful of cattle coming off the runs."

He waved his hand gaily, and, with Bill Utting walking at his stirrup, went through the slip-rails to the plain. At the turn-off to the creek bridge he pulled his horse up and began to feel through his pockets.

"It's all right," he said, in answer to Utting's look of inquiry. "I'm just making sure I haven't forgotten my smoking gear. Well, Bill, what d'you know? "

"Not as much as I'd like to, but more than's good for my peace of mind," returned the old man soberly. "Did you know that all the mine men

are coming in to the Creek this morning? And likely Boyd will be in too."

"So!" ejaculated Howth, using his favourite expression when at all perturbed. "I knew something was worrying you. It's a singular thing, but they always seem to time their trips for when I'm away."

"It isn't so this time," Utting told him. "There's been a bust up in the hills. The mob have struck work. It seems Boyd caught Sjoberg on the bend, and told him off. The Dutchman didn't like it, and said so. So Boyd paid him his money and told him to get. Kling butted in then, and there was nearly a row, I'm told, only Jerry Slott took sides with Boyd. And now Kling and his friends have downed tools until Boyd takes Sjoberg on again. There's no one left up in the hills—at least, there won't be after to-day—but Jerry Slott and a boy."

"When did this happen, Bill?"

"Last night." Utting shrugged his shoulders meaningly. "They reckon to bluff Boyd, of course; but I ain't sure they'll do it. He looks a hard nut to me. What do you think?"

"Boyd is no baby," said Howth briefly. His face was troubled. "Well, if they get on the tank and play up, I'll have a word to say to George Nordsen when I get back. I don't want to do it. I reckon Yetta's too white a girl to have to face trouble for that blackguard uncle of hers. But I

don't see what else I can do. What is Boyd coming in for? ”

“ Oh, I suppose he'll burn the wires sending his kick along to the management,” was Utting's comment. “ I'd hang around the Creek myself, until Jeff got back, only I've got to see to some business of my own. How long will you be gone? ”

Howth looked about him before replying. “ No longer than I can help, you may be sure,” he said tersely. “ I'll tell you something, Bill. I've a chance of meeting with a man down Spinoza way that knows something about Kling. D'you get me? Where did Kling get that limp from. I heard tell once that it was from a bullet. I want a hold over Kling, if I can get it. Well, so long, Bill.”

He cantered away, his head lowered against the slam of the west wind. Overhead the air was filled with the scintillating spectre of dissolving frost. The ice-blue of the sky was undimmed by a single cloud. In spite of the cold Howth felt no discomfort. He was well inured to the rigorous disciplining of the outlands winter, and asked nothing better than a good horse under his knees and the freedom of the range. Now, as he pursued his journey vigorously, his eyes searched the prospect ahead of him with kindling interest. The long belts of wind-ravened scrub, the net-work of gully and winter creek, the purpling plateau that swept coastwards in tumbling waves of heather and silver-

grass to meet the brown-capped knolls outlined far beneath, were almost as familiar to him as the neat paths and squared flower-beds of his own home garden. He was able to find in them a sense of comradeship, a friendliness, so convincing as to be almost real.

Two miles from home Howth rounded a patch of scrub almost on top of another rider. They drew rein simultaneously, each grinning broadly in recognition of the other.

“What, Danny, the line down again?” asked Howth. He nodded at the gear-bag slung over the young fellow’s shoulders. “If this keeps up you’ll be earning a little of the pay they give you. Where is it this time?”

“That’s what I’m out to find,” said Dan, fidgetting in his seat, as if anxious to be moving on again. “We’re in for a spell of sharp weather, Jim. Well, we can do with it. The plains are drying already.”

“Yes, but the bush is like a sponge,” said Howth. “It’ll stay wet for a week, with the sun thawing it out. How’s your mother?”

“She’s well, thanks,” said Dan absently.

Howth settled his peaked cap more firmly on his head. “Good. A fine woman that. Going my way, Dan?”

“You’re off to Lewistoun, aren’t you?” Dan shook his head, a gleam of impatience in his eyes. “No, not this time, Jim. It wouldn’t do. We’d

yarn and yarn, and devil a bit of real work would either of us do. See you later."

He wheeled and rode away, leaving Howth to stare after him with open mouth.

"Dan's in something of a hurry, it seems," he decided finally; and rode on in turn.

At noon he halted for a cold snack; settling himself with his back to an outcropping stone, whilst his horse foraged for a picking over the heath. He had scarcely regained his saddle a half-hour later, and was in the act of lighting his pipe, when for the second time he saw a rider approaching him. The trooper's eyes bulged amazedly.

"Well, upon my word," he muttered. "I'm holding a regular reception of my friends to-day." He raised his voice in a yell of greeting. "How are you, Jeff? What's the latest from Peter's Dip?"

Jeff smiled delightedly. "I spotted you half-a-mile away. That black horse of yours shows out against the sky like a chunk of coal on a plate. No, I haven't heard a thing of any consequence since I left Copper Creek. How is my partner?"

"Betty! She's booming," said Howth, with an affectionate chuckle. "She's sitting on the road waiting for you to come home. She's inclined to be savage, so look out. You should have heard the way she trimmed Bill Utting."

"Poor old Bill," sighed the breaker.

The two men eyed each other in silent amuse-

ment. Presently, however, Howth's expression changed. He looked regretfully at the splendid proportions of his friend.

"Jeff," you should have been a mounted policeman," he said abruptly. "You were cut out for the force."

"Wrong, Jim. You should have been a horse-breaker," corrected Jeff, with amusement. He yawned and stretched. "Lord, but I'm tired. I haven't left the saddle for a week, except to eat and sleep. Tell me all the news."

Howth obligingly ransacked his memory. "I hardly like turning out and leaving Kling behind to think he rules the roost," he finished, on a more sober note. "Anyway, Jeff, I'm mighty glad to see you making back for home. There's hardly a decent man left on the Creek, except Bill Utting. Oh—and Boyd, of course. I reckon he's sound enough at bottom. He's pretty badly bitten with self-itis, but he wouldn't stand for any rough-house. Especially since they've turned him down. Still, I'll be lots easier in my mind now I know you'll be there to see to things. And that reminds me. Keep an eye on Sjoberg. He's drinking again, and ripe for mischief."

"Where's Danny?" asked Jeff.

"Dan! Oh, yes; he's home again. I saw him this morning about two miles this side of the Creek bridge. The line is down and he's gone along to find the break." Howth looked at his watch,

“ It’s getting on for two o’clock, and I’m due at Lewistoun at five. Well, so long, Jeff.”

“ When will you be back? ” Jeff called after the retreating figure.

Howth twisted a moment in his saddle. “ The day after to-morrow at latest, I hope. But you never can tell on a job like mine. Don’t let Betty bully you too much.”

Jeff continued his journey at an easy pace. His horse was a little done up, and he had no particular reason to hurry himself. Having just completed ten days of solid hard work at Peter’s Dip he felt he could afford to take things slowly on the home trip. It was accordingly late in the afternoon when he topped the last ridge of the Tier, and a little later saw him passing within a chain or two of Nordsen’s hotel. Two or three men grouped about the door stared at him curiously as he rode on, and one gesticulated and called something in an indistinct voice. Jeff contented himself with a nod in reply. He was tired and hungry, and disinclined for conversation of any kind. Nevertheless, as he drew level with Howth’s cottage he was persuaded to put aside his weariness for a moment’s peep at the little partner who so eagerly awaited his return.

A smile wrinkled his kindly face as he stumped up the path to the house. But almost immediately his expression changed. Something in the atmosphere of the place—the silence, the half-open door, the seeming absence of any life or movement with-

in, struck a cold chill at his heart. He knocked on the wall, listening eagerly for Betty's childish scamper down the hall; but there was no answering stir. As he raised his hand to knock again a sound reached his ears; vague, oddly indeterminate, like the choking inhalation of a great shuddering breath. The pupil's of Jeff's eyes contracted. He entered without hesitation; striding down the narrow passage to the kitchen; and there halted, his pulses hammering furiously.

Mrs. Howth was half-standing, half-kneeling in the centre of the room, her hands clutching at the table. Her face was indescribable. Never in his life had the breaker witnessed such a revelation of human terror.

"What is it?" he cried.

She tried to speak, but only a harsh croaking escaped her shivering lips. A vast horror was in her wide-open eyes.

"What is it? What's wrong?" repeated Jeff sharply.

"Betty!" she articulated.

The breaker sprang to catch her as she swayed.

"Betty! What about Betty! Is she ill?"

"Sjoberg. Betty . . . was playing on . . . the road . . . and Sjoberg . . . rode past and caught her up . . . on the saddle and took her away. He was drunk." She caught at the big gentle hand. "Oh, Jeff . . . Oh, my little girl . . . my little baby . . ."

“ God! ” breathed Jeff.

For an instant his mind seemed to go blank. A buzzing came to his ears, and his sight dimmed. Yet almost immediately his senses rallied. The rush of returning thought was so great as to give him a feeling of nausea. He remained immovable a full half minute gazing down at the china-white face and agonised eyes of the trooper's wife. Yet presently this nightmare inertia left him. With a gentleness almost inconceivable he lifted the fainting woman in his arms and carried her to a chair.

“ When did it happen? ” he questioned rapidly. “ Hold up, Mrs. Howth. Don't give way. No harm shall come to Betty. Can you understand what I'm saying? Sjoberg dare not harm her. Of course he only did it to frighten us. But every minute lost makes it harder for us to act as we ought. Try to tell me how it happened. How long ago since Sjoberg came? ”

“ I don't know . . . Jeff. It was not long . . . ten minutes . . . I heard Betty screaming and looked . . . and looked through the window . . . ” The poor woman raised her hands imploringly. “ She was watching for you . . . to come . . . and Sjoberg took her. . . . I tried to go to her but I . . . couldn't move . . . my heart . . . and that brute . . . my little girl . . . ”

“ There—there . . . for God's sake, ” soothed the breaker huskily. Each pitiful, gasping

word stabbed him like a sword thrust. His whole being was crying out to him to take up the pursuit, but he held himself sternly in check. To act on the spur of the moment on such slender knowledge as he then possessed was simply to court failure. He was like a man groping in the dark. Yet the inaction drove him nearly frantic.

