The Rider of Waroona

by George Firth Scott, 1862-1935

Published: 1912
John Long Ltd, London

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Chapter I

Crotchety Dudgeon.

In an old, rackety, single-horse buggy, a vehicle which, to judge by the antiquity of its build and appearance and the rattle of its loose worn bolts, might have done duty since the days of the first pioneers, Dudgeon drove from his homestead to the bank.

He was a man who never discarded any article of use or clothing until it was hopelessly beyond repair. With a huge fortune stowed away in gilt-edged securities and metropolitan house property, he grudged even a coat of paint for the vehicle he had driven for nearly forty years. The local wheelwright had long since declined to attempt to repair it, so the old man fell back on fencing-wire and his own skill whenever the final collapse seemed imminent.

There was a legend circulating among the older residents of the district as to the reason for his peculiarities. To the younger generation it was merely an out-of-date story, for young Australia has scant heed for everything which does not come within his own personal range of experience or knowledge. But the legend, as extant, gave some significance to the seemingly unreasonable actions of the eccentric old man.

In the early days, when railways were not and the land was open and free for the bold young bloods to conquer, Dudgeon had come out from the coastal cities of the south. He had health and strength, and a heart which knew not fear; but whatever of wealth he had had was left in the hands of gambling sharks in the cities whence he came. He arrived at the township on foot, a rare occurrence in

those days when no man journeyed half a mile except in the saddle. But the fact that he had walked "looking for work," as he said, drew so much attention to him that offers were made from all sides to hire his services. He accepted the best, and went to Waroona Downs with the then owner, one Henry Lambton, who, with his wife and daughter, resided at the house beyond the range.

Another was there also, a young man about Dudgeon's age, an Irishman named O'Guire, a dashing, reckless fellow who made up in sharpness of wit and trickery what he lacked in moral stability and scruples. Indirectly, he was the pivot on which the course of Dudgeon's life turned from the normal.

The direct cause was Kitty Lambton.

In a community where men predominate, every woman ranks as a belle; but throughout Waroona and the districts for hundreds of miles round, Kitty was queen, acknowledged even by her sister rivals. Before her charms young Dudgeon fell prostrate in adoration, and she, jealous of her sway over all with whom she came in contact, trifled and philandered with him until neither earth nor heaven held anything more adorable for him than herself. He was her slave, devoting himself to her with such abandon that her vanity was gratified to the extent of influencing her, when others began to remark upon the manly attractions of her admirer, to allow him the privilege of believing that she would marry him.

But she was only trifling with him, callously and not too gently, for the edification of herself and her real lover, O'Guire. The truth leaked out when one day O'Guire vanished from the district and with him vanished Kitty.

Thereafter Dudgeon was a changed man. Filled with an insensate belief that Lambton and his wife were mainly, if not entirely, responsible for an ill which brought them almost as much suffering as it brought him, he went from the place, hugging schemes of deep vengeance to his breast. It was in the days of the early gold finds, and Fortune showered on Dudgeon her compensation for the injury of Love. All that came to him he took and treasured, until he had enough for his purpose. Then he returned to Waroona, and set about exacting the full measure of his revenge upon the Lambtons.

He drove them from Waroona Downs, following them from the district when they went, following them until he found them living with Kitty and her husband in one of the southern cities, struggling fiercely for a bare existence. The slings and arrows of misfortune had not brought out the better side of O'Guire's nature and, at the time Dudgeon pounced down upon them, he had only just emerged from prison. Detail was lacking in the current legend as to what immediately happened thereafter, for when Dudgeon came back to Waroona Downs he was silent on the subject, and only rumours filtered through of Lambton and his wife going down, each heart-broken, to a pauper's grave, while O'Guire and his wife barely eluded the final act of vengeance by escaping over sea.

Under Dudgeon's ownership Waroona Downs flourished, and later he acquired the largest station in the district. The success he enjoyed at Waroona Downs followed him. His ownership of Taloona alone made him the richest man in the community.

But no amount of money could bring back to him the nature which had been his before the bitterness of betrayal changed him to a misanthropical cynic. His hatred of women was not appeased by the revenge he had on the Lambtons and

O'Guires. He would not employ a woman; he would not employ a man who was married; he would not tolerate the presence of a woman on any of his properties. However valuable a man might be to him as an employee, instant dismissal was inevitable directly that man announced his intention of marrying.

In one instance the effect of this rule recoiled almost entirely on his own head, but that did not deter Dudgeon from adhering to it.

He employed a man, first as overseer, then as manager, and finally as confidential factotum. Unknown to him, Dudgeon set numberless traps and pitfalls to test his reliability, and when, on every occasion, the man came through the tests unscathed, he received so much consideration from the taciturn old misanthrope, that he was currently regarded in the light of the heir to the Dudgeon millions.

Perhaps something of the current belief crept into his own mind, for there came a time when he cast his eyes upon the sister of a neighbour and, braving the risk of Dudgeon's anger, sought her hand in marriage. Unfortunately for him she accepted him, and the news, travelling apace, reached the ears of Dudgeon before the happy lover had a chance to impart it personally. The old man rode direct to the station.

"I'll have no women folk on my property," he blurted out as soon as he was face to face with his factotum. "Nor any man who has dealings with them. Clear out."

It was vain to argue. All appeals to years of bygone service, all reference to business transactions then pending which would be jeopardised by the removal of the man who had the negotiations in hand, were curtly brushed aside. Dudgeon had spoken, and no power on earth would change him from his purpose. The would-be Benedick had chosen, and by that choice he had to abide.

From that arose a quarrel with the bank, for the sudden dismissal led to an important transaction failing for the want of a simple act. The bank officials, knowing the man with whom they were dealing waited for the instructions which never came. Had they acted without them he would probably have repudiated their action, but as they did not act, he blamed them for his loss, accused them of dishonesty and removed his account, vowing never to have dealings with them again if he could avoid it, and always putting them to the greatest inconvenience when he was compelled to deal with or through them.

Now, by an irony of fate, he was forced to have dealings with them again, dealings which he resented for more reasons than his antagonism to the institution, and dealings, moreover, which he was prepared to leave no stone unturned to bring to naught.

He had placed Waroona Downs in the hands of Gale, the local auctioneer, for sale. The one condition he had imposed was that the purchaser should be a resident of the district, a condition he had considered ample to prevent the property passing into the possession of one of the opposite—and hated—sex. Yet that condition had failed. A purchaser had been found, a purchaser for whom the bank was acting, and a purchaser who, while being a resident in the district, was also a woman.

Dudgeon—"Crotchety Dudgeon" as he was termed by his neighbours, who, despite his wealth, usually regarded him as being of no account in the general scheme of Nature—had done his best to repudiate the bargain; had blustered and

fumed, threatening actions and penalties against all and sundry, but in vain. The bank officials were polite, listening to all he had to say in silence and only speaking in cold, precise, formal phrases to reiterate the intention of the purchaser to hold to her bargain, and the readiness of the bank to complete, on her behalf, the transaction.

He refused to meet or see her, but he could not help hearing of her, and what he heard only served to stimulate his resentment, for her name, Nora Burke, recalled memories of his Irish rival O'Guire, while the bitterness of his surrender to the charms of Kitty Lambton was revived when he understood that Mrs. Burke also belonged to the fascinating type of woman.

She had, he learned, the coal-black hair of the Western Irish, and grey-blue eyes which flickered and flashed behind thick dark lashes. What her other features were he did not hear, for her wealth of hair and the charm of her eyes carried all before them. But, as a matter of fact, no other feature was conspicuously beautiful, and it was difficult to realise where the charm of her face rested until the full force of the dark-lashed eyes was recognised. Within them lay the secret of the power she wielded.

Although not above the average height, a graceful and well-proportioned figure gave the impression of a greater stature. One of the most accomplished horsewomen who ever sat a side-saddle, her appearance on horseback would alone have sufficed, in a community like Waroona, to have won for her the admiration and homage of the public. But there were yet other reasons for the popularity she acquired within an hour of her arrival.

Forty miles from a railway, the township was the centre of a district divided into a series of sheep stations. When the season came for shearing the wool and despatching it to the markets in the cities on the coast hundreds of miles away, the population was fairly respectable in point of numbers, though with the riff-raff which formed the army of camp followers moving in the track of the shearers and teamsters, respectability was not otherwise manifest. But at other periods of the year, there were few men and fewer women scattered over the area marked on the map as Waroona, and including as many square miles as some English counties possess acres. Wherefore the arrival of any new-comer was an event; but when that new-comer was a woman, and one, moreover, of the many personal charms and accomplishments of Mrs. Burke, it was inevitable that her advent should form the subject of something more than passing interest.

Her frank manner of speech also helped her, for there is nothing more objectionable to the average Colonial than the person who is reserved on the subject of his or her private and personal concerns.

There was no such reserve with Mrs. Burke. She had not been twenty-four hours in Waroona before it was known that she was a young widow left with a stepson to bring up and educate on the rents from an impoverished Irish estate. Year by year it became more and more difficult, she said, to collect those rents from tenants to whom politics were more attractive than commercial obligations. Therefore, when a chance occurred for her to sell the estate, she did not hesitate to entertain it. But, in order that her stepson might still derive as much benefit as possible from the wreck of his ancestors' wealth, she determined, before selling, to seek in Australia a new heritage for the last of the Burkes.

Waroona Downs was suggested to her as the very place to suit her, and Gale at once offered it to her. The negotiations were rapidly completed, and the community was collectively rejoicing at the good fortune of having so desirable an acquisition as the handsome Irishwoman added to it when a miniature thunderbolt fell in the form of the emphatic refusal of the owner to sell the property to a woman.

Following the advice of her many friends and admirers, Mrs. Burke took up her residence at the place so that she might claim the nine points of the law possession is said to give, while she handed to the bank the deeds of her Irish property, and against them the bank agreed to complete the purchase.

Popular opinion was entirely with the young widow, and popular opinion was strong enough to force Dudgeon back to the last resource. This was a demand that the purchase price of the station should be paid in gold.

The price was twenty-five thousand pounds and, as Dudgeon well knew, there was not such a quantity of coin to be found in the district, where it was the almost invariable practice to pay everything by cheque or order. He had preferred his demand formally; had waited for a reply that the bank was prepared to meet it and, as no such reply had reached him, was about to declare the matter at an end.

He drew up at the bank. Eustace, the manager, was speaking to his assistant as the old man entered.

"I've come for the money," he said abruptly, and stood by the counter, holding out his gnarled, bony hands.

"You mean the purchase money for Waroona Downs, Mr. Dudgeon?" Eustace replied suavely. "You are rather early, are you not?"

"I gave you notice three days ago. You'll pay over or the deal's off. Which is it?"

Harding, the assistant, passed a document to Eustace.

"These are the terms of the sale, Mr. Dudgeon," Eustace said in the same smooth tone. "The completion of the purchase is to be performed one month from the date on which the agreement to buy was made. Mrs. Burke agreed on the 20th of last month. To-day is the 17th. She has therefore three days before you can make your final demand."

Dudgeon grabbed the document and read it through. The wording was as Eustace had said. He had played his card too soon.

"I'll beat you yet," he cried as he flung the paper across the counter. "No matter what it costs, I'll never have a woman owning one of my properties. You're a lot of scheming scoundrels, but I'll beat you yet."

He bounced out and flogged his horse to a gallop as he drove away.

"If the head office had sent off the gold at once when I wired, it would have been here by now," Eustace said to his assistant.

"Then everyone would have known it was here, and there is no saying what might have happened," Harding jestingly answered. "Anyway, it is due to-night."

Later, when the bank had closed for the day, a light waggon drew up at the door with a couple of men in it.

"We've some books and boxes of stationery for you from the Wyalla branch," one of the men called out as Eustace opened the door and looked out.

A bushman slouching past with his roll of blankets slung across his back, glanced round at the waggon and continued his way to the hotel. Eustace and Harding both helped to carry the bundles and boxes into the bank. When they were all inside Eustace turned to the men.

"You'll have some dinner with us before you go back?" he asked.

"Can't, old chap. Head office orders. Don't know what sort of people the general manager thinks you've got in this part, but the strictest secrecy in everything were our instructions, so Ted and I are teamsters and nothing but teamsters till we get back to our own branch. So long, old chap."

"It does seem a lot of rot," Harding remarked when the waggon was away again.

"You haven't been here long enough to know old Dudgeon, Harding. Let us get the gold into the safe—we'll put it in the reserve recess. I only hope the old man comes in again to-morrow morning, so that we can pay it over and get clear of it and his business."

But the next day passed without any sign of Dudgeon, and after a last look round to see that all was right Eustace and Harding bade one another good night with the hope that on the morrow Dudgeon would come for his gold, though there was still another day before he could legally demand it.

Chapter II

The Riddle.

At five minutes to ten the following morning Eustace awakened to find the sunlight streaming into his room, the bank in absolute silence, and his head so light and dizzy he could scarcely stand when he sprang out of bed.

He glanced at the alarm clock on the mantelpiece. The alarm was set for six, the hour at which Eustace almost invariably awakened. He had no recollection of hearing it ring that morning, yet only a touch was required to show that it had gone off at the proper time.

His wife still lay in deepest slumber.

"Jess! Jess!" he cried, as he shook her. "Wake up, Jess! It's nearly ten o'clock. Wake up! Wake up!"

She stirred heavily, uneasily, drowsily.

"Wake up! Wake up!" he repeated. "Look what time it is."

She sat up with a gasp, pressing her hands to her head.

"Oh, what is it?" she exclaimed. "My head! How it throbs!"

"It's nearly ten o'clock," Eustace cried. "I don't hear anyone moving. The bank must be open in five minutes."

He hurried across the landing to his assistant's room and unceremoniously opened the door.

His assistant was in bed in a heavy sleep.

"Harding! Fred! Wake up, man! Do you know what time it is?" he said, as he grabbed the sleeper's arm and shook him so vigorously that he pulled him half out of bed.

Sleepily Harding's eyelids lifted to reveal glazed and lack-lustre eyes.

"What's up?" he mumbled. "What's the matter now?"

"Look at the time," Eustace cried excitedly.

Harding pushed his hand under his pillow, raised himself on his arm and flung the pillow over.

"Where's my watch?" he exclaimed. "Where has it gone?"

"Don't you hear me say it is nearly ten o'clock? What on earth do you mean by sleeping to this hour when the bank ought to be open?"

Harding blinked at his pyjama-clad manager.

"You don't seem to have been up so very long," he grumbled. "But where's my jolly watch gone? I'll swear I put it under my pillow last night. Are you having a joke? Have you hidden it?"

"I have not touched your watch. I tell you it's ten o'clock and the bank——"

"Then someone has stolen it," Harding exclaimed as he sat up.

The pupils of Eustace's eyes contracted to pinpoints. With an inarticulate cry he dashed from the room and rushed to the stairs. He heard his wife call from the servant's room but paid no heed to the words.

Down the stairs he plunged, springing across the passage to the door leading from the residential portion of the building to the banking chamber.

The door was locked.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed. "I was afraid it had been broken into."

He ran upstairs again, meeting his wife at the top.

"I can't wake that girl, Charlie. What shall I do?" she said.

"Shy cold water over her," he answered abruptly as he went on to his room, where he seized his clothes and fumbled nervously for his keys.

They were in the pocket where he always kept them.

The discovery reassured him. Whatever else had happened, the bank was safe, for without the keys no one would be able to get at the cash. It was curious how everyone in the house had overslept themselves, but that was a detail to be unravelled subsequently. For the moment he must race into his clothes and be downstairs in time to have the bank's doors open to the public by ten.

He was nearly dressed when Mrs. Eustace returned to the room.

"Charlie, whatever has happened? Bessie can hardly stand. She's exactly as if she had been drinking."

"Oh, don't bother me about Bessie," he said petulantly. "It's ten o'clock, and the bank is not open."

He pushed past her and sped down the stairs. Despite his efforts to recover his confidence, his hand still trembled as he unlocked the door leading to the bank and entered the office.

One quick glance round set his mind at ease. The place was in the same state of neatness and order as when he and Harding locked up the night before.

He crossed to the street door, unlocked and unbolted it and pulled it open. As he did so, Harding came in through the private entrance.

"I say, Eustace, hang it, what have you done with that watch?" he asked. "It's not in my room. Where have you put it?"

"I have not seen your watch. Make haste and get the safes open and the books out. Look at the time," Eustace replied sharply.

The keys of the big safe, or strong-room, as they termed it, were kept in a smaller one, to which there were two keys, Eustace and Harding each holding one. The last vestige of fear passed from Eustace's mind as the keys of the strong-room were found lying in their usual place. He sighed with relief as Harding picked them up, unlocked the heavy door and, swinging the handles, threw the strong-room open.

The tray on which the cash had been placed after balancing the previous evening was in a small upper compartment resting on the books. It was the usual practice for Harding to remove it and hand it over to Eustace, who checked the contents while the books and documents necessary for the day's work were being arranged.

But Eustace was too impatient to wait for the ordinary methods. As Harding pushed back the safe doors and bent down to remove the keys, he reached over him and caught hold of the tray.

Instead of being heavy, as it should have been with all the gold, silver and copper coins, it came away in his hands light—and empty!

His face went livid. He reeled back against the counter, letting the tray fall to the floor.

"Gone!" he cried. "The money's gone!"

Harding started up and stood staring, first at Eustace, then at the tray lying on the floor.

"Gone?" he echoed. "Gone? How can it have gone?"

"It has—the tray is empty," Eustace gasped in reply.

Harding looked from the tray to the open safe. His glance rested on the drawer where the bank-notes were kept. He took hold of the handle and pulled the drawer out.

It was empty.

In an inner recess, guarded by second-locked doors, the gold reserve was kept. The night before the bags of gold had filled it to the doors.

Harding tried the handles. They held. The locks had not been forced.

"Have you the keys of the reserve?" he asked.

With shaking hands Eustace produced them and stood watching, as the doors were unlocked and swung open.

The recess was as empty as the cash tray.

Dumbfounded, Harding turned to Eustace who, with his face ashen, stared blankly at the empty recess. Then a wild light leapt in his eyes and he seized the handle of a drawer in the counter where a loaded revolver was kept lest at any moment an attempt was made to rob the bank during office hours.

Harding sprang to his side and gripped his arm.

"Not that," he cried hoarsely. "Hang it, man, pull yourself together. Think of your wife!"

"It's ruin—ruin for me. Better finish it," Eustace muttered.

Holding him back with one hand, Harding pulled the drawer open with the other to take the revolver away. But the drawer was also empty.

"That has gone as well," he cried, letting go his hold of Eustace as he stooped to peer into the drawer.

Eustace sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, this is terrible—terrible," he moaned. "Terrible, terrible."

The door leading to the house was flung open and Mrs. Eustace faced them.

"Charlie!" she exclaimed. "My rings and jewellery have vanished. The cases are all empty. I am certain—why, what is the matter?" she broke off to ask as she caught sight of her husband.

She glanced from him to Harding.

"What has happened?" she said wonderingly, as she advanced further into the office.

Opposite the open doors of the strong-room she saw the empty cash tray lying on the floor, the note drawer pulled out, the vacant space of the reserve recess.

"Charlie!"

Her voice went to a shriek as the truth flashed upon her.

She rushed past Harding and flung herself on her knees beside her husband, her arms around him, her face upturned to his.

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie! Whatever are we to do?" she cried.

"Shall I go over to the police-station? We had better report it at once," Harding said quietly.

Eustace raised his wife from her kneeling position.

"You must not come in here now, Jess," he said. "Go and learn, as nearly as you can, what has been taken from the house. Harding and I must send word to the head office."

He led her from the room and closed the door after her.

"We shall have to use the code, I suppose," Harding said, as he returned. "If you will read out the words, I will write them."

Eustace sank into his chair again and sat staring blankly in front of him.

"Come, come, old chap," Harding exclaimed, as he laid his hand on his manager's shoulder. "Don't give way. There's a mystery in all this. We shall want all our wits to clear it up as it is; don't make it worse."

Eustace raised his head.

"But who can have done it, Harding? Who can have done it? Every place locked up and yet the money has gone! No one knew all that gold was here."

"You and I knew it."

"My God! You don't mean——" Eustace cried as he sprang out of his chair. "You don't——"

"Steady, old man, steady. Keep your head. There's nothing to be gained by getting excited. You and I knew it was here and someone at the head office knew, as well as the fellows at Wyalla. Some word may have leaked out while it was on the road. There's no saying off-hand; what we've got to do is to keep cool and go slow if we're to clear ourselves. I'm as much concerned in this matter as you are."

Eustace shook his head.

"No, Harding. I'm manager, and all the responsibility is on my shoulders. Whatever comes to light, I'm ruined. The bank will fire me out directly they hear of it—and this was my first branch too."

"I would not look at it like that," Harding replied. "No game is lost till it's won. I'll send Brennan over as I pass the station. He may be able to throw some light on it. Come. Let us draft the report for the head office."

But Eustace was too unnerved to render any assistance, and it was Harding who, single-handed, drafted and coded a brief message reporting what had been discovered. Not until this message was handed to him did Eustace move.

"That's my death warrant," he said gloomily as he signed it.

Harding took the message and left the office. The township boasted only one street, the bank being at one end, the post office at the other. Midway between the two was the police-station, where the one constable responsible for the maintenance of law and order within the district resided.

"Get over to the bank, will you, Brennan?" Harding said as he entered the station. "You'll have your hands full this time. There's been a robbery during the night, and all the cash cleared out."

"What's that, Mr. Harding? The bank robbed? You don't mean it!"

"Go and ask Eustace; he'll give you all the details. It's floored him. Hurry over, there's a good chap. I'm on my way to the post office to wire to the head office; I can't stay now."

Ten minutes later the news was known from one end of the township to the other, and was travelling in every direction through the bush to the outlying stations and selections.

The farther it travelled the more astounding it became, and yet the form in which Brennan telegraphed it to his Inspector showed it to be sufficiently startling and mysterious.

When the reports had been wired away, Eustace recalled an incident he had forgotten in the excitement of the initial discovery.

During the evening, soon after sunset, a stranger called at the bank. He came to the private entrance where he was seen by Eustace, who described him as a well-built man of medium height, with sandy hair and beard and, by appearance, an ordinary bushman. He said he had come in from a distant station with a cheque he wanted to cash, but as the bank was closed for the day, Eustace told him he would have to come again in the morning. He had gone, mounting his horse and riding away in the direction of the hotel where stockmen usually congregated.

Brennan went to the hotel in search of him, but no one knew anything about him there, nor had anyone else seen him either in or out of the township.

"But he must have been seen," Eustace exclaimed impatiently, when Brennan returned to the bank with the news. "He must have been seen. He could not have vanished."

"Did anyone else see him besides you when he called?" Brennan asked.

"No, I was passing the front door at the moment he came. No one else saw him, so far as I know. But he must have been seen in the township. He must have gone to the hotel."

They were standing in the bank office, Brennan on one side of the counter, Harding and Eustace on the other.

"You didn't see him?" Brennan asked, looking at Harding.

"No, I didn't see him," Harding answered.

"But you heard me speak to someone—I came into the dining-room and told you it was a man who wanted a cheque cashed," Eustace exclaimed.

"That's right," Harding said quietly, "I was going to say so when you interrupted me."

There was a hum of voices outside and half a dozen men came into the office—Allnut, the largest storekeeper in the town; Soden, the hotelkeeper; Gale, the local auctioneer; Johnson, the postmaster, and two men who were strangers.

"Here, Soden," Eustace cried, as soon as he caught sight of the hotelkeeper. "Do you mean to say that the man I told Brennan about never came to your house last night?"

Soden, a slow-witted, heavy-built man, shook his head.

"Not a sign of him, Mr. Eustace," he answered. "But these two men came in just now. They've got something to say," he added, turning to Brennan.

One of the two men stepped forward.

"We didn't think much of it in a general way," he said, "leastways not until we heard at the pub about the robbery. You see, me and my mate camped last night about five miles out on the road. As near as we can say, it was somewhere about midnight when Bill—my mate," he added as he waved his hand towards his companion, "looked out of the tent. 'Hullo, Jim,' he says, 'what's this? Here, come and look, quick.' You see, from where our camp was we could get a view half a mile down the road. Well, when I looked out I saw, coming along the road at racing speed, a pair-horse buggy with two men in it. The chap who was driving had the horses at full gallop as they passed the camp, but it wasn't him so much that I noticed as the horses. You see, they were both white—white as milk. The moon was up and they showed real pretty."

"White?" Brennan exclaimed.

"White as milk," the man replied. "That's what made Bill call out. We didn't know there was a white horse in the whole of Waroona, let alone two of them."

"Was that on the main road?" Brennan asked.

"On the main road—just about five miles out."

"I know every horse in the district, and there's not a white one among them," Gale said.

"These were white—white as milk," the man repeated. "It was what made us look."

"If the horses were galloping the tracks would still show in the road," Gale said to Brennan. "Shall I ride out and have a look?"

"If you've got a buggy, me and my mate will come too and show them to you," Jim exclaimed resentfully.

"That would be better," Brennan said.

"Come along then," Gale exclaimed, and left the bank with the two men.

As soon as they were gone Brennan turned to Johnson.