Mrs. Howth did not appear to hear him. She sat stiffly staring into vacancy, her hands clasping and unclasping on her lap.

Jeff bent over her and spoke again quickly.

“ I’m going to find Betty and bring her back to you. Can you understand that. You’re not to fear. Nothing shall harm her. You can trust me, can’t you? I’ll send someone to sit with you.”

He went out at a run, swung on his horse and galloped back towards the hotel. As he passed the school-house he heard his name called, and he pulled up with a jerk. Yetta Nordsen was standing at the side of the track. Her blue eyes were blazing.

“ Jeff! Have you heard? Oh, the brute . . . the beast. Thank God you’ve come.”

The breaker looked at her a moment almost without recognition. On his face was the white of a terrible rage.

“ You, Yetta! I’ve just come from Mrs. Howth. Do you know anything? Which way did Sjoberg go? Was there no one to stop him?”

The girl pointed to where the peaks of the hills

were already dimming behind the gathering shroud of night. "He went that way. Wait. It was nearly twenty minutes ago. No one knows where he was going, and there was no one to follow but Mr. Boyd, who went after them as soon as he could get his horse from the yards. I was at the post office with Joan. We did not know what had happened until Mr. Boyd shouted to us as he rode past. Joan is trying to raise Otter's Tier to send a message to catch Jim Howth as he goes through Lewistoun."

"Boyd followed, did he!" exclaimed Jeff. "I always knew he was a real man at bottom. Yetta, where's your . . . where's Kling?"

The question went unheeded. The girl stepped close to the side of his horse, and suddenly touched him on the knee. Her bosom was heaving tempestuously.

"Jeff Semple, if harm comes to that little child never dare look a woman in the face again," she cried.

"Yes, I know. I suppose it does seem like that," said Jeff, with a little painful catching of his breath. The utter inconsequence of the words did not appear to trouble him. In the circumstances her attitude seemed quite-natural. It was the black spectre of his own fear that creased his brows so cruelly and set blue lines about his eyes and mouth. Despair was breaking over him like a flood. In his heart he knew only too well that the

assurance he had given Mrs. Howth was no more than veriest subterfuge. The ghastly reality of what had happened made his courage reel. He dare not give his thoughts full rein. "Don't worry about it, Yetta. It can be no more than a drunken joke at worst. Will you go and sit with Mrs. Howth? The poor woman's nearly out of her mind. You will. That's right. Of course, I knew you'd want to do just that as soon as you knew. You haven't told me yet if Kling is at the hotel."

"I think so. What does it matter! There's nothing else I can do, is there?" Yetta's voice shook suddenly. "Oh, Jeff . . . hurry, hurry. That baby in the hands of a vile creature like Sjoberg. The thought is unbearable. I've been praying for you to come."

A flicker of emotion crossed Jeff's face. "Have you. Then keep on praying. No, that's all you can do. I'm going to force the truth from Kling. If any man knows where Sjoberg was bound it will be Kling. Keep your heart up."

He left her abruptly. The door of the hotel was open and he entered without hesitation. At first the light tricked him, so that for a moment it seemed that the room was empty. Yet presently he made out the figure of George Nordsen behind the bar counter. A second man, his face glimmering oddly through the heavy shadows, stood watching his entry. Jeff strode to within a foot of him.

“Kling, I want to know where Sjoberg is.”

Kling laughed, but with a trace of uneasiness.

“Why, Jeff, it’s you, is it? I didn’t know you were back. How are things along Peter’s Dip?”

“Where has Sjoberg gone?” repeated Jeff evenly. He took no notice of Nordsen. His whole attention was rivetted upon the man before him. “Cut out the rest of your talk until it’s asked for. You know what has happened. Sjoberg has ridden off with Howth’s child. I’m not asking you why you never tried to stop him, or why you sit here now doing nothing. That’ll come later. At present I only want to know one thing, and I want to know it so badly that if you don’t give me a straight answer I’ll pull it out of you with my two hands. Where has Sjoberg taken Betty Howth?”

Kling’s body stiffened.

“Why pick on me?” he asked insolently. “I tell you I don’t know a thing about it. I don’t own Sjoberg. He was only boozed, anyway. He won’t hurt the kid. And I had no horse to chase him with, even if I’d wanted to.”

“Kling, I’ll give you just twenty seconds more to tell me what I want to know,” said the breaker, still in the same flat, unemotional voice. “I’d advise you to believe that I’m in earnest. Where has Sjoberg gone?”

Above the brooding silence came the splutter of a match as Nordsen roused himself to reach for the lamp at his elbow. The tiny glimmer threw the

figures of the two men into faint relief against the wall of twilight. Jeff was standing erect, his eyes never leaving the thin, spiteful face of the mine man, who crouched against the bar with his hands at his back.

“Damn you, find out,” said Kling suddenly, in a high, venomous falsetto.

His right hand shot up and descended. The movement was so extraordinarily rapid that only instinct saved the breaker from disaster. Even as it was the heavy glass tumbler shaved him so narrowly that he felt the wind of it passing on his cheek, and knew a quick sickness at the pit of his stomach. He fell on his side, but rose again with the agility of a cat. And even as he did so Kling’s defiance seemed to wilt. The rat-like courage went out from his staring eyes, like the snuffing of a candle. He turned towards the door, flight in every line of his body. But quick as he was Jeff was before him. The breaker caught Kling by the two shoulders; in the vehemence of his anger plucking at the flesh beneath the coarse clothing so strongly that the man cried out in blasphemous terror.

“Hell! you’re breaking my arm.”

Jeff laughed horribly with his mouth.

“In a minute I’ll break your neck. Nordsen, if you come into this I’ll see you run out of Copper Creek on a rail. Now, you . . . where is Sjoberg? ”

“ I tell you I don't know,” said Kling, squirming.

“ Think again.” Jeff's grip tightened relentlessly. “ All along you've been the man behind Sjoberg. Stand back there, Nordsen. You heard what I said. Go on, Kling.”

Kling's face was livid. He cried out in a kind of panic. “ It's God's truth, you damned fool. I don't know the first thing about it. Dutchy was blind crazy. He's been on a tank these three days. He's riding for the pit for all I know—or care.”

“ That's true,” came Nordsen's voice over the breaker's shoulder. “ Sjoberg never cracked a word of what he was at. I give you my word that's so.”

“ *Your* word,” cried Jeff, with stinging scorn. But now for some reason he no longer doubted they were speaking the truth. The knowledge filled him with a fury of despair. He felt himself suddenly thrust to the lowest depths of his courage. “ *Your* word, Nordsen. Keep it to tell Jim Howth when he comes to kill you.”

As swiftly as he had seized Kling, so now he flung him free, but with such violence that the man spun drunkenly half the length of the room and crashed over a chair to the floor, where he lay half stunned.

Jeff looked about him helplessly. Each losing second of time seemed like a drop of blood squeezed from his aching heart. The vision of his child friend

rose before him with all the faithfulness of his intense love—the wide, stricken eyes, the little hands outstretched, the sweet voice calling his name A groan burst from his stiffened lips.

Yet even as the madness mounted in his brain a sound came at his back, and he turned swiftly. Charlie, the barman, was standing before him.

“By God, Jeff, it’s rough. No, I don’t *know*. But I heard Sjoberg talking about the hut on Devil’s Web. He used to have some kind of a plant there before Sam Pickens came. It’s worth trying, maybe.”

For a second Jeff stared at him wordlessly. But suddenly the breaker’s tenseness relaxed; a glimmer of hope came into his burning eyes. He uttered the barman’s name as though he were pronouncing a benediction.

“Charlie!”

The next moment he was gone.

DAN GRANT parted from Howth with a feeling of relief. Between himself and the quiet spoken trooper existed a friendship mutually sincere, and at any other time the young fellow would have rejoiced at the encounter and gladly gone out of his way to accompany Howth some miles of his journey. On this occasion, however, a certain clearly defined intention made it imperative that his own movements for the next few hours should be free from observation. He had accordingly disclaimed a desire for present company, albeit Howth's evident astonishment at the abruptness of his departure gave him a slight uneasiness. Dan hated to be thought unfriendly, or lacking a common regard; but in this instance his impatience would not be denied. He endeavoured to comfort himself with the reflection that the urgency of his business stood sponsor for any apparent slighting of his friend.

His objective took him in a direction almost at right angles to that pursued by Howth. For nearly an hour he rode along the outskirts of the timber, his body hunched coldly on the saddle and

his cavernous eyes misty with thought. Here and there he passed a section of the overland telephone wire that connected Copper Creek with Otter's Tier; the latter a half-way camping ground on the stock route from the coast runs to Lewistoun. For the most part the line was strung on poles sunk deeply into the peaty soil of the plain, but where it was possible use had been made of sapling trees growing along the line. From these the heads had been shorn, and the branches lopped from the trunk, so that they had all the appearance of their transplanted fellows save that a thick growth of suckers which sprang from their upper circumference shewed them as still to be reckoned amongst the living.

Except for an occasional glance aloft, more from habit than intention, Dan showed little interest as yet in the overhead wire. So far as he knew, the line was intact. Howth's inference had been wrong; though, as it happened, strangely opportune. It had relieved Dan from the necessity to otherwise explain their meeting. Under the circumstances the young fellow had felt it no shame to allow the impression to remain. There was, besides, a certain humour in the situation which appealed to his wayward imagination. He was about to do a thing of which he knew Howth would sternly disapprove, and a little chuckle rose to his lips at thought of the wiggling that awaited him should the trooper ever discover his default.

Back on the open plains the chilled landscape was steadily warming. But deep in the scrub where Dan now rode the air was full of a black, enveloping frost. The branches overhead hung motionless; the leaves glossed with rime, save where an errant ray of sunlight dissolved a tiny trickle of moisture on bole and stem. No sound stirred the silence save the tread of his horse and the occasional crack of a limb yielding to the thaw.

On reaching a natural clearing in the bush Dan pulled up and dismounted. He tethered his horse on a long line to the spur of a myrtle tree, so that the animal should be free to keep moving. For himself he viewed the prospect with a shiver of discomfort. It was probable that his sojourn in this particular locality would be a matter of some hours, and he made haste to build a fire and gather within easy reach a pile of dead timber.