"Two white horses can't go far in this district without being noticed. Will you wire round to the different telegraph offices and ask if anything of the kind has been seen or heard of?"

"They cannot have gone more than a hundred miles since midnight, can they?" Johnson asked.

"A hundred? No, not fifty," Allnut exclaimed.

"Well, we'll say a hundred. I'll wire to every telegraph office within a hundred miles. I'll send or bring you word within half an hour."

"Supposing there is any truth in the yarn," Soden remarked slowly, "how is it going to help? I brought the men along, not because I believed their yarn, but because it seemed to me they might know more about the robbery than they would care to have known."

"There's no harm in sending off those telegrams, anyway. I'll get away and put them through," Johnson said as he went to the door.

He stood for a moment looking out along the road.

"I fancy that's Mrs. Burke coming," he called back over his shoulder to Eustace.

Soden, Allnut, and Brennan, at the mention of the name, moved towards the door, and Harding came round the counter to join them.

"You had better see her, Harding," Eustace said under his breath. "Tell her everything will be all right so far as she is concerned. We cannot say more until we hear from head office."

The other three men were already out on the footpath in front of the bank entrance. Eustace slipped into the little ante-room that served as the manager's private office, as the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside the bank reached him.

Chapter III

Disappeared.

"Oh, never mind," Mrs. Burke exclaimed as Brennan went to the horse's head and took hold of the reins. "Sure I'm only stopping for a moment—I won't get out. It's just to see Mr. Eustace I've come."

The men on the footpath looked at one another and then at her.

In the doorway Harding stood hesitating whether to go out or to wait until Mrs. Burke alighted from the buggy.

"You've heard the news, haven't you?" Allnut asked as he stepped to her side. "Ill news travels apace, they say. Hasn't word got out as far as the Downs?"

Mrs. Burke turned the full battery of her dark-fringed eyes on the storekeeper.

"News? What news?" she exclaimed. "I've only just come in. Has anything happened?"

She glanced at Harding where he stood in the doorway.

"To Mr. Eustace? Nothing has happened to Mr. Eustace, has there?" she added, as she leaned towards Allnut.

"Well, I don't know," he replied in an uncertain voice. "It affects him more or less, I suppose, seeing he is the manager. The bank has been robbed, you know."

It was well Brennan was at the horse's head, for the shriek with which Mrs. Burke greeted the information was heard at the post office the other end of the

town and made the horse plunge and rear. Although Brennan managed to hold it from bolting, it forced the buggy back on the footpath and almost turned it over. But Mrs. Burke was out long before then, for with a bound she sprang from the vehicle, sending Allnut staggering as she blundered against him in her rush for the bank.

Harding, having heard Allnut's words, stepped forward to meet her.

"You need not be alarmed, Mrs. Burke," he said, as she dashed up. "So far as you are concerned——"

"Where's that villain? Where's that wretch? He's stolen my deeds! I know it, I know it! I'm ruined! Brennan, come and arrest him."

Her words, shouted at the top of her voice, rang through the place and out on the roadway, where Brennan was still struggling with her rearing horse, and Soden and Allnut stood by as sympathetic onlookers.

"If you will come in, the manager will explain the matter to you," Harding said.

"Don't talk to me about explaining," she shouted in answer. "Where are my deeds? Where are the deeds of my Irish property? If you've stolen them——"

"Pray speak quietly, Mrs. Burke," Harding said. "There are others who can hear you, and the bank——"

"Others? Others hear me? I'll let them hear me. I want them to hear me. I've nothing to hide, and I'll not shelter any scoundrel who will rob and cheat a lonely widow. Maybe others will not stand by and see an unfortunate poor weak woman robbed and swindled——"

"If you will come inside, Mrs. Burke——"

"I'll not come inside. I want my deeds back. I'll have nothing more to do with your wretched bank. Sure I'm distracted. Have you those deeds?"

"Mr. Eustace," Harding began, when she flung round and leaped away from the door.

"Brennan!" she cried. "Brennan! Come here, Brennan. They've robbed me of my deeds, the deeds of my Irish property. They insisted I should leave them here, and now they tell me they're stolen. Who's stolen them if it isn't that scoundrel in there? Come and arrest him. Come and help me recover my just rights."

She shouted out the words despite the fact that Brennan was still careering round in the roadway trying to pacify her plunging horse.

Harding glanced over his shoulder towards Eustace's room as she left the doorway. He saw Eustace slip from the room and make for the door leading into the private portion of the house. At the door he turned.

"Get her to come in here," he said impatiently.

As he was speaking Mrs. Burke flounced round again and caught sight of him.

"Oh, there you are," she cried, as she stepped inside. "Now, what have you to say?"

Eustace closed the door after him as she was speaking.

Mrs. Burke rushed out again into the road.

"Mr. Allnut! Mr. Soden! I can trust you. Will you stay here and see that villain does not slip out and escape? He's gone into the house. I'll go to the front door."

She ran towards the private entrance, but stopped opposite Brennan, who had at last succeeded in getting the horse under control.

"They've robbed me, Brennan," she cried. "I left all the deeds of my Irish property with them. They've stolen them and say the place has been broken into as a blind. I don't believe it. It's Eustace. I never believed in him. Sure, if it hadn't been for Mr. Gale I'd never have listened to him. But now what am I to do? Where's Mr. Gale? Why isn't he here to help me? Why don't you tell him to come at once?"

"Mr. Gale has gone along the road with two men we want to know something about, Mrs. Burke. He'll return shortly. You had better see Mr. Eustace. It's only money which has been taken, I believe. Mr. Eustace will be able to tell you all about it."

"But he is trying to escape," she said in a whisper. "I saw him go out of the other door. He'll get away. Come and arrest him."

"Never fear," Brennan answered, as he smiled. "I'll see he doesn't get away. I'll watch here till you come out."

"Will you please come this way, Mrs. Burke? Mr. Eustace is waiting to see you," Harding called out from the bank entrance.

"I'll go," she said to Brennan. "But mind! I rely on you—thank God your father and mother were Irish even if you were born out here."

"Mr. Eustace asks if you will mind going into the dining-room," Harding said.

She shot a resentful glance at him as she swept by and passed through into the house. Eustace met her and led her into the dining-room, closing the door after him. As Harding shut the door leading from the bank, Johnson, the postmaster, came in.

"Here is a message just come through—I brought it down at once as I thought you'd be anxious," he said.

"Half a minute," Harding said, as he took the telegram. "Eustace is seeing Mrs. Burke in the house. I'll take it to him in case there is a reply."

He went through to the dining-room, knocked at the door and opened it. Mrs. Burke, her eyes flashing and her cheeks flushed, was standing facing Eustace, who sat by the table with his head resting on his hand.

"Here's a telegram—Johnson is waiting to see if there is any reply," Harding said, as he held out the message.

Eustace took the telegram mechanically, opened and read it and handed it, open, to Harding.

"Read it," he said. "There's no answer. I'll join you presently."

Harding left the room, glancing at the message as he crossed the passage. It required no answer, as Eustace had said. It was very brief.

"Inspector Wallace will take charge."

Harding whistled. Wallace was the senior inspector of the service, and his special faculty was the unravelling of tangled accounts and the detection of defaulting managers and cashiers. Leaving the ordinary inspection of branches to his juniors, Wallace only journeyed from the head office to take charge when grave suspicions were entertained as to the integrity of a branch staff. The telegram was tantamount to an intimation that the authorities of the bank did not regard the robbery as the work of an outsider.

As he re-entered the office, Brennan was standing at the entrance with Johnson.

"No answer," Harding said quietly, and Johnson nodded and went off. Brennan turned and crossed to the counter.

"Is Mr. Eustace about?" he asked.

"He is talking to Mrs. Burke in the dining-room. She's rather excited, and he took her in there because she would shout so. He'll be back in a few minutes, unless you want to tell him something particularly at once," Harding answered.

Brennan glanced at a telegram he held in his hand.

"It will do when he comes out," he answered slowly. "Have you had any word?" he added, as he leant over the counter.

"The head office wires that Inspector Wallace—our bank inspector, that is, not one of your police inspectors—is coming up."

"Is that all?"

Harding gave a short laugh.

"All? It's quite enough, Brennan. Between you and me it means that Eustace and I are suspected—one of us or both."

"Yes, that's right," Brennan said quietly. "One or both."

As he spoke he held out a message for Harding to read.

"Keep manager under close surveillance till I arrive. "DURHAM." "You know who Durham is?" Brennan asked.

"Never heard of him," Harding answered.

"He's the finest man who ever put on a uniform," Brennan exclaimed. "He is the sub-inspector in charge of this district—he's only been appointed a couple of months. I reckon it's only a temporary thing for him, just until there's room to make him an inspector. It's a good thing for your bank he is coming up. If anyone on earth can unravel a mystery, my sub-inspector is the man. He won't be long before he has the matter cleared up."

"If he can get to the bottom of this business, I'll agree with you," Harding replied. "But I don't think very much of his first idea; I don't think he is right if he suspects Eustace. When do you expect him?"

"I should say he will be here some time during the day. He wired from Wyalla, and I expect he'll ride across country—it will be quicker than waiting for a train at the junction. Ah, there's Mr. Gale back," he exclaimed, as a buggy drove past the bank. "If you'll let me know when Mr. Eustace is free, I'll just step out and hear what he has discovered about the yarn the men told us."

"All right. I'll call you as soon as Eustace comes in," Harding said, and Brennan left the office.

Soon after he had gone Harding heard the dining-room door open and Mrs. Burke's voice ring through the house.

"I don't believe a word of it. It's false; it's untrue. It's all a blind. I'll see whether there is not justice in the land for an unfortunate widow robbed of her all."

Then the door was slammed and the front door opened and slammed also.

Harding sat waiting for Eustace to come back to the office. He heard Mrs. Burke's voice sounding shrill outside, but not clear enough for him to distinguish what she was saying. Then the buggy started and drove rapidly away.

A gentle tap came at the door leading to the house, and Mrs. Eustace opened it and looked in.

"Has that dreadful woman gone?" she asked in an agitated voice. "Is Charlie here?"

Harding rose and went over to her.

"No. He has not come back yet. He is in the dining-room. Shall I tell him you want him?"

"Oh, no, perhaps it will be better to leave him alone till he comes out. Did you hear what she said? She has been making such a scene in there. Poor Charlie, as if he had not enough to worry him as it is, without her saying such terrible things."

Brennan, with Gale and Johnson, appeared at the entrance, and Mrs. Eustace went back into the house, closing the door after her.

"Mrs. Burke has gone," Brennan said, as he came over to the counter. "Is Mr. Eustace in the office?"

"He has not come out of the dining-room yet. Shall I tell him?" Harding replied.

"I'll go through," Brennan said.

Harding opened the door and stood holding it, with Gale and Johnson behind him, as Brennan went to the dining-room door and knocked.

Receiving no answer, he opened the door.

"There is no one in there," he called out.

With one accord the three moved forward. Brennan was half-way across the room when they reached the door. He went to the window and looked at the fastening.

"He did not get out this way," he cried. "He must be in the house somewhere."

Mrs. Eustace appeared on the stairs, and came down.

"Where is your husband, Mrs. Eustace?" Brennan exclaimed directly he saw her.

"He was in there—isn't he in there now?" she said, as she passed into the room.

"He is not here, Mrs. Eustace, though Mrs. Burke left him here when she came out a few minutes ago. Where is he?"

With widely open eyes Mrs. Eustace stared from one to the other.

"Oh, what is it?" she cried. "What is it? Tell me—is it——"

For a moment she stood with her eyes fixed on Brennan.

"Oh, my God!" she cried as she flung up her arms and fell headlong to the floor.

Chapter IV

Durham's Surmise.

Eustace had disappeared as completely and mysteriously as the gold which had been in his keeping.

Every corner of the building from the roof to the basement was examined. Even the cupboards were inspected and the made-up beds pulled to pieces, lest he should have succeeded in secreting himself amongst the jam-pots or inside the covering of a pillow; but no trace of him could be found.

His hats hung on their accustomed pegs, so that if he had gone from the house he must have gone bareheaded. But the question which none could answer was how he had managed to go from the house at all.

At the time Mrs. Burke left the dining-room, Brennan was standing talking to Gale and Johnson in front of the private entrance. In the office Harding was waiting for his manager to come from the house. Thus two out of the three ordinary means of exit could not have been used without Eustace being seen. The third was the back door opening from the scullery, which, in turn, opened from the kitchen. Bessie was in the kitchen when the slamming of the dining-room door announced the departure of Mrs. Burke.