The next to engage his attention was the telephone line which ran immediately overhead. Connection was made to a pole sunk at the centre of the clearing, and upon this his interest gathered. After a little consideration he took from his pack a length of insulated wire and with his sheath-knife bared the casing from either end and scraped the copper core until it shone brightly. With an end of this wire twisted about his wrist he then climbed the pole and roughly cleaned the overhead wire where it met the insulator. To the part so treated he firmly bound an end of the free wire and

descended once more to earth. From his pack he now took a portable linesman's set, and clamped the other end of his lead under one terminal of the instrument. To the remaining terminal he affixed a second wire, similarly prepared, and connected this with a steel pin driven into the damp ground. The operation was now complete.

Dan regarded the result with satisfaction. He was now able, by simply removing the receiver from the instrument, to listen in on the line whenever he liked. For some time, however, he sat smoking and warming himself at the fire. It still lacked some minutes of nine o'clock, and he knew that the line was not open for traffic until that hour. When finally he settled himself with the receiver at his ear it was with the conviction that he would have to wait indefinitely for the message he had set himself to intercept.

A minute after nine he heard Joan Norris giving the line-clear signal to Otter's Tier. There followed an exchange of gossip between the girl operators separated by sixty miles of space, and his eyes brightened interestedly. He caught Joan's voice in laughing protest.

"No, really I haven't a shred of real news. What! In a place like this! People outside have never heard of Copper Creek."

"You're wrong there," sounded Otter's Tier triumphantly. "I see you haven't read to-day's paper yet. Just a moment. I'll read you some headlines."

A little silence was succeeded by a rustling of paper and the voice resumed: "Are you there? Here it is. 'The Ajax Tin Mines Ltd. Copper Creek Holding under discussion. Grave charge levelled at Directors. Shareholders' stormy meeting.' What do you think of that?"

"Oh, dear," he heard Joan sigh.

Otter's Tier sniffed. "You may say so. It'll prove dear enough for some of them before they've finished, I'll be bound. Oh . . . and the paper's just full of this Development Scheme, or whatever they call it. I'm sick of hearing about the thing. A lot of difference it will make to us. Did you say anything?"

"I was listening to you," said Joan mildly. "Is there much mail to come?"

"About the usual lot. Keep your eyes open for the papers. Well, I suppose you're wanting to be busy. O.K."

Following the ring-off a long silence ensued. Dan, however, was not conscious of monotony. He sat digesting the unexpected news with a curious smile on his face. He knew almost nothing of the affairs of the Ajax Company beyond their operations at Copper Creek. This plain intimation of serious friction between the directors and a section of the shareholders brought him a feeling of unashamed gratification. He began to wonder how all this would affect Ralph Boyd, and to what extent the manager was responsible. So far as he

himself was concerned Dan could not see that he came into the matter at all. He reflected cynically that the old adage anent rogues embroiled and honest men compensated was unlikely of fulfilment.

Towards noon he opened a parcel of food and began to eat. The fire still burned, and he had a wistful longing for a hot drink to ease the ache in his throat. His cough was causing him growing concern. In the sharp, frosty air of early morning it certainly troubled him little. Indeed, the cold seemed to reach deep down into his lungs, easing their soreness wonderfully, and sending the invigorated blood coursing through his veins like a balm. But when the air warmed, or night had gathered the mists into the valley, he would experience periodical seizures which left his body spent and the hair dank upon his brow. Recovery was marked by a fierce impatience of self. Too often his resentment culminated in an outpouring of anger such as had startled and disgusted Boyd on the occasion of their first meeting. Yet throughout Dan remained supremely conscious of the absurdity of the whole proceeding. It seemed as if some imp of the perverse, dwelling deep within the depths of his erratic nature, never wearied of inhibiting reason.

A sudden wakening of the wire brought a welcome distraction. For the next hour messages dribbled back and forth at slow intervals. There

followed another long pause. Then once more his tired ears caught a premonitory hum, and at the first words of the message his inertia left him and he became instantly alert. Otter's Tier was calling Joan impatiently.

"Halloa, Copper Creek. A message for you."

"Yes," he heard Joan's voice in reply.

"Are you set. Message begins. Ralph Boyd, Ajax Mines. Redhead wins. Signed Craighume. Message ends. Got that? It looks like this man Boyd is doing a little gamble at the races doesn't it? O.K."

Dan dropped the receiver and sat staring at the ground. His confidence had received a rude check. The words as they stood conveyed to him no meaning whatever. That the message would be in code had never entered his mind, and for a moment he was nonplussed. Were all his careful preparations, his long, cold vigil, to go for naught. He puckered his brows in an effort at solution. Redhead wins. The phrase mocked him with its very ineptitude. And then suddenly he sprang to his feet. In a flash elucidation had come, and with it a sense of savage exultation. He threw out his hands; and laughed, and coughed, and laughed again. . . . Redhead wins. It was, after all, merely a clumsy attempt at disguise, a childish play upon the words Sandy Cove. The discovery confirmed all that he had hoped. He could have shouted his triumph aloud.

Presently his mood sobered. He set himself to dismantle his apparatus and remove every trace of his presence in that spot. By the time this was completed to his satisfaction the day was drawing to a close. Already the air was touched with coming frost, and long shadows filled the interspaces of the bush. The gaps of sky between the swaying tree tops assumed a greenish pallor in the fading light.

Dan saddled his horse and made fast the pack. Then he mounted and rode free of the timber. Once on the plains he went forward at a canter, not drawing rein until he began the ascent of the foothills. Dusk lay thick upon the Tiers. The emptiness, the gigantic silence of night, was become subtly manifest upon the immeasurable void of the horizon. One by one the ribs and spurs of the neighbouring ridges dwindled and vanished. The encircling arc of timber appeared swollen to an immensity of black shadow which covered the rangeside like a pall. Stars, clearcut and coldly beautiful, rose the sky like ice fragments strewn over a sea of jet.

The profound solitude seemed a fitting symbol of the hour. In all that vast region was no sound but the slow cadence of the wind and the eerie whisperings that rose from the unseen depths of the gullies. Dan rode with loose rein, his chin sunk on his breast and his body swaying in the saddle. But now suddenly his thoughts were scat-

tered. From somewhere ahead of him came a thin trickle of sound which presently resolved itself into the thud of approaching hoofs. While he still speculated horse and rider loomed upon his vision.

“ Who is it? ” Dan called.

It was with a strange sense of unreality that he heard Boyd’s voice answering through the darkness. With the recognition came also a swift leaping of his anger. All the hatred he felt for this man surged through his being like a flood tide.

“ Mr. Boyd! What are you doing here? ”

Boyd’s own astonishment found expression in a curt laugh. “ I might ask the same of you. You’re the last person I expected to meet in this God forsaken place. As it happens you’re very welcome. Don’t misunderstand me. For myself I ask nothing from you. But there are times when personal prejudice must stand aside. Do you know that Sjoberg, apparently prompted by Kling, has abducted Howth’s child? ”

“ What! . . . What’s that you say? ” stammered Dan. The shock of the words drove every atom of resentment from his mind. He thrust his head forward, staring incredulously at the vague presentment of his enemy. “ Betty Howth? What are you saying! ”

“ It’s true, ” said Boyd, in a tired voice. “ Sjoberg—the drunken swine—took the child up on his saddle and rode off with her into the hills. I followed as soon as I could get my horse from the

yards. By that time Sjoberg was out of sight. I managed to pick up his tracks, and followed them until I lost them in the dusk. It's a damnable outrage."

"And then?" asked Dan, with dry lips. He was conscious of a feeling of suffocation.

"I went on searching," said Boyd simply. "I knew it was hopeless, but I had to do something. But even now I can't bring myself seriously to believe that Sjoberg would harm the child. He was drinking fairly heavily though, and a man of his type usually becomes brutal in his cups."

"Sjoberg! . . . Hell!" exclaimed Dan.

The knowledge appalled him. Only too well he understood the big Dutchman's hatred of Jim Howth, his swinish proclivities when the drink was uppermost, and his blood chilled in his veins.

Boyd was acutely sensible of his own helplessness. He had thought for nothing but the extreme necessity of the trooper's child. All else was become unreal and visionary. Whatever of bitterness the past had known, or of the future might set a climax to their hate, a truce was now between himself and Dan. In his understanding he cried out almost fretfully.

"What can we do? It's like hunting for a needle in a stack."

"Hold on . . . don't let us get rattled," said Dan. He was breathing hard. "We've got to do some quick thinking. How long is it since you lost the tracks?"

“ Not more than a few minutes before I met you. I think I made a mistake in crossing the ridge. I should have kept on up the hill, but it seemed to come dark all of a sudden, and I was over eager.”

“ If Sjoberg turned up the hill he was making for the Devil’s Web,” argued Dan, slowly. “ Either that, or for the sheds along Tamper’s Creek Bridge. But which? . . . which? ” He paused in an agony of indecision. “ No. Something tells me it’s the Web. You know he was camped there once before Pickens’ time. If we cross country we can make the hut under twenty minutes. Can you ride . . . ?”

The remainder of the sentence was lost as he urged his horse against the wall of darkness. Boyd gave his own animal the rein, wisely preferring to trust to its instinct rather than attempt guidance. He had long since lost any sense of direction, and now clung doggedly to the saddle, grimly content so that he escaped absolute disaster. He was only able to guess at Dan’s whereabouts, but he knew intuitively that his own horse was following faithfully in the track of its flying mate. He crouched low in his seat, his eyes straining at the blackness that gushed from every side, the wind of his going roaring at his ears. After what seemed an eternity of reckless endeavour his horse slackened and stopped. He heard Dan calling to him in a fierce whisper.

“ By God, Boyd, we were right. Look . . . there to the left. See the light.”

For a second Boyd was bewildered. He could distinguish nothing but the immense chasm of the night, monstrous, impalpable, voiding infinity. His nostrils were filled with the charnel odour of rotting vegetation.

“ I can't see,” he muttered.

Dan touched his arm impatiently.

“ To the left, I tell you. There . . . above the bushes.”

Boyd looked again, and suddenly saw a disc of brightness poised, like a cyclopean eye, on the dividing line between earth's shadow and the sector of night sky. As he gazed it seemed to wink sinisterly.

“ What is it? I mean”

“ Pickens' hut,” said Dan briefly. He was hunting to find a place to tie the horses, and Boyd could hear him coughing and swearing under his breath at the delay. “ Are you set? Then come on.”

No sound broke the stillness as they came opposite the open door of the hut. Under the circumstances the silence seemed ominous, and Boyd gave a gasp of relief at sight of Sjoberg seated at the table with his head on his arms. He roused only at their entry; rising unsteadily to his feet to peer at them in the light of the lamp on the wall at his back. Of Betty there was no sign.

Dan was looking quickly from side to side.

“ Sjoberg, what have you done with Betty Howth? ” he demanded, without preamble.

The question seemed to rouse the Dutchman from his stupor. Sudden recognition blazed in his eyes and his big shoulders lifted threateningly.

“ Vot de hell do you want? ” he said hoarsely.

“ You know what we want, ” said Dan. He advanced warily into the room, his eyes going from the bottle on the table to the open door of a store-room which had been excavated out of the earth wall against which the hut stood. Beyond was no gleam of light, but only a kind of shrouded silence; and, looking into it, the young fellow knew a quick fear. “ You made the mistake of your life, Sjoberg, when you stole Howth’s child. Pretty nigh the whole of Copper Creek is looking for you. You can’t dodge what’s coming. You can say it was only meant for a joke, if you like. We’ll argue that later. Now where is she? ”

Sjoberg answered nothing; but Boyd, whose eyes seemed drawn to the man’s face, saw a little ripple of hard cunning pass over it.

“ What have you done with her? ” repeated Dan, with rising passion. He moved closer as he spoke, so that now he stood at the threshold of the store-room. “ I don’t believe such a thing is possible. But if you have harmed so much as a hair of that baby’s head, not all the devils out of hell are going to save you.”

The reply was in such manner that not even Boyd, standing braced in readiness for the unexpected, was able to intervene in time. All at once the Dutchman's huge right arm shot out, taking Dan squarely across the waist and hurling him headfirst through the door of the store-room. Simultaneously the door slammed at his back and he heard the heavy bar fall into position.

Dan rose to his knees, the fury that filled him seeming to find its outward equivalent in the tumult of encounter that now reached him from without. He crawled to the closed door and beat on its rough surface until the blood started from his bruised knuckles.

"God damn you, let me out," he cried, choking.

The fastening defied his utmost efforts, and presently desisting he began to feel his way about the place in search for another outlet. Meanwhile the noise of the struggle continued. Knowing the relative strength of the two men Dan was constrained to marvel that Boyd had held his own so long. Anxiety spurred him to greater effort. But now suddenly his heart gave a great bound and then seemed almost to stop beating. His hands, groping through the intense darkness, had encountered the soft touch of human hair.

The first shock of contact past Dan felt feverishly for a match. None was forthcoming, and cursing softly he bent to swift examination. For an instant he dreaded he knew not what. But as he

gathered Betty's little body more closely in his arms she stirred feebly and a tiny sigh escaped her. The sound if it was as some blessed anodyne. Instinctively he seemed to understand that she was unharmed save for the fainting fit that held her. He bent over her protectingly, his whole imagination centred upon the struggle which was proceeding with unabated violence. Fear for the child and thought of his own helplessness made him well-nigh distracted. He had a chill vision of Boyd disabled, and himself presently confronted by Sjoberg abominably triumphant.

Mercifully Dan was denied the evidence of his sight. Boyd was at that moment in greater straits than his life had ever known. Sjoberg's action had been so utterly unforeseen that he was taken completely aback. In a single moment the man's drunken cunning had divided their strength in twain, and the clatter of the wooden bar as it cut Boyd from his companion sounded the knell of their confidence. And presently he was aware that Sjoberg had turned and was staring at him calculatingly.

"Sjoberg, open that door," said Boyd sharply.

Even as he said it he felt the absurdity of the words. His authority was gone. They no longer occupied status of master and man. Relativity was suddenly become curiously and hideously inverted. Brute force alone remained arbiter of their opposing wills.

If it was impossible to gauge the ultimate thought in Sjoberg's mind, Boyd could have small doubt of the man's present intention. Beyond and above Sjoberg's responsibility in the matter of Betty Howth, there now revealed itself in his attitude a depth of personal hatred, a plain desire to maim, to kill, such as set Boyd's pulses throbbing painfully. Yet he made no attempt to evade the issue. Temperamentally he was incapable of flight, even had an opportunity presented itself. It was against his nature and training to avoid physical risk, and he faced Sjoberg now without hesitation.

All this in a moment of time. The next he found himself desperately avoiding Sjoberg's clutching hands, his sole purpose otherwise being to free the door of the store-room from whence came dimly to his hearing the muffled echoes of Dan's inordinate anger. In this, however, he was to fail signally. Unexpectedly he caught his foot in a loose board and he stumbled. Before he could recover his balance Sjoberg took him in a grip that made him cry aloud. He freed an arm and struck upwards at the inflamed face which overhung his shoulder, but the blow missed its objective and glanced weakly from the Dutchman's skull.

In his cramped position—his opponent's great hands on his shoulders, with both elbows driven into his chest, and his back arched over a rail of the bunk—Boyd found it increasingly difficult to do

more than hold his own. And presently this, too, was denied him. Such was the tremendous pressure of Sjoberg's arms that he was held as in a vice. Struggle as he would he could not free himself from the tireless enmity of that embrace, and for the first time he knew actual fear. The constriction of his chest and lungs induced a feeling of vertigo. He continued to resist, but more feebly with each passing moment.

To so great physical suffering had Boyd attained that for some seconds his mind was stagnate. But now suddenly, inexplicably, he found himself thinking of Joan Norris. It seemed as if at that moment of extremity his fleeting consciousness caught, in an indescribable bitterness of farewell, at the hidden truth most dear to it. He had a curious sensation as if somewhere within his breast a door had been opened, so that he stood, as it were apart, gazing into the depths of his own soul. In the amazement of his understanding a cry burst from him.

“ Why . . . why, I love her.”

There came to him Sjoberg's answering grunt, and the sound roused him to supreme effort. A strength not his own flooded his veins as if with fire. Almost it seemed that he must win free. But the effort died as suddenly as it was born. Once more he felt the weakness mounting in his limbs, knew his vision obscured with a deathly sickness.

He let his eyes close and his head fell forward against the straining shoulder of his enemy.

How long they remained thus Boyd never knew. He was dimly aware of a succession of tiny sounds piercing his brain from distances monstrously remote. He heard the neighing of horses; and then, as it seemed, the voice of Dan Grant calling persistently. And from this sea of unreality emerged suddenly the white light of returning consciousness. He felt Sjoberg's grip relax; and then knew himself free at last, and clinging dizzily to an edge of the overturned table. In his ears rang the voice of Jeff Semple, yet in tones so charged with emotion as to be scarcely recognisable.

“Out of the way, Boyd.”

The shock of charging bodies followed, and simultaneously Boyd's sight cleared. He saw the breaker smash a terrible right fist into Sjoberg's face, caught the man's answering bellow of pain and the thud of his heavily shod foot as he kicked at Jeff's knee, and, missing, struck the wooden edge of the bunk. For an instant Boyd could only stare stupidly. Then, because his legs refused their office, he dropped on his hands and knees and crawled to the door of the store-room and released the bar.

As he fell back against the wall Dan sprang from the opening. The young fellow's face was full of a savage earnestness, and he coughed and swore by turns. For a moment he remained taking in the

situation. Then he ran forward, catching up a billet of wood as he went, and circled the fighting men adroitly. Presently his opportunity came. He poised himself with sickening deliberation, as if he were about to pith a steer, and struck downwards at the exposed nape of Sjoberg's neck. The Dutchman's head jerked back like a spring released. His body sagged. As Jeff tore loose his hold he fell heavily to the floor.

"And that's that," said Dan breathlessly, and with infinite satisfaction.

Jeff wiped a trickle of blood from his cheek. It appeared he had nothing to say against this primitive method of settling the matter.

"Betty!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"She's all right, Jeff. You'll find her in there." Dan pointed to the store-room. "She's in a faint; but nothing worse, I think," he called to the vanishing breaker.

Boyd was recovered from his sickness. He advanced to where Sjoberg lay with his knees drawn up in semi-conscious agony, and looked at him with an odd expression of disgust.

"He nearly killed me," he said abruptly; and paused a second, as if wondering at the thought. "I believe he meant to. What are you going to do with him?"

"Do!" echoed Dan. He reached to where a strip of greenhide hung upon the wall. "What

do you do with a mad animal. Tie him up, to start with, wouldn't you. Help me turn the swine on his face so I can make fast his wrists. He's a present for Jim Howth."

Boyd complied in silence. Now the crisis was past he felt constrained and awkward. His bitter dislike of Dan was increased a thousand-fold. His mind repeated numbly: "This is the man she loves. This is the man who has known the beauty of her smile, the tenderness of her lips"; and he looked at Dan with pain twisting his own white ones.

The young fellow appeared unconscious of Boyd's scrutiny. His eyes were on his task. Now and then he coughed. He did not look up until Jeff appeared with Betty in his arms.

"Is she all right?" asked Dan anxiously.

The breaker did not reply. He was gazing at the child—her face stark against his shoulder, the eyes closed, the little teeth gleaming between the softly parted lips—and his feelings threatened to choke him.

"Yes, I think so," he said presently. "She's coming round now. What a scare she must have had." He stroked the ruffled curls with the tenderness of a woman. "Betty . . . little partner," he whispered.

Betty's eyes opened. At first she returned his eager look blankly. But suddenly she smiled, and her arms went around the breaker's neck.

“ Jeff . . . dear Jeff. I knew you'd hear me calling for you.”

“ Sjoberg didn't hurt you, Betty? ”

She roused herself and looked about the hut with wide, curious eyes. “ Oh, there's Dan. And Mr. Boyd too. And . . . and Sjoberg. Is he dead, Jeff? When he carried me in here I got frightened and ran in there to hide. And then I felt sick, and went to sleep. Please, Jeff, I don't think I'd like him to be dead. He smelt such lots of whiskey, but he didn't hurt me.”

“ He was wise,” said Jeff grimly. He heaved a sigh of vast relief. “ No, he's not dead. But he might just as well be dead when your daddy's finished with him. What is it, dear? ”

The reaction had come, and the child clung to him, sobbing convulsively. Jeff waited until she had quietened.