Both she and her mistress were insistent that Eustace did not pass through the kitchen. Each told the same story when interrogated. As soon as the signal of Mrs. Burke's departure was heard, Mrs. Eustace went to the door leading from the kitchen to the passage and stood waiting for her husband to appear. When he did not do so, she went to the door of the office, knocked, and asked Harding if Eustace were there. She maintained that the door of the dining-room had not been opened after Mrs. Burke flounced out. Harding, who was listening in the office, also maintained it had not been opened.

The mystery of Eustace's disappearance was still agitating everyone when Sub-Inspector Durham rode up to the bank. Listening, without comment, to all Brennan had to report, he went through the premises with Harding and Brennan, saying nothing till he came to the back door.

Situated as it was, with only the bush behind and beyond it, the bank was thus free from being overlooked. A block of ground at the back was surrounded by a three-rail fence, but the cultivation was limited, a score of fowls occupying the far end and the remainder of the area consisting of a grass patch and a few indigenous shrubs left when the ground was fenced in from the bush.

Standing there, he waved his arm comprehensively towards the unoccupied land at the side and back of the building.

"Once outside, who was to see him clamber over that fence and make for the shelter of the bush?" he asked. "While you were loitering at the front door, Brennan, your man was walking out at the back."

Brennan gnawed his moustache in chagrin.

"But—how did he get out of the dining-room?" Harding exclaimed.

Durham turned slowly and looked steadily into Harding's eyes.

"He walked out, Mr. Harding, walked out through the door."

"The door was shut."

"When you saw it. It was probably closed as noiselessly as it was opened—his wife saw to that. Then, as soon as he had slipped out this way, she came to your office and threw dust in your eyes by asking where her husband was. Just the sort of thing a woman would do. What did he do with his keys—the bank keys, I mean?"

"He had them with him."

"Oh, no, Mr. Harding. They would be no further use to him. He must have left them behind him. We shall find them somewhere. Let me have a look at the safes which were robbed."

"Shall I send off a description of the man to the police in the neighbourhood, sir?" Brennan asked.

"Did you not do so at once?" Durham asked, swinging round sharply.

"I was preparing it when you arrived, sir."

"We will look at the safes," Durham said.

Harding had pushed-to the doors of the big safe As he pulled them open Durham pointed.

"What keys are those?" he asked.

In the lock of the reserve recess the keys Eustace gave Harding in the morning were still hanging. Harding took them out.

"They are the manager's keys," he said. "In the excitement of the discovery that all the gold had gone, I must have forgotten to return them. I had no idea they were here when you asked me what Eustace had done with the keys. I entirely forgot them."

"But he did not, Mr. Harding. Do you know where he kept his private papers?"

"That was his private office," Harding replied, pointing to the little ante-room.

"When do you expect the relieving officer to arrive?"

"I can hardly say. He may come by train to the junction, in which case he should be here about noon to-morrow."

"Then you will be in charge until he arrives?"

"I have telegraphed to the head office reporting that Eustace has disappeared and asking for instructions. Until they come, of course, I am in charge."

"Then you will come with me while I examine his desk, though I do not suppose it contains anything but official papers—now. In the meantime, Brennan, send away your description to all the neighbouring police-stations and also to head-quarters for general distribution. When you have done that you can come back here. I shall be waiting for you."

He followed Harding into the little room.

"You had better go through the papers, Mr. Harding. They will probably all relate to the bank's business. I only want to see those which do not."

"It was in this drawer he kept his own papers," Harding said, as he touched the knob of one of the side drawers.

"Is it locked?"

"No," Harding replied, as he pulled it out. "But it is empty," he added.

"Quite so," Durham replied in an unconcerned voice. "As I expected."

Harding stared at him in perplexity.

"But—but——" he stammered. "I don't understand it. I cannot—I cannot believe it of him."

Durham stood silent.

"Only a madman would have done such a thing, and Eustace is no more mad than I am," Harding added.

Still Durham said nothing.

"But if he had done such a thing, why did he remain here? Why not get away at the same time as he got the gold away? Surely——"

"Would you mind looking through the remainder of the drawers?" Durham interrupted.

Harding opened them one after the other, examined the papers they contained, and replaced them without making any further remark. The search was unavailing so far as private papers were concerned—all were connected with the bank. As Harding examined them, Durham stood beside the table without a word or a glance at the papers. When the last drawer had been opened, gone through, and closed, Harding turned to him.

"There is nothing here except what concerns the bank," he said.

"You are sure he kept all his own papers here?"

"Quite sure. The first drawer I opened was full of them yesterday. He had it out after the bank closed last night when I came in to give him the cash balance."

"I will see Mrs. Eustace," Durham said shortly. "In the interests of the bank I should like you to be present. Will you ask her to come in here?"

"Perhaps she would rather see you in the house."

"As she pleases—if you will ask her."

Harding found her sitting disconsolately in the dining-room and gave her Durham's message.

"Very well, I'll see him—here—if you stay."

She spoke without moving her eyes.

"I will be here," he said as he left the room to call Durham.

In the office he found a telegram had just arrived. It was an answer to his wire to the head office.

"Close office. Do all to assist the police. Wallace should arrive noon to-morrow."

He handed the message to Durham, who just glanced at it.

"Is she coming in here or not?" Durham asked.

"She is in the dining-room, and will see you there," Harding answered.

Mrs. Eustace was standing staring out of the window when they entered the room.

"I can tell you nothing. I know nothing more than I have already said," she exclaimed as she turned to meet them.

"If you will kindly answer my questions I will be obliged," Durham replied. "Can you tell me where your husband kept his private papers?"

"Yes, in his office—that is, as a rule."

"And when he did not keep them there, where were they?"

"Oh, he always kept them there, but sometimes he had some in his pocket. Last night——"

"Yes? Last night——?" Durham said as she stopped.

"Oh, it's nothing. Merely that he had some papers in his pocket and discovered they were there when he was upstairs."

"Do you know what he did with them?"

"Of course I do. He left them on the dressing-table. They are there now."

"Will you show them to me?"

"Mr. Harding, will you take him upstairs? The papers are by the looking-glass."

Durham followed Harding upstairs without a word. On the dressing-table a small packet of folded documents was pushed half under the mirror. Durham picked them up and glanced at them.

"Thank you," he said. "Now we will go down again."

"These are the papers you referred to?" he asked, as soon as they were in the dining-room.

"Yes," Mrs. Eustace answered.

Durham laid them on the table in front of him.

"Can you tell me anything about your husband's private affairs?" he asked, looking steadily at her.

"I don't quite understand what you mean," she replied slowly.

"In regard to his mining speculations."

Harding saw the momentary start, quickly recovered, that she gave at the question.

"Do you know he speculated?"

She sat silent with averted face.

"Do you know he speculated both in shares and horse-racing?"

Still there was no reply, and Durham added, "Speculated and lost—heavily?"

"Not heavily," she exclaimed, flashing round upon him. "He did not lose heavily. He may have——"

She checked her words suddenly, closing her lips and turning her face away.

"Will you please finish your sentence, Mrs. Eustace?"

"He may have lost—sometimes; but he won as well. He had those shares—they may yet bring him in a fortune," she said, pointing to the papers on the table.

"Do you know if there was ever any official reference to his speculations?"

Harding could barely hear the words as, with bowed head, Mrs. Eustace replied.

"I did not quite catch your answer," Durham said quietly.

"I said yes, there was—once."

"Did he tell you what was said?"

"I don't know," she said after a few moments' silence. "You had better ask the bank. I don't know anything about it."

"Perhaps you know why your husband was appointed to this branch?"

"I don't know anything about it," she replied in a low tone.

"It may save time if I tell you at once, Mrs. Eustace, that the general manager of the bank has put me in possession of all information regarding your husband—you will not improve the situation by denying what I know you thoroughly understand."

Mrs. Eustace looked up and met a glance which gave her the uncomfortable sensation of being looked through and through. She lowered her eyes more quickly than she had raised them, paled and then flushed blood-red.

"Your husband did not escape through the kitchen," Durham said in his even tone of voice.

"I have already said so," Mrs. Eustace replied, scarcely above a whisper.

"He left this room by the window."

The blood left her cheeks as she started. Harding saw her hands clasp tightly.

"And you secured the window on the inside after he had gone."

"No!"

The monosyllable escaped her lips like the yap of a dog at bay.

"You secured the window on the inside after he had gone," Durham repeated in cold, unruffled tones.

Mrs. Eustace sprang to her feet and faced him.

"It's a lie," she cried. "The room was empty when I came to it."

"The room was empty, quite so. And the window was open. You closed and secured it."

"I tell you I did not."

"You have already said that you only stood at the kitchen door until you went to the office to ask whether your husband was there. Now you say the room was empty when you came to it. Which statement do you expect me to believe?"

"I don't care what you believe," she cried. "You have no right to ask me these questions. I will not answer you. Mr. Harding, I appeal to you. If you have no regard for the honour of an absent friend, at least you might protect the wife of your friend from insult."

Durham's eyes never wavered as he watched her.

"No insult is offered or intended, Mrs. Eustace," he said quietly. "Mr. Harding, in the interests of the bank, as well as in the interests of your husband, is desirous, as we all are, of knowing the truth. I will ask you one more question: Where were you when Mrs. Burke left the dining-room and crossed the passage to the front door?"

Mrs. Eustace, with close-set lips, stood defiantly silent.

"Will you answer that question?" Durham said.

"No, I will not. I will tolerate this no longer."

With a quick, angry gesture she turned to the door.

Durham was on his feet and in front of her before she could take two steps.

"Until I have seen your servant, Mrs. Eustace, you will remain here," he said. "Will you kindly come with me, Mr. Harding?"

He held the door open while Harding passed out, following him without another word.

But there was little to be ascertained from Bessie more than she had already told. She heard the door slam and her mistress go to the kitchen door, but whether she went on to the dining-room or not, Bessie "didn't notice."

"Could you see out of the window at the time?" Durham asked.

"No, sir, I was in the scullery washing up," the girl replied.

Mrs. Eustace, much to Harding's surprise, was still in the dining-room on their return. The papers Durham had placed on the table were untouched.

"I am sorry to have had to detain you, Mrs. Eustace. For the present I have nothing further to ask you. These papers you had better take—I have no doubt they were left for you."

"What do you mean—left for me?" she exclaimed.

"A woman of your quick intelligence, Mrs. Eustace, scarcely needs to be told," he answered, adding, as he turned to Harding, "I would like a few moments with you in the office."

In the little ante-room that Eustace had used as his private office, Durham turned the searchlight of his questions upon Harding.

"Have you known Mr. Eustace for very long?"

"I have only known him personally since I came to this branch a few weeks ago."

"Did you apply to be sent here?"

"No. I knew nothing about it until I received instructions to come."

"Did you know Mrs. Eustace before you came here?"

"Not as Mrs. Eustace."

"You knew her before she was married?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Yes."

"Am I right in saying that you knew her very well?"

"Yes, I did know her very well."

"Don't think I am attempting to pry into your private affairs, Mr. Harding. In a case of this kind, the clues that lead to the unravelling of the mystery often lie on the surface in some trifling circumstance that seemingly has nothing whatever to do with the main question. You have already realised, I take it, that we are concerned with something quite distinct from the ordinary class of crime. Perhaps you have not had sufficient experience with the criminal class to recognise what was apparent to me from the beginning, that in this matter we are following the work of one who is a master of his craft."

"So far as that goes, I am absolutely dazed," Harding exclaimed. "The more I hear, the more hopelessly confused I grow."

"I am not surprised. You are following the work of someone who is, I am quite satisfied, no ordinary criminal, but one of the most astute, clever and unscrupulous individuals who ever adopted dishonesty as a profession. If I ask you questions which appear to you to be irrelevant and possibly impertinent, will you give me credit for being actuated only by my sense of duty, and answer those questions as fully and as accurately as you can?"

"Certainly," Harding replied.

"Thank you. Now, will you tell me this—Were you ever engaged to Mrs. Eustace before she married her present husband?"

"Yes."

"Did she break it off, or did you?"

"She—she married."

"She married Eustace, while she was practically engaged to you?"

"While she was actually engaged to me."

"Then he must have known of your existence?"

"I assume so, but—well, nothing was ever said about it between us. I will tell you exactly what happened. The letters I had written to her, the presents I had given her, and her engagement ring, were returned to me in a packet through the post with a piece of wedding-cake. Until I came here and met her, I did not know to whom she was married. Whether Eustace knew we had once been engaged I do not know. I never referred to it."

"You never knew that, in applying for an assistant, he named you personally to the general manager of the bank and gave as a reason a long-standing friendship?"

The look of astonishment which showed on Harding's face was sufficient answer.

"Yet it is what happened—I have the information from your general manager."

Chapter V

Mrs. Burke's Presentiment.