“ There—there. Now we're all right again, eh? That's the brave little woman. Now I'm going to get Danny to carry you along to the horses until the rest of us come. That's the idea, Dan. She's thirsty. See if you can rustle her a drink of water. There's a spring just outside.”

He waited until they had gone and then turned to Boyd, a new respect in his look.

“ If you don't mind, Mr. Boyd, I'd be glad to shake hands. We haven't exactly hit it off together, and perhaps we never shall—and more's the pity. But I know what we all owe you for this

night's work. If it hadn't been for you . . . Well, God knows if he really meant harm. You'll never want for a friend in Jim Howth."

He held Boyd's hand gravely a moment. As he released it a sound made him turn sharply to see Sjoberg struggling to rise. Jeff strode up to him.

"Sjoberg, we're taking you back to Copper Creek. I hope you've sense enough left to go quietly. If you don't, by God I'll drag you there by the heels. You know me. Now get up."

Sjoberg pulled himself painfully upright, using his elbows to grip the sides of the bunk. Anger, and a kind of sullen fear, showed itself on his face, but the drink madness was gone from his eyes.

"Never did I hurt der kinchen," he mumbled heavily.

"It's God's mercy for you that you didn't," said Jeff. He eyed the man with dislike. "What's the matter with you, Sjoberg? Why, the police have been waiting for a break like this. This comes of taking notice of Mike Kling. Oh, yes; I reckon I don't need to be told who first put it into your head. Well, Kling will get his later. Now, go on—march. And no tricks. Though I think you're too sick to do much, even if you were fool enough to try anything on."

Outside in the open a thought came to him and he halted suddenly. "I've forgotten something," he explained to Boyd. "You won't be scared to mind Sjoberg a second. See here . . ."—he

fumbled through the darkness and found a stick of wood, which he pushed through the loop of rawhide about the Dutchman's wrists—"if he tries any funny business just give that a twist or two. It'll stop him."

He ran back into the hut. The tin lamp was still burning and he reached it from the wall and knocked the glass chimney to the floor. He held the lighted wick to the bulging hessian lining, moving rapidly along as it caught fire, until the smoke and heat drove him from his task.

And so, with the light widening at his back and the angry snarl of flames in his ears, he ran down the hill into the darkness.

“I’M real sorry, Mr. Boyd,” said Jerry Slott. He eased the heavy swag on his shoulders and looked at Boyd with genuine regret. “You’re having a rough spin, and this leaves you pretty stiff.”

“That’s all right, Jerry.” Boyd smiled a little wearily. The events of the past week had not been altogether unexpected, but were none the less unwelcome on that account. “I daresay I’ll manage until they send someone to relieve me. It won’t be more than a week or so at most.”

The rotund cook nodded slowly. “That’s so,” he agreed. “Still, I’m sort of disgusted with myself that I ain’t able to stay with you and help hold the fort. You know how it is. The missus wants to come back, and maybe it’s my place to stand by her. I ain’t hopeful; but there it is. It’s my dooty, as you might say.” He hesitated uncertainly. “They tell me the Ajax is likely to be closed right down. Is that true?”

“Quite true,” said Boyd. “So perhaps, after all, you’re doing the best thing for yourself. In

any case I couldn't have kept you on after this week. Since the scandal in town they've decided to hold an inquiry into the whole of the Company's affairs. Pending that—and because they consider things here to be more or less unsatisfactory—they are closing down indefinitely. Of course they'll start up again later. With Sandy Cove booming, as it must now this Development scheme is going through, they can hardly do otherwise. I'm convinced the Ajax is payable. Given a fair spin myself I'd have proved it. As it is I suppose I've failed. On the other hand I might come out of it better than most people imagine. We'll see later."

"But I'm sorry to be leaving you," repeated Jerry. He was silent a minute. "Did you know them two fellers that done a bunk with the cash, or whatever it was. Craigen and Hume the papers call 'em. Maybe you knew 'em?"

Boyd smiled peculiarly. "Yes, I knew them, Jerry."

"But you ain't messed up with them?" asked the cook, with anxiety.

"Oh, not in any way to do me harm, I think," Boyd assured him. "I was associated with them both in another matter," he broke off with a shrug of the shoulders. "That doesn't interest you, of course. As to what has happened here, the fact of Craigen and Hume clearing out is really a benefit so far as I am concerned. But I'm probably in for some nasty criticism of my work at the Ajax.

They have to have a scapegoat, and I serve the purpose admirably.”

“What do you know about that!” exclaimed Jerry.

“I’m not complaining,” said Boyd. “It’s the luck of the game. I’ve just to stay on here until they send a man to relieve me. There’s really nothing to do, of course, except watch out. Last night the shed door was broken open and some fusing and gelignite stolen. When I leave Copper Creek finally my one regret will be that I haven’t been able to get my hands on the man responsible for this sort of thing. There’s a chance I may do it yet. I’ll take a night shift from this on.”

“I’d take my gun,” the cook advised sagely. “Now that Kling and Absolam have taken to the hills, you ain’t to know what’s what. There’s one thing you do know though. The man you want ain’t Dan Grant. I always told you so.”

Boyd’s lips tightened. “So you did, Jerry. And I’m bound to say it looks as if you were right. But you don’t always see the hand that pulls the strings. There’s Sjoberg, for instance. They’ve sent him up for trial on an old offence, and he’ll be lucky if he is free to trouble society again under five or six years. But you and I know that the man they ought to have gaoled was Kling. Only for Kling, Sjoberg might have been fairly decent. Damn Kling, anyhow.”

“Sure. Hell’s bells will ring for him yet.”

Jerry began rolling one of his beloved newspaper cigarettes with slow, anxious fingers. "He's plotting more mischief; and it's just a race whether he gets away with it or they grab him first. He's put it round that this place don't owe him anything, and there's something he's got to do before he gets out. Maybe it's only talk. You'll be lonely here for a time, Mr. Boyd."

"I really believe you *are* sorry to be going," said Boyd, after a moment. "And I'm truly sorry to lose you. You seem to be about the only real friend I've been able to make in these parts. Perhaps it's been my own fault. But you've helped me in more ways than one, and I want you to know that I'm grateful."

"Thanks," said the cook, laconically. He seemed to fumble over the lighting of his cigarette. "I've always been glad to help. We've hit it off together, as you might say, about as sarspididerous as ever was. Them two men, Craigen and Hume, they had ought to be shot and quartered, as the saying is. I'd be glad to do it myself." He shook his head regretfully, as one might who saw opportunity making mock of attainment. "But first I'd make 'em both so as their own mothers couldn't identify 'em from the waste out of a bone-mill. Too honest I would. As fer you having no friends—now, you know that ain't quite so. Jim Howth ain't the man to forget what you done fer his kid. And moreover I ain't heard Jeff Semple expressing

any great desire to smoke the calomel of peace over your dead corpse.”

“ Oh, Jeff’s all right,” said Boyd, laughing in spite of himself. “ He’s for law and order. Did you know Nordsen had his license taken away. It’s a fact.”

“ Well, I’ll go hopping to hell,” was Jerry’s characteristic remark. His eyes popped. “ Be sure your sins will find you out. But I’m kind of sorry fer Miss Nordsen.”

“ She has good friends,” said Boyd.

Jerry went to the door and took stock of the morning. “ Well, she’s fining up,” he remarked. “ I reckon maybe I’ll be jogging along. I want to make the bridge over Sunwater by to-night. It’s a thirty-mile tramp, and the going’s heavy.”

He held out his hand, and Boyd gripped it regretfully. “ If ever I can do you a service, or you feel like making back for the bush again, drop me a line,” he said. “ Swinten’s Hotel, Launceston, will always find me.”

“ I’ll remember, Mr. Boyd,” said the cook. He raised his hand in a little kindly gesture of farewell. “ I’m not one to poke trouble in the eye with a stick, as the saying is. You know that. If I’ve taken sides now and then it’s only because I like to see every man get a fair run, whether he quite deserves it or not. This here is a rum world, any way you like to take it. We got to help each other along the road. Or else life ain’t worth living. So long.”

“ Good-bye, Jerry,” called Boyd softly.
“ Good-bye. And good luck always.”

He watched the sturdy figure of the cook until it vanished from sight around the bend. Only then did he seem to realise how much the man's cheery optimism and unfailing loyalty had meant, and the old lonely feeling returned intensified. For some time he remained brooding. Then with a sigh he turned towards the correspondence on his desk. Strangely he could make no headway. His mind was not on his task, and presently he gave over the attempt to work, and threw the papers from him irritably. His thoughts went back to the time of his first meeting with the men whose defalcation caused such a stir, and he smiled grimly as he visualised the scene. Craigen, with his hawk's face and long, restless fingers, and his trick of seeming always to be listening, listening. . . . And Hume, the Jew broker, sitting toying with his half smoked cigar as he gazed cunningly through the open window at the string of lights that girt the darkness below Trevallyn like a necklace of fire-flies. Boyd could see himself as he stood then listening to Craigen's quick, nervous sentences; again he felt the thrill of anticipatory triumph which marked his understanding of the scheme submitted so cautiously for his approval. He had known the questionable reputation of these men, but this did not deter him. The possibilities were almost infinite. And a third share of it all was to be his own.

Boyd lighted his pipe with a hand that trembled slightly. A third share! Why, it was all his. It was in keeping with the strange irony of things that both Craigen and Hume had been forced to flee at the very moment their joint hopes were realised. He could imagine their bitter denunciation of the fate which pursued them so hardly, their venomous dislike of himself, who alone had the substance. It could matter now not one iota that his credit as manager had been impugned. Only two well he knew the power of money and money's worth.

Presently he went to the door and stood there in the pale warmth of the sunlight. In spite of his confidence he could not rid himself of a feeling of depression, almost a sense of impending evil. He knew himself to be in many ways a changed man since coming to Copper Creek. Ambition had lost something of its allurements; he no longer knew that obsession of self which had blinded him to understanding of those finer qualities of men and women but for which existence would be hideous and intolerable. How much he owed to the influence of Joan Norris he did not know. Since that lightning-like revelation of his love—and Boyd could conceive of no more incongruous or bizarre setting for such an experience than the raw horror of that struggle on the Devil's Web—he was strangely humbled, and his thoughts were tinged with the heresy of doubt.

It was without surprise that he looked up from his musing to see Dan Grant approaching over the deserted enclosure. His own destiny and that of the young fellow appeared so indissolubly linked that it was natural and fitting Dan should appear at the very moment his mind was brimming over with thought of the woman whose possession was the primary desire of both. He offered no greeting as Dan came up, nor was any given. It seemed to be understood between them that the temporary truce called into being by Sjoberg's mad action was ended finally.

"Well?" said Boyd, without encouragement.

Dan shook the rain-drops from his hat. "Mr. Boyd, do you remember what I said that night at your house when I made a final appeal to your forbearance? I said then that I'd do my best to even the score between us. That's so, isn't it?"

"You said a great many extravagant things," returned Boyd. "I chose to excuse you on account of your evident excitement." He added pointedly. "It was a courtesy I am not likely to repeat."

"You continue to take the high hand, I see," said Dan, with a faint smile. "Well, I tell you frankly you'll need all your confidence. I came here to give you some local history. Since most of it is already known to you I hardly know why I take the trouble, unless it is that it will clear the way for what is to follow. I admit I can't force

you to listen to me, but you'll save yourself bother if you do."

He broke off to cough, and Boyd looked at him curiously. The sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, the bent shoulders and quick, troubled breathing, told their own tale, and a thread of compassion pierced the cold dislike at his heart. He thought to himself: "Poor devil, he's in a decline. I wonder if he knows it." Aloud he said—and was ashamed instantly he had said it:

"Oh, I've plenty of time on my hands. If you can amuse me I shall be grateful."

Dan flushed at the sneer.

"I hope you may find it amusing, but I take leave to doubt it, Mr. Boyd. Well, as you know, this Development Company has given out at last where they intend to start in. Before the Bill came before the House they naturally kept their intentions to themselves. They didn't want to leave room for speculators to jump in and make a pot. But there was one thing the Company itself hadn't decided. That was the exact location of the scheme. And no one else knew; although a few set out to guess. You were one of them. And you narrowed the thing down until it was a choice between Shark Bay and Sandy Cove. We all know now that it is Sandy Cove."

"Yes," said Boyd carelessly, "it is Sandy Cove. What of it?"

"I'm here to tell you. But first I've something

else to say. The position was that the Company itself were not sure of the location, and until it was sure it was unlikely to spend money buying up the privately owned land at either place. In the end, of course, it would have to be done, and no doubt they expected to get it fairly cheap. As for the rest of the land it would come to them with the Government Grant. But what a chance for the man who anticipated the right location and got in on the private land a few hours ahead. Most people never gave it a thought. But there were one or two who did. As I said before, you were one of them."

"Very true, but hardly interesting at this stage," said Boyd, yawning.

"You gambled on the hope that the Company would overlook Sam Pickens' block at Sandy Cove," continued Dan quietly. "Or, at least, overlook it until you had got on to it yourself. As a matter of fact they had men out looking for Pickens a fortnight before the Bill came up, but they never found him. That suited you exactly. Long before then you'd got hold of Pickens' yourself, and bought an option on his holding. That made you safe so far as Sandy Cove was concerned. Then you selected at Shark Bay. You had it all your own way. Whichever was chosen you'd stand to make a small fortune. For sooner or later you knew they'd have to give you your own price."

"I never made any secret of what I was doing,"

retorted Boyd. "It was open to anyone to do the same. As it is I hardly see what business of yours it is now."

"I made it my business from the first," said Dan. He eyed Boyd almost regretfully. "I told you long ago that I didn't want to do more than go about my own affairs, if you'd only let me. I didn't want to mix myself up in the affairs of you or any other man. You can believe it or not, as you like, but money, as money, never appealed to me. It would have been better for you to have listened to me then, but you would not. You suspected me of interfering with the mine property, though you never once had the courage or decency to tell me to my face. And yet for all your cleverness no bat could have been more blind to what was going on. Have you discovered yet that Kling and Nordsen have been trying for months to so discredit the Ajax that it would be closed down and the lease abandoned. That's true. They meant to re-lease in their own names."

Boyd's face darkened angrily. "I have no intention of discussing the matter, one way or the other, except to remind you that that, too, is no business of yours."

"You're right there," said Dan. "But I would have made it my business. If you'd met me fairly I could have put you on the track of what was happening. Remember that. It's been bluff stakes from beginning to end. Kling played his

game under your very nose, and you never knew yourself fooled. You went on playing your own game. And, like Kling, in the end you”

“ I won,” interrupted Boyd. The thought helped to restore his good humour. “ On the contrary—unlike Kling, I won.”

“ No,” said Dan evenly. “ You lost, Mr. Boyd.”

Boyd considered him a full minute. The young fellow’s voice held a confidence he did not altogether like. He said presently :

“ If you came here for the purpose of denying your own words, you seem to be doing it very successfully. What rubbish are you talking now! You have just admitted that I hold an option on Pickens’ land at Sandy Cove. In view of that it seems evident that I have won very decidedly.”

“ No,” said Dan again. “ You did not win; you lost.” He seemed suddenly no longer able to contain himself, and his voice rose exultantly. “ By God, yes, you lost. You paid for what never existed. I tell you now to your face that Sam Pickens never owned the land he sold you.”

“ That’s a lie,” said Boyd sharply. “ Pickens’ name is on the map. I saw it there.” He snapped his fingers derisively. “ Bah! what kind of a fool do you think me? What scheming are you up to now. Get out of my sight.”

“ Oh, I’ll go soon enough,” said Dan. He no longer cared to mask his bitter triumph. “ I have

told you the truth. Sam Pickens only paid one instalment on that block. He defaulted, and the land reverted to the Crown. And now let me tell you the rest. I went to Hobart, made sure that what I suspected was true, and re-selected Pickens' holding in my own name. You know where you stand at last. Good-day to you."

Boyd remained for a second as if paralysed. He tried to answer, but somehow words would not come. If this thing were true . . . if it were *true*. At first, desperately, he saw it as the height of illogical nonsense. But the swift-coming thoughts continued to shape themselves mockingly, hatefully. If it were true . . . He only knew that the foundations upon which he had been building for years were suddenly swept from beneath his feet. He saw himself tricked, ruined, the pitiful dupe of his own ambition. The roots of pride, of self, were remorselessly laid bare, and there remained naught but the dead and withered fibres of illusion.

"Wait," he called hoarsely.

Dan halted and swung around, his eyes going sombrely to the grey anguish of Boyd's face.

"Ah! so you know it's true," he said. "Yes, Mr. Boyd, you bluffed so hard that you ended in bluffing yourself with the rest. For once you know how it feels to be the under dog. You've got a taste of your own medicine, and I hope to God it chokes you."

He turned his back deliberately and strode to where his horse waited by the side of the deserted boiler-house. Without a single backward glance he mounted and took the desolate track leading to Copper Creek. At Nordsen's he stabled his horse and stamped coldly within. The long room was empty except for Charlie, the barman, who looked at him questioningly.

"She's a bit nippy," the man ventured, in friendly fashion.

Dan nodded. "I'm as near frozen as I ever expect to be. I swore I'd never have another drink in this place, but I reckon I've earned the right to renig if I want to. And you're in charge now, anyhow. Pour me out a whiskey straight."

The barman complied silently, and Dan seized the glass and drained it almost at a gulp. The raw spirit stung his throat, and he coughed and swore.

"What rot-gut it is. But it warms you. Where's Nordsen, Charlie?"

The man motioned his head. "Inside. Jim Howth was along last night and put the fear of God into him. He's got the wind up properly. He's been asking to see you if you called here. Shall I tell him?"

"No," said Dan abruptly. "I'll go in."

He pushed open the door of the inside room and entered. Nordsen was on the couch, his shoulders hunched, his untidy rubble of beard resting dejectedly on his chest. He looked up with blood-shot eyes.

“ Well? ” asked Dan, on the threshold.

“ They’re taking my license away—blast them, ” whined Nordsen. His blubber lips trembled.

Dan eyed him with disgust. “ Well, it serves you right. What else did you expect? Did you send for me to tell me that? ”

“ I thought maybe if I gave you a hint of what’s doing, you’d get Howth to let up on me a bit, ” Nordsen mumbled. He grinned servilely. “ How was I to know Sjoberg was as mad as all that. I’m glad they got him. I don’t hold with violence. Look here, I’m willing to tell what I know. ”

“ What do you know? ” asked Dan curtly.

“ Mike Kling, ” said Nordsen, with a cunning gleam. “ He’s planning a comeback. There’s something doing about Boyd and the Ajax, but I don’t know what it is. I thought maybe if I told you you’d put in a word for me. I got to make my living, and there’s Yetta . . . ”

“ You can leave her out of your talk, ” interrupted Dan, contemptuously. “ What a cur you are, Nordsen. You’ve never given Yetta a thought, except to suit your own ends. And now that you’re likely to get what’s coming to you you try to use her to help you crawl from under. Well, go on. If you know all this, why didn’t you tell Howth last night? ”

“ Because I never knew myself till a couple of hours back, ” Nordsen protested, in a cringing voice. “ I heard some talk. I’d have sent round

and told Howth, only he's away with Jeff Semple hunting Absolam. And Kling's on the loose to raise hell as he wants it."

"When?"

Nordsen shifted uneasily. "I ain't sure. To-night, I b'lieve. Yes, it's bound to be to-night. Kling's got you all in the gun, and Boyd more than any, because he wouldn't peak. He's up there in the hills with McGurr. He's clean crazy with hate. You won't forget it was me told you about it. I'm for law, I am. I . . ."

"Oh, you won't be overlooked," Dan assured him grimly. "I don't know that it's any of my business, anyhow, what Kling does to Boyd. But I shouldn't care to be in your shoes if ever Kling finds you've turned Judas on him."

He left Nordsen biting his fingers apprehensively, and returned to the bar where he leant moodily against the counter, regardless of Charlie's side-long curiosity. In spite of his defeat of Boyd he was restless and ill at ease. Somehow the triumph lacked substance. He knew nothing of that savage elation the long weeks of his waiting had promised. Always at the back of his mind was the appealing restraint of his love for Joan Norris; as if subtly, mysteriously, her influence must remain for all time guardian of his inmost thought.