Waroona Downs was fifteen miles from Waroona township by the road, and ten as the crow flies, the intrusion of a rocky and precipitous range making it impossible to take the shorter and more direct route. One had perforce to use the road, and the road turned and twisted where the level plains were broken by the range, passing, at one stage, through a narrow gorge hemmed in by steep, rock-strewn heights, on which a growth of stunted gums flourished sufficiently to hide the jagged boulders from the road below.

Half-way through the gorge a stream, having its source in a series of springs hidden among the tumbled rocks, swept across the track in a shallow ford. The road dipped to it on both sides, the constant flow of water having stripped away the soil and left a barrier of naked rock which dammed back the stream to form a wide pool sheltered among the hills and fringed by a more luxurious growth of vegetation than clothed the heights above.

The last gleam of the setting sun shed a ruddy tinge on the topmost branches of the trees as Durham reached where the road dipped to the stream. The subdued light in the pass made the distances elusive and turned the shadows into subtle mysteries of purpling greys. The air was full of the scent from the thickly growing vegetation, but, save for the rippling swish of the water trickling across the track, the silence was unbroken.

Durham reined in his horse and sat loosely in his saddle as his glance swept over the tangled masses of undergrowth, the tumbled boulders peeping here and there from amid the shadows, the precipitous sides of the pass, and the broken ruggedness of the ground beyond. But it was not an appreciation of the picturesque, nor a recognition of the poetry in landscape which held him. He saw in the place only such a spot as the men concerned in the robbery of the bank would select for hiding their booty. Within that maze of rock and tree and mountain, how many nooks there must be to serve the purpose.

Had he been occupied only with the matter of the robbery, he would have started there and then to satisfy himself whether his surmise was correct, and whether the missing thousands were not lying perhaps a few yards away, hidden among the undergrowth and boulders. But there was more than the robbery in his mind; it was not alone to make inquiries on the subject that he had ridden away on a journey Brennan could have accomplished equally well. There was a much more personal note in the affair.

Durham was in love, and with a woman he had only met once, and of whom he knew nothing more than her name.

Travelling one day by coach, he had, for a fellow-passenger, a woman. A dozen signs showed him that she was a new arrival in the country, unused to colonial ways, unversed in colonial methods. It was natural for him, at such places as they stopped for meals, to extend to her a share of the attention his official position secured for him. It was also natural for him to drift into conversation with her.

The companion of his coaching experience was named Burke—Nora Burke—she had told him. Nora Burke was one of the victims of the bank robbery, and, apparently, the last person who had had anything to say to the vanished bank manager. It was more to ascertain whether the heroine of the coach journey were the same as the owner of Waroona Downs, than to learn what Eustace had or had not said, that Durham determined to ride out to the station.

Even as his glance wandered over the picturesque scene before him, he was impatient to press on—five miles had yet to be covered before he reached Waroona Downs. He pulled the bridle with a jerk and rode steadily until he was clear of the range. Then he put his horse at a gallop and kept the pace till he saw the gleam of a light from the window of a house set back from the road. In the dusk he could not make out all the detail of the place, but Brennan told him the homestead was the first house he would come to after clearing the range.

He swung on to the side track leading to the house. As he came up to it he saw the figure of a woman silhouetted against the light.

"Is this Mrs. Burke's?" he called out.

"And if it is, what might you want?"

His heart leaped as he heard the answer—despite the sharp ring, sharp almost to harshness, he recognised the voice. It was that of the companion of his coach journey.

A low verandah, about three feet from the ground, ran along the front of the house. It was on the verandah the woman stood. Durham sprang from the saddle, slipped his bridle over a post, and stepped up the short flight of stairs.

The woman had drawn back into the shadow beyond the window. As he advanced, the light from the lamp within fell upon him, revealing to her the uniform he wore.

With a soft, melodious laugh she came forward.

"Why didn't you say you were a trooper?" she said. "I thought——"

"I am Sub-Inspector Durham," he said quickly.

"Oh, indeed," she replied.

She met his glance without a suggestion of recognition in her own.

"I have ridden out to ask you one or two questions in regard to the robbery at the bank, of which I understand you have heard," he said.

"Ask me questions? And pray what have I to do with the robbery, save that I am an unfortunate victim of the dishonesty of men you and the rest of the police ought to be chasing at this very moment? Ask me questions? It's me who has need to ask them of you. Where are my stolen papers? Where——"

"If you will give me your assistance by answering the few questions I wish to ask you, I have no doubt that your papers, and all the rest of the stolen property, will very soon be recovered," Durham said. "I understand you saw Mr. Eustace this forenoon. Will you tell me——"

"Ask Mr. Eustace himself," she retorted. "He can tell you what I said."

She stood in front of him, with her hands hanging down hidden in the folds of her dress.

"I will not detain you long. I have been travelling since early to-day and have to ride back to the township to-night."

"Travelling all day? Sure you must be tired!" she exclaimed. "Come inside and rest—this affair has so upset me I'm forgetting that Irish hospitality ought to be the first rule for Irish folk wherever they may happen to be. Come in, come in."

She led the way into the room where the lamp was burning. As she stepped in through the long open window Durham saw she was carrying a heavy revolver in the half-hidden hand.

"You were evidently prepared for emergencies," he said.

She laughed as she laid the weapon on the table.

"After what happened to-day, Mr. Durham, I'm all nerves. When I heard you riding to the house I was frightened lest it should be some more of the scoundrels coming to see what else they could rob from me. You see, I'm all alone here except for poor old Patsy Malone—he's just a poor half-witted fool who was with my husband and my husband's father before him, and he thinks, poor old creature, that wherever I go he has to go too. I had to bring him out here with me to save the scandal he would have made. Sure, he's harmless enough anywhere, but what could he do if some of those thieving scoundrels rode up here and robbed me of the last few papers and things those bank rascals have not yet had the chance of stealing? But sit down, Mr. Durham, sit down. I'll tell the old fool to get you some tea—a cup won't harm you after your long ride. And maybe you'll take just a bit of something? You'll be hungry."

She was out of the room before Durham could answer, but he heard her calling for her ancient retainer and giving him instructions with the same volubility that she had shown when speaking to him.

"It won't be a minute, Mr. Durham. Luckily the fire was still in, for Patsy was only finished washing the dishes scarcely five minutes ago. And what is the news from the township? Have they caught the robbers yet? Or do you think they have very far to look for them if they really want the man who did it? Now there's a foolish thing for me to say! I forgot. Of course, it's yourself that has come up to catch him. You'll forgive me, Mr. Durham, but I can assure you I never had so great a shock to my nerves as I had to-day. What's to become of me now that all those documents are gone? You see, when I came away my solicitor in Dublin—you see, he was my husband's solicitor and his father's solicitor before him, so, as you may judge, he is an old man, though not so old as old Patsy out there—but, as I was saying, he said——"

She commenced speaking as she entered the room, continued as she walked to the table and sat down, and appeared to Durham as though she were going on indefinitely.

"Will you pardon me one moment," he said. "I left my horse at——"

"Of course, of course," she cried, starting up. "Sure the poor beast will be tired, too, and hungry. Wait, wait, Mr. Durham, I'll send old Patsy——"

"Oh, no, don't trouble. I'll just take the saddle off and turn him into the yard. It's Brennan's horse and had a feed before we started."

He was out on the verandah before she could leave the room.

When he returned, Mrs. Burke was watching a bent and decrepit-looking old man laying the cloth. He gave a furtive glance at Durham as he entered the room.

"Go on with your work, Patsy, go on, and don't dawdle. Don't I tell you Mr. Durham is both tired and hungry? Never mind looking at folk. Go on now."

Patsy mumbled an inaudible reply as he stooped over the table.

"You must bear with him, Mr. Durham," she said as soon as the old man had left the room. "He's been so long with the Burke family he feels he's entitled to know everyone who comes into the place. You see what a fragile old creature he is—and he's all I've got in the place if some of those scoundrels come and attack us."

She jumped out of her seat and paced from one end of the room to the other.

"Sure I was a fool," she exclaimed. "I ought to have asked Brennan to come out. He's half Irish, leastways he's Irish born in Australia, and he'd have understood."

"I don't think you need be afraid, Mrs. Burke," Durham said quietly. "You're not likely to be troubled."

"Oh, you don't know. You're a great strong man and able to fight a dozen maybe. But a lonely woman—haven't they got my papers, and won't they think that there's a lot more in the house and money too, maybe, and jewels? And what is there to keep them from robbing the place and burning it down over our heads, with only that poor old fool out there and a poor weak woman like myself to face?"

He looked at her as she paced to and fro, her handsome figure moving with the grace of a Delilah and her wonderful eyes flashing a greater eloquence than her tongue, as her glance from time to time caught his.

"You need not be afraid," he repeated. "Those responsible for the robbery of the bank will not be anxious to appear anywhere in public for some time."

She stood in the centre of the room where the full glare of the lamp fell upon her.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, "I don't know. I would not trust them. Besides——"

"Besides what?"

"Well, I was thinking that nobody knows who they are for certain, and what difference would it make to them, or to any of us, if they rode down the main street of Waroona under the very noses of yourself and all the troopers in Australia?"

"That is scarcely likely, Mrs. Burke."

"I don't know," she repeated. "You don't know who they are, or you would have them inside the walls of the lock-up. Now tell me, have you any idea?"

"I cannot tell you that, Mrs. Burke. What I can tell you is to put out of your mind entirely any fear that they will pay you a visit."

She shook her head and resumed her walk to and fro.

"Suppose they come?" she exclaimed, halting at the table opposite to him. "Suppose they come at dead of night? I might be murdered in my bed while I was asleep and only know it when I woke up to find myself killed."

Durham laughed.

"It's true, and you know it, Mr. Durham. Sure I never was so shaken and nervous as I am to-night! Could you send Brennan out when you return to the township?"

"I am afraid that is impossible," he said.

"But why? Sure the fellow has nothing to do but sleep, and he may as well sleep here as in his own quarters."

"He is on duty to-night."

"On duty? Now that the bank's robbed, I suppose he's guarding it? The horse is stolen, so you lock the door of the empty stable, Mr. Durham; but where there's a chance of another horse being stolen you let it look after itself as best it may. And that's what you call doing your duty and earning the money we poor unfortunate taxpayers have to provide for you!"

"I am afraid I cannot discuss that matter with you, Mrs. Burke," he said coldly.

"No!" she retorted hotly. "No, you can't. All you can do is to put the only constable in the place to guard an empty bank——"

"There is a reason why Brennan should remain in the township to-night. It is therefore quite impossible for him to come out here—as well as being unnecessary."

She flounced round and resumed her rapid striding until old Patsy appeared with the tea.

"Make haste, now, Patsy, make haste!" she exclaimed. "Sure you are the slowest old fool ever set on the earth to delay and keep people waiting."

The old man, mumbling to himself, set the meal and left the room.

"Now, Mr. Durham, just make yourself at home with such scant hospitality as I can show you. If it was in Ireland, sure I'd give you a meal worth the eating, but here, with me not knowing whether I'm to own this place or not, and without a soul about it save useless old Patsy to do a hand's turn, you'll understand it's only a poor pot-luck sort of spread at the best I can offer. But such as it is, it is offered with a free heart, though you are going to leave me to be murdered by the scoundrels whenever they like to come."

"You will laugh at your fears to-morrow," Durham said as he drew up to the table.

"They are not fears, Mr. Durham. You don't know; you're not Irish, and so don't understand, but Brennan would. It's not fear. It's what we term presentiment. Not all the Irish have it, but only some of them. It's my misfortune to be one of them. I have it. Sure I was tortured the whole of last night, what with anxiety and sleeplessness and worry, and all through that wretched bank affair. It was presentiment. I tried to laugh myself out of it, but as soon as I got into the township this very morning, what did I hear? Of course, you know. Well, now I have just the same feeling that to-night there's to be more dirty work by those thieving scoundrels, and it's here they're coming this time, here—and I'm to be left to their mercy, just one poor weak, defenceless woman and an old half-witted fool of a man. It makes me just——"

She left her sentence uncompleted as she turned away, with a break in her voice, and stood by the open window leading out on to the verandah. As Durham glanced at her he saw her shoulders heave and her hands convulsively clasp.

Through the chill of her forgetfulness the love impulse surged.

"If you are really so distressed about the matter," he said quickly, "if you really fear you will be attacked to-night, I will stay here till the morning."

With a magnificent gesture she faced round from the window and came swiftly towards him, her eyes sparkling, her lips wreathed in a happy smile.

"Oh, what a weight of care you have taken from my mind!" she cried. "I can rest now in peace and comfort without thinking that every moment may be my last on earth."

"But if they come they may kill me. What then?" Durham asked, with a smile which had more than amusement in it.

She flashed her brilliant glance at him, raising her eyes quickly to his and drooping them slowly behind the shelter of the dark, heavy lashes.