He roused himself after a space to join Yetta at dinner in the warmth of the kitchen. The girl, her own face lined with anxiety, found him silent

and distrait, and presently went quietly from the room and left him alone. Dan finished his meal and drew his chair closer to the wide chimney where he sat a long time staring at the glowing logs. But his mind could not find the peace it craved. He tried the solace of tobacco, but the smoke seemed to have lost its flavour and he replaced his pipe irritably in his pocket. In spite of all he could do he could gain no respite from his thoughts. They pressed upon him relentlessly, torturing him to an inconceivable weariness of mind and spirit. When Charlie came in for his meal Dan nodded and left the kitchen for the stable, where he saddled up and rode slowly to the post office.

Joan looked up apprehensively as his shadow darkened the doorway.

“Dan!” she exclaimed. She looked at him mutely for a moment. “How tired you look. You are not ill?”

Dan shook his head. “No, I’m not ill. Joan, I felt that I couldn’t rest until I asked you something. No, you needn’t fear that I have forgotten my promise. It’s not that. It’s not myself at all.” He broke off, as if at a loss how to proceed. He burst out suddenly: “Oh, but for God’s sake, let us make an end of any pretence. At least you owe me the truth. Is Ralph Boyd anything to you?”

Her lips trembled, but she did not speak. The

hot blood poured into her cheeks, but as suddenly receded, to leave them pitifully white.

“I don’t ask this just to distress you,” continued Dan, with an effort. “It’s only that I want to . . . to make quite sure. . . . You know that in spite of what I am, or may be, I wish only for your happiness.”

“Don’t!” said Joan brokenly.

Dan took a deep breath. “Dear, won’t you trust me? Tell me. . . . Would it matter anything to you if harm came to Ralph Boyd?”

“Dan! what are you saying?” Joan’s hands went to her throat. “He is . . . is not in any danger?”

“Oh, we’re all in danger—from ourselves,” said Dan. He smiled stiffly with his lips, but his eyes were full of agony. “You have not told me yet in . . . so many . . . words. And I have to be quite sure. Is Boyd’s happiness your own?”

“Yes,” she whispered, almost inaudibly.

The young fellow gazed dully at the bowed head with its heavy coils of shining brown hair. For a long minute he remained motionless, his hand fumbling at his lips. Then he turned to the door, stumbling a little blindly as he crossed the tiny playground to climb once more into the saddle and turn his horse’s head towards the hills.

The sun was already sinking behind the timber when he again arrived within sight of the mine

buildings. He went first to the house on the rise, but Boyd was not there, and he rode on to the yards, where he left his horse and proceeded on foot to the office. That too was closed and locked. Everywhere was the silence of desertion. Fear gripped him that he had come too late and he broke into a run until he came at last to the pit of the abandoned workings, and there halted at a swift challenge. Boyd was standing in the long shadow of the dam wall. He held a revolver in his hand.

“What are you doing here?” came Boyd’s voice again.

Dan pushed back the hat from his brow with a movement half weary, half contemptuous. It was all so simple, this game of bluff stakes, even when the playing of it meant the bitter end of all that he himself held in life most dear and sacred. He smiled as he uttered the lie that was to sacrifice himself in place of this man whom he hated with every fibre of his passionate being.

“Joan Norris sent me. She wants to see you at once. It is very urgent. There was no other way of letting you know, and so . . . I came.”

Boyd started incredulously. “To see me! What new trick is this!”

“Yes, it’s true,” repeated Dan. He was thinking to himself numbly: “I would go to hell itself at her call . . . how can he hesitate.” He said aloud: “Man, would I be her messenger

otherwise. God Almighty, you do flatter my hatred."

Boyd went red and white by turns. "You can take it that I am unwilling to accept any kind of favour at your hands," he retorted sharply. "I've small reason to trust you. Where is Miss Norris?"

"At Copper Creek," said Dan. He laughed recklessly. "You'll find my horse in the yards. What are you waiting for?"

"And you?" asked Boyd. He looked slowly around him. "If what you say is true. . . . I meant to watch here all night. . . ."

"Oh, if you're scared to leave the place, I'll stand watch till you come back," Dan offered. He laughed once more, as if unable to escape the grim humour of what was happening. "I meant to, in any case."

Boyd looked at him searchingly. "I suppose I ought to thank you . . ." he said, after a moment's silence.

"You need not," said Dan bluntly. "It is not done for you."

Boyd turned away, his lips compressed angrily. In a few moments he was out of sight, and Dan remained to pace coldly up and down the length of the dam wall. The earth rampart was stained and slimed with the ooze of months. The long, heavy rains of winter had filled the giant dam to overflowing. In the gathering silence of the dusk the roar of the water escaping along the spillways

became intensified. The sound beat at his ears, filling them with a fury of discordant noise. He withdrew presently to an angle of the wall, and there stood gazing moodily at the wide expanse of fading sky beyond.

What thoughts came to him in those remaining moments of his vigil God alone knew. He saw the red sun flaming to rest behind the labyrinth of swaying timber, saw its dying glory spread athwart the grey clouds in a mantle of exquisite colouring, saw the first stars creep softly in the wake of the golden afterglow. And somehow as he watched the harsh lines seemed to erase themselves from his haggard face, his tired eyes became tender, a smile that was neither bitter nor sneering came on his lips. He threw up his head and spoke a few words in a queer hesitating voice.

“Oh, well, Jeff, old man . . .” he said, as if his friend stood at his side to hear and understand. “It’s all . . . in the day’s work . . . old Jeff.”

He choked a moment, and rested his head on his arm. But next second he was around again alertly. A new sound had pierced his consciousness above the rushing of the water. He stepped out into the trough of the workings, gazing up at the splotch of shadow above. At first he could see nothing. But all at once his darting eyes were arrested by what seemed to be a little running wisp of smoke against the skyline. At almost the

same moment the figure of a man appeared balancing itself on a pilehead. An instant only it remained in view. When he looked again it had vanished.

“Kling!” shouted Dan. A cough strangled him, and he beat his hands together in a furious impatience. “Mike Kling. Oh, you damned dog.”

Even as he called the man’s name challengingly there flashed upon him the full meaning of what he saw. By some swift intuitive process of the mind he seemed to link the past with the present, and he stood gazing up at the dam walls as if fascinated by the revelation of Kling’s stupendous wickedness. And in that bare second of understanding the end came. Of a sudden the length of the embankment quivered like some live thing. The mud walls seemed to lift and then open. The air split to a cataclysm of sound. Simultaneously a column of smoke and débris shot upwards and the vast area of imprisoned water descended raging into the trough of the valley.

On the far plains men heard that sound, and wondered. And Ralph Boyd, midway to Copper Creek, turned in his saddle and looked, and listened again, but heard no more. And so presently continued his way, all unwitting of the tragedy enacting there in the heart of the old hills.

Night came to a calling of little sounds, a whispering of strange voices through the darkness. A

chill wind swayed the timber, whose jet black silhouette crouched sullenly at the feet of the everlasting sky. The flood waters had passed on, leaving only a kind of shrouded desolation in which moved no living thing, but only the stirring of flotsam, and a huddling of black shadows vomitted from the deep throat of the valley. The lapping of little waves up and down the lip of the pit mouth cut the silence like the muffled echoes of a sustained and terrible sobbing.

ONE morning, a fortnight later, Boyd rode to the gate of Howth's garden and dismounted. At his step on the verandah the trooper opened the door and welcomed him gravely.

"Yes, I got your message. Well, Mr. Boyd, and so you're off to the city at last. You must be glad to get away. One way and another you've had a pretty trying time." He stood aside for Boyd to pass in. "Sit down a minute. You'll have to excuse the litter. As you know, I'm batching now. Mrs. Howth and Betty are still with Mrs. Grant, and will be until she goes south to her friends. It's little comfort any of us can bring her, but we must do our best—for Danny's sake."

"How is Mrs. Grant?" Boyd asked. Events had left their mark on his face, which was appreciably thinner, with dark lines under the eyes. His manner was subdued.

"I always used to wonder where Dan got his spirit from," said Howth, a little inconsequentially.

"I don't now though. Mrs. Grant is a wonderfully brave woman. She's got her back against the wall, but she's fighting hard. Dan was her life." He cleared his throat roughly. "Some things are hard to understand."

Boyd nodded silently.

"But of course she has no need to worry about the future," continued Howth slowly. "She'll have more than enough to meet her wants. Dan was a shrewd head. That slice of land he collared at Sandy Cove will fetch a thumping good price in a month or two. Don't you think so?"

"It is quite certain to." Boyd winced a little, but returned the trooper's look steadily enough. He felt the colour mounting in his cheeks. "I'm very glad to know it. Of course it's no news to you that I was interested in the land you speak of. It was that which really brought me to Copper Creek. Dan Grant was too clever for me."

"I heard something of the kind," said Howth. "No, not from Dan. But I heard. You don't bear him any ill-will for that."

"I do not," said Boyd emphatically. He added after a moment of silence, "It would be strange if I did, seeing that I should not be here now if it were not for Dan Grant. I suppose there is no doubt about it being Kling who mined the dam wall?"

"None," said Howth, his face darkening. "But we have small chance of proving it. Kling

knows that. The day I took him and Nat Absolam in the hills Kling practically laughed in my face. Aye, Mr. Boyd, but he'll laugh the other way round before I've finished. We may not get him for manslaughter, but there's an old charge waiting for him. He has to stand his trial for a bank robbery down Brainte Cliffs way two years ago. He got away with a bullet in his right hip from the manager's gun. That's what makes him limp. It was the limp that first set me to thinking; and then I met a man out from Lewistoun who put me on the right scent." The trooper lifted his hand with a little pathetic gesture. "But I wish to God I'd known about it before," he said huskily.

"Yes," said Boyd, in a constrained voice. He got to his feet. "Well, I must be going. I'm glad to have seen you, even though it is only to say good-bye. I owe you a great deal. I'm afraid I've given you small reason to like me, but you have been scrupulously fair. I admit it with a great deal of regret that I ever hinted otherwise. I think . . . I know that I have come to see things in an altogether different light. If I could reclaim the past I would do it. That is not possible; but, thank God, the future is still my own."

Hówth said nothing, but continued to look at him kindly.