"No," she said softly. "You are too brave a man—they will not dare to come while you are here."

"And so your presentiment passes into thin air?" he said.

"It's relieved," she said. "Maybe I'm too timid—that affair has upset me so much. Now tell me, do you really think you know who the thieves are?"

She sat down at the table opposite to him and leaned her chin on her hands, her loose sleeves falling away from her arms and revealing, to the best advantage, their rounded whiteness. Into her eyes there came the flicker of a challenge, the sparkle of mischief which gave a new character to her face, a different expression to all he had hitherto seen. There was flippant raillery in her voice as she repeated her question.

"Do you really think you will find out who the thieves are?" she exclaimed.

"One I already know," he replied, fixing his eyes on her as his square jaws set firm in his effort to refrain from allowing his features to relax into the smile which was hovering so near.

For a moment the lines round her eyes hardened, and the sparkle became a flash before it melted again as a rippling laugh came from her lips.

"How terribly stern you look!" she cried in a mocking voice. "Do you ever think of anything but your work, Mr. Durham?"

"Not when I have anything at all difficult on hand," he replied.

"Then this does puzzle you?"

"It has its difficulties; but, for all that, it is a problem I shall solve."

Again the rippling laugh rang through the room.

"Why, of course! Was there ever a case the police had in hand where they did not have a clue at the very beginning?"

"Several," he answered. "A clever, resourceful criminal, Mrs. Burke, always has the advantage. Where they fail ultimately is in becoming too sure of themselves and too forgetful of the network of snares laid to entrap them and always waiting to trip them."

"I suppose that is so," she said slowly. "I suppose that is so. Poor things—I can't help pitying them, Mr. Durham. One never knows what lies behind their wickedness—what it was which first sent them rolling down the slope that ends—often—on the gallows."

She shuddered as she spoke, averting her face from him.

"This is a dismal subject," he exclaimed. "Let us change it. Will you answer the questions I want to ask you about the bank affair?"

"Ask them. Oh! ask the wretched things and let me get it over. Sure I begin to hate the mention of it," she exclaimed as she shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

Without apparently heeding her objection, he asked her to say whether anyone was in the passage as she passed from the dining-room to the entrance of the bank.

"Of course there was. Didn't I tell Brennan at once?" she said.

"Who was it?"

"His wife."

"Brennan's?"

"Brennan's! No! The bank manager's; she was just outside the door—listening, I'll be bound."

"You are sure of that?"

"Sure that she was listening? Well, isn't she a woman? What else would she be doing?"

"That is all I want to ask you," he said quietly.

She looked at him wonderingly.

"All?" she asked. "You rode out from Waroona merely to ask me that bit of a question?"

He nodded.

"Well, then," she exclaimed, "if that's how you're going to catch the thieves it's good-bye to my papers."

The eyes which met his told of anger and indignation.

"You expected a rigid cross-examination?" he asked, with a smile.

"I expected questions which would have some bearing on the affair," she retorted.

"Your experience in this sort of thing is somewhat limited, Mrs. Burke. A tangled skein is unravelled by following a mere thread, not by tearing at the entire mass. I have hold of a thread, and I am following it."

"And where will it lead you?"

"Where? It does not matter where so long as the tangle is made straight."

"While my papers and my——"

"You need not be uneasy," he interrupted. "They are just as safe as though you held them in your hand."

"Safe for those who stole them," she retorted, with a short, satirical laugh.

"Safe for you," he answered. "You have not been long enough in the country to realise how complete a system of detection we have here. I have never felt more certain of securing both the culprits and the stolen property than I am in this case."

Again she gave a short, satirical laugh.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Of course. You know exactly where the thieves are and where they have hidden what was taken and also where they are hiding. You can put your hands on them whenever you like. One does not need to come to Australia to hear that sort of romance, Mr. Durham; I hoped rather that one would not hear it in Australia, but you police are as capable at blundering and bungling and bluffing here as elsewhere."

"I am neither bungling nor bluffing," he answered quietly.

"You are doing both," she replied warmly. "What are you doing here now? Why have you come bothering me with ridiculous questions? What can I tell you more than the bank people themselves? Or is it that you think I am the thief? Why don't you say at once you suspect me—old Patsy and myself? Sure it would be in keeping with the rest of it—wasting your time and mine by coming out to ask who was in the passage when I left the dining-room! What has that to do with my loss? Do you think I care whether Mrs. Eustace heard what I told her husband? I'd say it to her face if she likes, just as I said it to his. I told him he ought to be arrested,

and I say so to you. I'd arrest him and his wife and his assistant and his servant—everyone in the place if I had my way."

He was watching the light flashing in her eyes, watching and admiring. The full rich tones of her voice vibrated with the heat of her words, her bosom rose and fell as in her indignation wave after wave of expression swept across her face, each one intensifying the charm she had for him.

"I suppose you include me in your list of suspects," she blurted out as he did not speak. "Why don't you say so at once? Your questions certainly suggest it."

"Do they?" he asked, with a smile which irritated her.

"Yes, they do. What else do they suggest? It would be quite in keeping with the rest of the business—you riding out here to ask me pointless questions while the people most likely to have been concerned in the robbery are left alone. They are known, I suppose you will say, where I am a stranger, someone you have never seen before——"

"You are wrong," he interrupted, still smiling; "I have seen you before."

Her eyes concentrated on his with keen intensity.

"When? Where?" she asked sharply.

"We were fellow-passengers by a coach four or five months back. You have forgotten me, but I"—now that the personal note had been struck, the note he wished so much to sound and yet shrank from, he was almost carried away by it; by an effort he checked himself, and instead of telling her all that the meeting had meant for him, he added, "I rarely forget a face when I have once seen it."

She flashed a swift glance at him, reading in his eyes, in his face, in his attitude, the confirmation of what she knew from the tone of his voice.

"But you—you do not—remember me," he said slowly as she did not reply. He saw the glance, saw the fleeting questioning light in her eyes, and with the fatuity bred of love-blindness, misread it.

"I do remember—distinctly," she answered softly. "I recognised you as you came on to the verandah. I thought it was you who had forgotten—or did not wish to remember."

As she spoke the last words softly, demurely, she raised her eyes to his and looked steadily at him with no sign on her face of her recent indignation.

"I not wish to remember? I not wish to remember you?" he exclaimed in a ringing tone. "Why—it was because I have never ceased to remember that I came here to-night. Your name was mentioned at Waroona—it was the only clue you gave me when we parted, the only clue I had to follow when I tried to find you, tried to trace you every day since then. I have never ceased to seek for you, never ceased to think of you, nor to remember the day I met you. Had you not been here to-night, had I found it was someone else with a similar name, I should not have forgotten you—I shall never do that—never."

She sat back in her chair, her eyes downcast, a slight frown puckering her brows. He saw the frown as she spoke and it checked his words, but he continued to watch her steadily, noting the graceful, yet seemingly unstudied way in which the wavy mass of her luxuriant hair was coiled on her head, the clear whiteness of her skin, the heavy fringe of her drooping lashes. Even as he watched she raised her eyes to his.

For one brief moment she allowed them to rest, filled with an earnestness and depth of softness that made his pulses leap again.

Impulsively he stretched out his hand to her across the table.

She lowered her glance, and a faint smile flickered round her lips.

"I must away," she said softly, as she arose. "You will need a good night's rest after your long and wearying ride."

He pushed away his chair, as he started abruptly to his feet. The warmth of his impulse went cold.

"I shall start with the dawn or before it," he said, keeping his eyes averted from the glamour of her face. "I have a riding-cloak. I will take this hammock-chair on to the verandah. Don't let me disturb you."

"But you cannot go in the morning without a bite," she replied.

"I shall require nothing," he said brusquely. "I shall be away before you are awake. I am merely staying to set your mind at rest on the question of the house being visited and robbed. Don't let me disturb you—or detain you."

She bent her head slowly and gracefully.

"As you will," she replied in a gentle voice. "Good night, Mr. Durham."

Without waiting for a reply she turned and went from the room, closing the door quietly after her.

He stood where she had left him, staring fixedly at the closed door.

"I was a fool to come, a greater fool to speak," he muttered savagely. "What satisfaction is there in knowing who she is, when——"

He swung round petulantly, diving his hand into his pocket for a pipe. When it was filled and lighted, he dragged his chair out on to the verandah, lowered the lamp flame to a glimmer, pushed-to the window, and lay back in the chair, blowing furious clouds of smoke out upon the night and staring, with unseeing eyes, into the dark.

But always before him there floated the vision of the speaking grey-blue eyes looking at him from the shelter of their dark-fringed lashes; always in his brain he heard the gentle melody of her voice as she had last spoken to him, and always there came to taunt and goad him the jarring memory of the half-mocking way in which she had pushed back upon himself the frank revelation he had made. But though it jarred, it had no power to lessen the fascination she exercised over him. Despite her rebuff, despite the seeming hopelessness of his infatuation, it held him. The more he tried to force it back, the stronger it grew; the greater, the more beautiful and more lovable did Mrs. Burke appear to be.

The jarring note passed from his memory. Under the soothing quiet of the night and the stillness of the bush, looming dark and mysterious against the sky, scarcely less sombre with only the light of the stars to illumine it, his fancy was filled with the image he had carried in his mind for so many months. The weariness of an arduous day added its softening influence, and he drifted out upon the sea of dreams and thence into a deep slumber, while yet his pipe was unfinished.

Chapter VI

The Face at the Window.

While Harding sat talking to Brennan in the office, Bessie came to him with a note.

"Mrs. Eustace asked me to give you this, sir," the girl said, as she handed it to him at the door.

He tore open the envelope. A single sheet of paper was enclosed, on which was written, "For the sake of the bygone days, come to me."

"Where is Mrs. Eustace?" he asked.

"She's in her room, Mr. Harding, in her little sitting-room."

It was one of the rooms where he had never been, a tiny chamber at the far end of the passage which she had made into a boudoir. Once he had seen into it through the open door, seen the daintiness with which it was decorated, a daintiness redolent of her as he had known her in the days when, for him, the world held no other woman.

And she had chosen this as the place where they should meet!

He knocked at the door, and heard her voice answer, bidding him to come in. She was sitting in a cane lounge-chair, listless, pale, and weary-eyed.

As he entered she gave him one swift glance and then looked away.

"Do you wish to see me, Mrs. Eustace?" he asked in a cold, formal voice.

She did not reply at once, but sat with her head bowed and her hands loosely clasped in her lap.

"If you will say what you wish to as quickly as you can, I shall be obliged," he said. "Brennan is in the office, and I have some matters to arrange with him."

Her head was raised slowly, steadily, until her face was turned full towards him.

"Will you please arrange them first?" she replied. "I want to say something which may take some time, and I—I would not inconvenience the bank."

"I would rather hear what you have to say first, Mrs. Eustace."

She shook her head.

"It is not a matter I can sum up in a few brief sentences," she replied. "If you cannot arrange things with Brennan and then come to me here, pray forget I mentioned anything about it."

He moved uneasily as she averted her face and sat back in her chair.

"I will see what I can do," he said shortly, and left the room.

When he returned to the office he found Brennan talking to Bessie, who had brought him some supper and a couple of blankets with which to make a bed on the floor. Brennan nodded towards them as Bessie disappeared.

"You know the idea of my being here at all, don't you?" he asked.

"To tell you the truth, I don't," Harding replied.

"The Sub-Inspector fancies someone may try to get back to learn what he can about our doings. You know who will most likely be asked, and so you see what it means when, as soon as I am here, and before I say a word about staying, these things are brought in. As if there is likely to be any sleep for me with the chance of

the Sub-Inspector riding up any hour and catching me off duty. But it shows what's in the wind, doesn't it?"

"Mrs. Eustace has asked me to discuss something with her," Harding said quietly. "She knows you are here to-night."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Harding. She knows that, I've no doubt, but how did she or the girl know I was to be on duty here all the night? Don't you see? Supposing the Sub-Inspector is right, and a certain person we know wants to hear all that had happened since he went away, is he likely to come while I am here? It is not difficult to put a lighted lamp in a window, or to leave a blind pulled up or drawn down, is it? Anything of the kind is enough to give him a warning that the coast is clear or that there is danger ahead."

"Oh, but we can easily stop that," Harding exclaimed. "We can easily prevent any signal being used."

"If you know what the signal is," Brennan said. "But if you don't know, what are you to do?"

"We shall have to watch."

"That's it, we shall have to watch and take care nobody knows it," Brennan replied in a low tone. "Have you a revolver?"

"No. The one we kept in the bank was stolen from the drawer with the money."

"Then slip this into your pocket," Brennan said, as he passed a bright nickel-plated "bull-dog" to Harding. "It's loaded in all the chambers and has a snap trigger; but it's no good for a long shot, though it makes as much noise as a service carbine. Don't hesitate to use it if anything happens—the noise will let me know, and there's no danger of hitting anyone with it unless you are a better shot than I am."

"But where are you going?"

Brennan jerked his head towards the door.

"You see me off the premises and then tell the girl to fetch those blankets away again. After that, keep your eyes open and rest assured that as soon as you let off the barker I've given you, I shall not be far off. If there is any arrangement such as I have suggested, my going now will put them off their guard and our gentleman will get the signal to make his call as expected. Bringing in those blankets has given the game away—to me it shows just what is in the wind."

When he had seen Brennan off the premises, Harding told Bessie to remove the blankets from the office, and returned to the little room.

The door was ajar when he reached it, but there was no answer to his rap. He pushed it open and entered. Mrs. Eustace was not there.

He turned, and came face to face with her as he stood in the doorway, though he had not heard her approach.

"I did not hear you coming," he exclaimed.

"No, I am wearing light shoes," she answered. "But won't you sit down? Have you made all your arrangements? I don't want to begin to say what I wish if you will have to go away before I have finished."

"There is nothing to call me away now. Brennan has gone," he said, as he took the chair she indicated.

"Before I begin, I must ask you to forgive me for mentioning the subject at all," she said slowly.

She sat facing him and, up to that moment, had kept her eyes fixed on him; but as she ceased speaking she glanced aside until her head was bowed as it had been previously. He took advantage of the opportunity to give one quick look round. The chair in which he sat was so placed that the profile of the person occupying it was thrown by the light of the lamp directly upon the window-blind. The window faced the bush at the back of the bank.

He moved his chair until his shadow fell on the wall, but then the lamp was between her and himself, and he could not watch her face.

"I will take this chair," he said shortly, as he stepped to the one where she had been sitting when he first came to the room. From it he commanded not only a complete view of her, but also out of the window, for the blind, pulled down to the full extent, was slightly askew, and left a space between it and the window-pane. Through that space he could see across the yard to the fence running round the allotment, and beyond it to the dark line of the bush, rendered the darker at the moment by the soft sheen of the rising moon showing above it.

A silence followed his movement, a silence during which she fidgeted uneasily and impatiently.

"You do not answer," she said presently. "Shall I go on?"

"I am waiting for you to do so," he replied.

"You will forgive me for mentioning this subject?"

"You have not mentioned any subject yet, Mrs. Eustace. I don't know what it is you wish to talk about."

"I am afraid it is very distasteful to you. I am not surprised if it is, but—if you knew everything in connection with it, you might think differently. That is why I want to tell you."

"Yes," he said indifferently, as she paused.

"You do not want to speak of it," she said again. "But I must explain—I ought to have done so directly you came up here. I want to explain my conduct to you when I returned your——"

"There is no need," he interrupted her. "That matter was at an end at once. There is no benefit to be gained by attempting to revive it."

"I do not seek to revive it," she retorted, colouring at his words. "Surely if I wish to set straight what I know is not straight, I am not seeking to revive it? I wish to make one thing clear to you. You have not known Charlie as long as I have. Neither do you know him as well as I do. In the face of the accusations made by that police inspector anything may be said or suspected."

He did not reply, and she went on.

"You, hearing Charlie painted in the blackest colours, are not likely to raise any protest either to yourself or to anyone else. You will rather believe all ill of him and will most likely impute things to him he never did. One thing I do not want blamed on to him. Those letters and things which were sent back to you, I sent—I sent them entirely myself—Charlie did not send them—I sent them."

She looked up at him quickly and then away as though she feared to meet his eyes.

"Is that all you wished to tell me?" he asked.

"I wished to tell you—all about it. I do not want you to blame Charlie. It was not his fault—nothing was his fault. I was a silly, flighty girl and fancied myself in love

with everyone, whereas, really, I never cared at all, not until I met him. I don't want you to think he was to blame, because, if you do, you may want to be revenged on him, and now you have this opportunity you may take it. If you believe me and realise he had nothing whatever to do with my changing my mind, more than to come into my life, as he did, then you may sympathise with him in his present trouble and save him all you can."

She did not attempt to look at him again as she spoke. He leaned back in his chair and turned his glance away from her, away to the space between the window and the blind. The first glint of the moon was stealing over the dark line of the bush and spreading over the open country between it and the line of fence. He could see, indistinctly, what seemed to be a heavy shadow moving slowly away from the trees.

"It is a subject on which I would rather say nothing, Mrs. Eustace," he said presently, without removing his eyes from the window. "If you wish to speak about it, and you think it will ease your mind in any way, I will listen to all you wish to say. But do not expect me to reply to you. Do not expect me to express any opinion. I do not wish to appear harsh, but I must tell you that so far as I am concerned, the curtain was rung down upon the last act of my romance when my letters were returned—was rung down to remain down for ever."

"I was afraid it would be a distasteful subject to you," she said; "but I must talk about it—I must. I have wanted to tell you for so long—I wanted to write to you and explain after the things were sent off, but—but it was so difficult. I felt how horrible it was of me, how horrible and how mean, never to say one word, but just throw everything in your face after—after all you had done for me. I deserve to suffer what I am going through now—I deserve everything. It was so contemptible of me to allow myself to be—to do what I did," she added quickly, and he felt rather than saw the way she glanced at him, for he was still staring out through the narrow opening between the window and the blind, away at the curious dark shadowy patch which was slowly moving further and further away from the line of thickly growing trees.

"Won't you say one word? Not even that you forgive me?"

Her voice was soft and gentle—the voice he remembered having heard so often in the bygone days—the days for whose sake she had appealed to him to come to her. He leaned forward in his chair, staring through the little slit of space between the blind and the window, intent upon distinguishing what it was he saw, resenting what he believed to be her efforts to beguile him.

"Do you hate me so much?"

Scarcely above a whisper the words reached him, a whisper with tears in it, and his heart shrank at the sound. He turned quickly towards her.

She started impulsively to her feet and held out her hands to him.

"Fred!" she exclaimed.

He sat unmoved, for the shadow in the distance was growing more and more distinct, and the suspicion with which he regarded her drove away every particle of commiseration, and made him blind to the emotion welling up in her eyes, hostile to the pathos in her voice.

She clasped her hands and let them drop limply in front of her as she sank into her chair again.

"Oh, I am so lonely, so lonely," she murmured, "I don't know what to do. If you would only help me. I know I behaved horribly to you, vilely; but surely—surely you have some pity for me in my misfortune. I have no one to turn to—no one—no one. If you would only help me to understand—if you would only talk the matter over with me, it would be some relief."

"There can be no benefit in talking over what has passed—the best thing is to forget it ever happened. That is what I have striven to do. If you returned my letters of your own free will, you were merely exercising a right to which you were perfectly entitled. You preferred Eustace to me, that is all."

"All?" she echoed in a tone of amazement. "All? Is that what you thought? Is that what you think?"

"What else can I think?" he retorted. "If you chose for yourself——"

She sprang up and faced him with widely opened, gleaming eyes.

"I did not," she cried. "I did not. There! Now you know. It was a——"

She stopped abruptly, staring with eyes so full of entreaty that he looked away from her lest the emotion roused by her words, by her attitude and her eyes, carried him away at a moment when he required above all things complete self-control. To avoid her eyes he turned once more to the window—the moving shadow had grown clearer—it had split in twain, and he could distinctly see the forms of two horsemen riding swiftly towards the bank.

The sight sent a chill through him; he recoiled from the woman whose pleading a moment before had thrilled him, recoiled from her as from some reptile. While she was appealing to him, pleading with him, the man she was expecting—whom she was even ready to vilify in order to throw dust in the eyes of the one who was a menace to him—was coming in response, probably, to a signal given by the clear, lamp-lit window-blind.

He faced her where she stood, his eyes hard and cold, his mouth set stern.

"I prefer not to hear anything further on the subject," he said in a measured tone. "It is a subject which does not now concern me."

"Fred!"

Despite his anger, despite the resentment the spectacle of those two riders had roused within him, the anguish in her voice cut him. Her eyes, fixed on his, were filled with intense sorrow, her face went ashen.

"Oh, Fred! I——"

She swayed as she stood, staggered, and sank into the chair between the lamp and the window, flinging her arms out over the table and burying her head upon them as she gave vent to a fit of sobbing. But as she moved, her shadow swept across the blind.

He looked out again upon the moonlit scene—the horsemen had passed from the field of vision. He leaned forward to get a wider view, but there was no further sign of them—it was as though the shadow passing across the blind had been a danger signal on which they had acted immediately it was given.

He wondered whether Brennan had seen them, whether he was also on the look out or was waiting hidden somewhere until he heard the warning shot. Harding was to fire in the event of anything happening. Ought he to fire now? Ought he to give the alarm or wait, lest the sound of the shot warned the two horsemen as well as alarmed Brennan?

Leaning forward, with his attention riveted as he gazed through the narrow slit, he scarcely noticed that Mrs. Eustace had ceased to sob—the sudden appearance of her head, in shadow, upon the blind, made him start to his feet.

"Put out that lamp," he exclaimed, but before she could move he was past her and had blown out the flame.

"Fred! What is it?" she asked in an agitated whisper.

"Silence," he said fiercely, as he crept back to the window and stooped to peer into the night.

Along the fence which formed the boundary of the bank's ground, the fence Durham had pointed out as the one over which Eustace must have made his escape, he saw the figure of a man stealthily creeping.

He thrust his hand into the pocket where he had slipped the revolver Brennan had given him.

"Fred! Fred! What do you see?" he heard Mrs. Eustace whisper, and in the dim obscurity he saw her come to his side.

"Quiet," he said harshly.

Both her hands, trembling, touched his arm.

"Tell me," she whispered; "I will be brave. Who is it you see?"

The thin streak of moonlight falling through the narrow space between the blind and the window glinted on the bright barrel of the revolver, as he drew it from his pocket.

She fell on her knees beside him, her arms flung round him, her voice in his ear.

"Oh, Fred—no, not that! Is it Charlie? Oh, don't—don't——"

He pushed her back roughly, his eyes straining to catch another glimpse of the creeping figure which had gone out of sight as he raised his revolver ready to fire.

"Oh, no, no! Don't shoot him! Don't, Fred, don't! He——"

Her words ended in a shriek, for even as she spoke there appeared outside the window, showing clear with the moonlight falling full upon it, the face of a yellow-bearded man. Harding wrested himself free from her clinging arms, leapt to the window, and tore the blind away.

The form of the man, running swiftly, was disappearing amongst the bushes.

Heedless of the glass in front of him, of the terrified woman at his knees, Harding raised his revolver and fired.

As the shivered glass crashed to the ground, the report of other shots, fired in rapid succession, came from outside, and across the patch of grass, firing as he ran, Brennan dashed after the runaway.

Harding scrambled through the broken window and ran after him.

From behind the clustering shrubs which formed a screen in front of the chicken-run, there came the sound of horses galloping. Brennan stopped as he heard it. When Harding caught up to him, he was rapidly reloading his revolver.

"He's slipped us," he cried. "The sub-inspector has my horse, and ordered me not to leave the bank till he came back. And there's that scoundrel riding away from under our noses!"

"Did you see him?" Harding exclaimed.

"See him? Wasn't I crawling on him round the house when she screamed out to him, and you fired? Another two minutes and I had him, yellow beard and all. Now

we know who the man was who called at the bank to cash a cheque after hours. Anyhow, I'll have the woman safe before she can do any more mischief. I'll arrest her right away, and the girl as well. They're both in the game, if you ask me."

Chapter VII

Snared.

Durham awakened with a sense of oppression.

For the moment he could not recall where he was. It seemed as though some sound had disturbed him, yet before he opened his eyes he realised the utter silence which reigned.

It was the silence which brought back to him where he was. He had fallen asleep as he lay in the hammock chair on the verandah at Waroona Downs.

In his half-awakened state he made an effort to sit up. But he could not move—arms, legs, body were held as though in paralysis. He could only open his eyes.

Before him, in the faint light shed by the down-turned lamp, he saw the figure of a man, leaning slightly forward, clad in the attire of an ordinary bushman—an unbuttoned jacket hanging loosely open over a cotton shirt; tweed trousers secured at the waist by a narrow strap; travel-stained leggings and heavy boots with well-worn spurs dangling at the heels. The head was covered by a soft felt hat pulled forward, shading the upper part of the face, while the lower was hidden by a thick growth of yellow beard. The hair, where it showed under the hat, was fair almost to whiteness and close-cropped. Eyebrows and lashes of the same light hue gave a sinister expression to the eyes.

Durham recognised him at once as the man Eustace had declared called at the bank after office hours.

Mrs. Burke's presentiment had come true! The men from whom he had so lightly offered to protect her had stolen upon him while he slept.