"No one here—not even Mrs. Grant, who had most cause to think of me with bitterness—has

suggested that I am in any way concerned in Dan Grant's death," resumed Boyd, in a tone of wonder. "That is their kindness . . . that is their charity, Mr. Howth. But I cannot forget that he deliberately thrust himself between me and Kling's hatred. Knowing our relations you must wonder how it could be so. I may not tell you what I believe to be the reason of his sacrifice. Whatever was between us shall remain between us alone; but now no longer in bitterness . . . I hope, no longer in bitterness." He ceased abruptly and held out his hand. "Good-bye."

Howth returned his grip heartily. His eyes were strangely soft.

"And good luck," he said. "Dan was my friend. But I think he knows and understands even better than we do. I bear you nothing but good will, Mr. Boyd."

Boyd did not remount his horse. Instead, he took the reins on his arm and walked thoughtfully towards the school-house. An urchin, drinking with tiny cupped hands from a tank at the corner of the building, eyed him curiously as he approached, and Boyd beckoned and felt in his pocket for a coin.

"Laddie, run along and tell Miss Norris that Mr. Boyd would be glad if she would spare a moment to see him," he said. "Yes, that's for yourself, but you've got to earn it."

He waited patiently until Joan appeared. Her

face was pale, and her eyes held a strained expression. She inclined her head in answer to Boyd's greeting, but she did not speak.

"Miss Norris," began Boyd earnestly, "perhaps it would have been easier for us both if I had not come, but I felt I could not do otherwise. There has been too much misunderstanding as it is. I leave for Launceston this morning, and it is unlikely I shall ever return. I have, as you know, failed in what I set out to do. I wonder if you will understand the thought in my mind when I tell you that I am not sorry that I have failed. I know now what you must have meant when you once told me I lacked something. The discovery has cost me . . . who am not worth the charity and real kindness you have all shewn me . . . more of regret than you will ever know. That alone might be tolerable. But it has also cost a brave man his life." Boyd smiled wistfully. "I felt I had to tell you this. I make no excuse for what has been, because I know only too well that no just excuse is possible. My failure is about as complete as it could well be. But I shall face life henceforward with a new purpose and with less of self than the past has known."

"Yes," said Joan mechanically. Her heart swelled at the misery of his look. There was something pitiful in the manner of his admission, something tragic in this groping indictment of self. . . . She wanted to speak, to say how she

understood all that was in his mind ; but could not because of the lump rising in her throat.

“ It is part of my punishment, if you can call it so, that I am forced to take my life at the hands of the last man in the world to whom I would be so beholden,” continued Boyd, with an effort. “ That sounds caddish and supremely selfish, but I know that you do not understand it as so. Even had Dan Grant lived we could never have been less than enemies. I do not think there is need to tell you why, even in part. But I am sure he realised, as I do, that it was not a matter in which either of us had any choice. And I can honestly say that I regret the need for his passing as much as I do the manner of it. He was in every way a better man than I. It is my shame that I confess it too late.”

“ I am sure Dan knows how we shall remember him,” Joan managed to say. Her lips quivered, and the distress in her eyes deepened.

Boyd came a step nearer. “ And so now—good-bye,” he said, a little unsteadily. “ Yet if you do not absolutely forbid me, one day I intend to seek you again. Yes, that is my hope—the one ray of comfort I take with me. I mean no disrespect towards the dead, but . . . because I love you. My happiness lies in your keeping—yours alone.”

He lifted her cold hand to his lips, raised his

hat and left her. When she could clear the mist of tears from her eyes he was gone.

With Boyd's departure went most of the interest still remaining to the Ajax Mine. As the days lengthened and the plains and Tiers grew comely at the touch of spring, Copper Creek turned its attention to the growing activities of the Development Syndicate. On the level lands about Sandy Cove was a township in the making. Buildings came into existence as if by magic, ditches were dug, roads were formed, whole lines of fencing appeared, as it were, overnight. The hitherto quiet coastlands re-echoed to the operations of a small army of workers.

Jeff Semple, perhaps alone in this, viewed matters with a touch of misgiving. The old order was changing daily, and he was not altogether sure that he liked it. Dan's death, and the incidents surrounding it, had hit him pretty hard. He went about his work much the same as usual, excepting that he appeared less active than his wont, and a little greyer at the temples. The loss of those friends who stood closest to his affections no doubt had something to do with his air of abstraction. Mrs. Grant and Joan had returned to the city some weeks back. Yetta Nordsen, on the closing of her uncle's hotel, had resolutely refused to accompany him, and remained at Howths until such time as she saw the future clearly. Yet now they too would soon be gone. The trooper's presentiment

proved to have been justified. As he had forecasted to Bill Utting, he received notice of transfer to a district on the East Coast, and was compelled almost immediately to set about the preparations for his departure. It was understood that Yetta would accompany the Howths.

On an evening two days before Jim Howth was to say farewell to Copper Creek, Jeff returned from a trip to the hills to find Betty seated in her quaint fashion on his door-step. At sight of her the breaker's tired face lit tenderly. He strode up and caught the child in his arms.

"Been waiting long, Partner?" he asked, holding her little body tightly. "Why . . . why . . . Betty, dear."

"I don't want to go," she told him, when her sobbing had quietened. "Oh, Jeff, I don't want to go."

"Now—now," Jeff comforted. He patted the tiny, forlorn figure helplessly. "You mustn't grieve so much. You know we must all learn to be brave. That's just part of life's lesson, dear. To be brave and good, even if sometimes we're quite sure our hearts are breaking." He smiled at her in the twilight. "See . . . you're better already. And it's not so bad as you think. I'm coming to see you lots and lots of times. And I'll bring a bagfull of new stories to tell you. You see if I don't."

“You will come, won’t you, Jeff?” insisted Betty.

“As true as true,” said the breaker. He set her gently on her feet. “Just a moment till I fix things up. I had a snack to eat just before I came away for home, so I reckon my tea can wait. We’ll sit out here, like we used to before the winter came. It’s fine and warm to-night.”

Jeff dragged his rickety armchair into the open and propped it against the wall.

“Just like old times, eh, Partner?” he said, with affected cheerfulness. “We won’t light the lamp . . . not just yet, anyhow. It’s ever so much nicer in the starlight. Are you settled nicely? How’s everybody at home?”

“They’re all sad too,” Betty told him, her voice still a little tremulous. “And Daddy said damn twice this afternoon when Yetta told him the bullock-dray had come for our things. And I said it too. Only I whispered it, Jeff, so God wouldn’t hear me.”

“Betty!” said Jeff reprovingly, but choked a little over the name. He began to talk of his day’s work. And presently launched into a story. But his heart was not in it, and the narration met with small success. Somehow his thoughts would not come.

“I loved it, all the same,” said Betty, in answer to his excuses. “But I think I still like the one about the poor man and the princess the best. It’s

such a funny one, Jeff, because it hasn't got any ending. Yetta thinks so too."

"What! What's that?" exclaimed the breaker, in a startled voice. The hand reaching towards his pipe was arrested midway, and the match spluttered and went out. "Did you . . . Betty, did you tell that . . . that story to Yetta?"

He felt the child's eyes searching his face anxiously. Her voice came timidly. "Yes, Jeff. It's such a lovely story, and I do so want to hear how it ended. I thought perhaps Yetta would know. But she didn't."

"What did she say?" asked Jeff presently, in a queer, stifled voice.

Betty sighed her relief. "I'm so glad you're not cross. And you oughtn't to be. Because Yetta said it was a lovely story too. And she smiled and kissed me. And her eyes were so shiney and wet, but she said that was because she was tired. And so then I came here to wait for you."

Jeff stood up and returned Betty carefully to the chair, where she settled contentedly. For a moment he hesitated, looking down at her. Then he began to pace to and fro, his pipe forgotten, his hands clenching nervously at his sides. He halted at a little murmur from the depths of the chair.

"What is it, little Partner?"

"I think I hear something," Betty told him, sleepily.

“No-o; do you!” said Jeff, in an attitude of listening. He broke off sharply, and drew a deep, convulsive breath. From somewhere out of the scented shadows around them had come a faint stirring, the light echo of a foot-fall. And as he waited the soft air quivered to the sound of his own name.

“Jeff. Jeff Semple.”

The breaker remained as if rooted to earth, his broad chest heaving, the wind rumpling the hair of his bared head. Many times had he heard that quiet voice calling his name—in fear, in bitter grief, in passionate thankfulness; but never as now, never before to thrill his inmost being to such indescribable exaltation. He stood entranced. And again sounded that cry—sweetly, elusively, fraught with infinite tenderness.

“Jeff. Where are you, Jeff?”

A hoarse cry broke from the breaker’s lips. Over the rim of the age-old hills the jewelled night sky lifted itself serenely, mysteriously; a shadowed crystal mellowing to the saffron radiance of the rising moon. A warm wind, odorous of summer, ran singing over the grass. The tiny voices of the darkness seemed to gather themselves into a sweet, delicious symphony.

And suddenly Yetta was standing before him, her hands at her bosom, her glorious hair a-gleam in the starlight. She was half laughing, half sobbing.

“ Jeff. Oh, blind Jeff. Dear, timid, loyal Jeff. Must I shame myself so. Ah, can you still doubt.”

The breaker's big body shook. His hands went out hesitatingly, reverently, to touch her shoulders, her fragrant hair, her face . . .

“ Danny! ” he stammered.

The girl's answering laugh was a caress. Her arms went about his neck, and she sighed as he crushed her almost fiercely to him.

“ Always you . . . always . . . always. As if there could ever have been anyone else.”

And so they stood. And all around them the swelling darkness, and the tender gleaming of the stars, and the air pulsing with sweet sound.

Only the child sitting forgotten in the old chair, pouted a little as she turned more comfortably in the warm, cosy depths. But presently she smiled, and nodded her head wisely.

“ Why, I do believe the Princess was only Yetta, after all,” she confided sleepily, to the little radiant beings who came tripping forward to lead her across the borders into dream-land.

THE END

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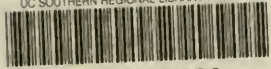
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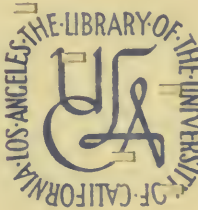
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