With a frantic plunge he strove to break free, at the same moment opening his mouth to shout a warning. But even as his lips parted, a hand came from behind him and placed a soft muffling substance over his mouth.

"Tie it—tight," the man in front said in a low whisper.

Durham felt the passing of a thong round and round his head. He tried to raise his legs to kick the floor of the verandah, but they were too securely fastened to the sides of the chair. He could move neither hand nor foot. He was as helpless as though he were dead.

The man with the yellow beard bent nearer.

"We'll see you again—later," he whispered. "That's a good horse you were riding—Government property, I think, it was. Well, it has changed owners."

He moved noiselessly away and Durham was left alone. Bracing his muscles, he strained at the cords which bound him, trying to writhe himself free. The chair creaked. In a moment the man with the yellow beard was back.

"If you wriggle for a year you won't get free," he said in a harsh whisper. "But I tell you what you will get; that's a crack on the head to keep you quiet. Do you hear? You lay still, or there'll be an ugly bump on your skull."

He stepped out of sight, and Durham heard the window he had pulled-to quietly pushed open. A rage of mingled anger and jealousy swept over him. Regardless of the threat, he plunged and struggled till the veins in his head were bursting, and he smothered as the muffler over his mouth worked up and covered his nostrils.

Suddenly a sound cut through the night which sent his blood cold.

From within the house there came the wild, terrified shriek of a woman. A hoarse shout blended with it, and then the report of a revolver-shot echoed through the place.

For a few minutes there was silence, deathly, nerve-destroying silence. Durham, trembling with mortification, strained his ears to catch some further sound.

Two shots in quick succession rang out, followed by a rush of scuffling feet, and on the air there came the thud of galloping horses' hoofs.

"They're off, Patsy! The rifle, quick! Quick! Oh, you old fool, be quick! They'll be too far!"

Durham heard the words screamed in a high shrill voice. Thereafter he could only hear the hum of voices dimly.

Presently they came clearer.

"I tell you only two got away, three horses and two men. I saw them. The other's somewhere. Sure I hope I put a bullet through him, and I believed him when he said he was a police inspector. Oh, what a country to come to. To think that the dirty—oh, look out, Patsy! Look out, you old fool!"

The noise of a shot rang through Durham's head as though a pistol had been fired close to his ear. He saw a splinter fly from the verandah post as the bullet glanced off.

"I've hit him! I've hit him! See if he's dead, Patsy. Don't be frightened. I tell you I'll cover him if he moves."

The light spread clear as the lamp was turned up, and Durham heard the slow-moving footsteps of the old man approaching.

"Bedad! It's all tied up he is!"

Quick footsteps came, and as Durham turned his eyes he saw, looking down at him, with her hair flying loose, her cheeks white, and her eyes wild with excitement, Nora Burke.

"What has happened? What does it mean?" she said slowly. "Patsy, get a knife and—no, let me."

She reached and caught hold of the cord tied round Durham's legs.

"Get a knife, Patsy. It is too tight to untie."

Obedient, the old man brought her the table-knife Durham had used at his supper, and with it she cut through some of the cords.

"Can you move now? Oh, it's a gag they put on you!" she exclaimed, as she leaned over him and cut the thong which held the muffler so securely across his mouth.

"Free my arm, and give me the knife," he said, as soon as he could speak. "I will cut quicker."

She placed the knife in his hand when she had slipped the cord twined round his arm. He could scarcely close his fingers on it, so stiff had they become, and he fumbled clumsily before he had cut himself free. Then he rose to his feet and stood unsteadily.

Patsy had vanished; Mrs. Burke watched him from the shadow at the side of the window.

"You saw them?" he exclaimed. "It was you who fired?"

Before she could answer his eye caught sight of something white lying by the chair. He stooped and picked it up. It was what had been used to muffle his cries, and he saw it was a handkerchief.

Instinctively he opened it out, stepped into the full glare of the light and ran his eyes along the edge. At one corner a name, boldly written, showed clear.

"Charles N. Eustace."

He could not repress an exclamation as he read the name.

"What is it?" she cried, as she came over to him.

She gripped his arm as she also read the name.

"Eustace!" she cried. "Eustace—then it was he who——"

She stopped abruptly, staring at him.

"Did you recognise him?" he asked.

"It was dark—I only saw them against the sky. They had their backs to me as they rode off. I mean it was Eustace who robbed the bank."

"When did you come to that conclusion?"

"I said so at first—I told Brennan. Why did you not arrest him? I told Brennan to go in and arrest him when I left, before you arrived."

"Brennan went to do so, Mrs. Burke."

"Then—how could Eustace be here to-night if Brennan arrested him?"

"Brennan did not arrest him. By the time he reached the dining-room at the bank it was empty. Eustace had disappeared. This handkerchief is the first token of him that has come to light since you saw him."

"Disappeared?"

Her eyes opened to their utmost as she uttered the word. It was as though she could speak nothing more, for she stood staring, her clasped hands pressed to her bosom, her dishevelled hair flowing in great masses and framing her face with its dark folds.

"Disappeared—until to-night," he said. "This handkerchief completes the chain of circumstances which points to Eustace as the person mainly concerned in the robbery."

"How sad, oh, how sad, for his poor wife," she exclaimed. "Why is it, Mr. Durham, that the woman always has to suffer while the man goes free?"

"The man will not go free. There is a net spread for him he cannot possibly escape. Tell me, which way did they ride?"

"You are not going after them? You must not do that—you must not face that risk."

"Risk is the pastime of my life, Mrs. Burke. But in this there is no risk. I shall follow their tracks until I find where they are hiding."

"No, no! You must not go. They will hear you coming; they will see you and then—think! You, who have only just escaped them! What mercy would they show?"

"The mercy I would show them," he answered fiercely. "They have stolen the revolver from my belt. Will you lend me the one you have?"

"It is the only one I have. What shall I do if they come back and I am without it?"

"Then I must go without."

He moved away, but before he had gone two steps she was at his side, her hand on his arm, her face turned appealingly to him.

"No, you must not! Mr. Durham, I ask you. Don't go. You may be throwing your life away. They may come back. Don't leave me alone in the place. Don't, please don't. For my sake, for my sake, stay till it is light."

Gently he took her hand in his and lifted it from his arm.

"You who have been so brave to-night, would not have me show cowardice," he said softly. "These scoundrels must not remain at large a moment longer than we can help. There is more now at stake than the bank's money—I shall not rest till they are captured, for only then shall I feel you are safe."

"But you must not go now."

Her disengaged hand was laid gently, caressingly, on his shoulders; her face, showing white amid the tumbled mass of her tresses, was close to his, so close he could feel the faint fanning of her breath and catch the subtle perfume from her hair. The fingers of the hand he held gripped his in a clinging, lingering clasp; the hand on his shoulder pressed firmer; she leaned against him.

"You must not go—you must not—for my sake," she murmured.

The head drooped till the tumbled tresses met the caressing hand; one pale cheek was so close to his he had but to bend his head to touch it with his lips. His arm slipped round her, drawing her soft, yielding form yet closer to him, and over him there swept a wave of emotion which in another moment had carried him away upon its crest, away from duty, away from the prosaic material world, away from everything but the woman he held.

"You must not say that," he said hoarsely. "You must not. You are the last who should try to turn me from my duty."

"Oh, but I cannot—I cannot let you go—it may be to your death. Wait till day comes," she answered. "There are horses in the paddock. Patsy can fetch you one. If you go now you will only wander aimlessly in the dark while they may turn upon you, if they do not get farther and farther away. Stay till the dawn."

"It will not be dawn for many hours."

"Why, what time do you think it is? It is nearly four."

Nearly four! Then he had slept right through the night so soundly that on waking he thought he had only dozed.

"You will not go? Tell me you will not go?" she whispered, and he felt her hands touch him lightly.

He drew back, fearful lest her fascination again overmastered him.

"Show me which way they went," he said brusquely, as he walked to the steps leading down from the verandah.

As he reached them he turned. Mrs. Burke had drawn back into the shadow beyond the open window.

"Will you show me which way they went?" he repeated.

He saw her hide her face in her hands, and the sound of a choked sob came to him. In a moment he was at her side.

She shrank to the wall as he approached, raising her head and shaking back the loose locks which streamed across her face.

"Go!" she exclaimed. "Go! Leave me! What am I that you should care? Only a poor, weak, sad, and lonely woman. Forget——"

"Do not say that," he answered quickly, his voice vibrating with passion. "You—you do not know—I would give my life——"

"I will not give you cause to say I kept you from your duty, Mr. Durham," she went on. "Forget my weakness. I promise you it shall never occur again."

She slipped past him and stood for a moment at the window, just long enough to flash one look of resentment at him before she passed into the room and extinguished the lamp.

Chapter VIII

The Note That Failed.

When Durham, having walked in from Waroona Downs, arrived at the bank, he found the township in a state of excitement bordering on panic.

The noise of the firing during the night had brought everyone who was awake at the time rushing to the scene. Men had mounted their horses and raced away in the direction the fugitives were supposed to have taken, returning hours afterwards with the information that no trace of them could be discovered, beyond the prints of their horses' hoofs, here and there, right up to the line of rocky rises which formed the commencement of the range.

Durham brushed aside the volley of questions directed at him as to how it came about that he had returned on foot. Passing into the bank he asked Harding to come with him into the manager's office, and told Brennan to clear everyone else out of the building.

As soon as he had heard Harding's account of what had happened, he produced the handkerchief bearing Eustace's name.

"Can you identify that?" he asked. "It is marked, but I want to know if you can recognise it apart from the name it bears?"

"It is like the handkerchiefs I use," Harding answered, as he pulled one out of his pocket. "Eustace and I ordered some to be sent up, and we divided them, taking half each."

"Did you mark them?"

"Mrs. Eustace did that for us. Is the name on this?"

He turned it round until he saw the name.

"Yes, that is one of Eustace's," he said.

"What time do you think it was when you saw that man's face at the window?" Durham inquired.

"Between half-past nine and ten—nearer ten probably."

"Was the face familiar?"

"It was, but I cannot recall where I have seen it before. It struck me as being a familiar face disguised. It was not Eustace's."

"You feel sure of that?"

"I'm quite sure. I wish you had been here to have seen it."

"I did see it."

"But you were at Waroona Downs."

"So I was. It was there I saw it. That man and his companion stuck the house up. I was asleep on the verandah and they must have crept on me, for when I awakened I was bound hand and foot. The man you describe was standing in front of me. When I attempted to shout to warn Mrs. Burke, a handkerchief was pressed over my mouth and tied by someone who kept behind me. That is the handkerchief which was used. Who would you say tied it?"

"I should suspect Eustace, of course; or do you think the man with the beard was Eustace?"

Durham shook his head.

"No," he said. "The description I have of Eustace does not agree at all with the build and general appearance of that man. If Eustace were there at the time he must have kept behind me. Is Mrs. Burke a woman who talks much?"

"Talks? She does nothing else. She tells everyone everything."

"Then it is no use my trying to keep this episode of the handkerchief quiet?"

"Not if she knows anything about it. She will tell everyone about it directly she comes to the township."

"Oh, she knows about it. She is a plucky woman. She drove them off, firing at them; then she discovered me on the verandah and nearly shot me into the bargain. When I was set free this handkerchief was on the verandah and she saw it as soon as I picked it up."

"Then everyone in the township will hear about it," Harding said. "She is to come in this afternoon to meet Mr. Wallace."

"When is he due?"

"About noon he ought to be here."

"Then I'll ride out and meet him," Durham said shortly. "Is there anyone in particular who was with the crowd last night to whom I can go for further information?"

"Mr. Gale was one."

"I'll see him," Durham said, and left the bank, finding Gale in the street discussing the latest raid with half a dozen other men of the town. He left them at once and came over to the sub-inspector.

"Look here, it's no use wasting more time," he exclaimed warmly. "We all say there is only one thing to be done if those scoundrels are to be caught. We must scour the ranges. I'll volunteer and so will everyone else in the place. The only hope is to ride them down."

"Quite useless," Durham replied curtly.

"It's the only course to adopt," Gale retorted. "We're all bushmen here and know what's the proper thing to do. You can't apply town methods to bush-rangers, you know. You may be the smartest man in the force at catching city burglars and

spielers, but you are out of your element in the bush. There's only one thing to be done—track them down."

"How many are there?"

"Well, two for certain—probably more."

"Probably more—exactly. And most probably one or other of the remainder is in the town acting as a spy for the others. If that is so, what will happen when you set out in force? Everyone would volunteer, as you say, and one of the number would give warning of what was being done. What chance would there be then of making a capture? You tried last night. What was the result?"

"We found their tracks."

"Then why didn't you follow them?"

"Because with the crowd riding all over the ground we lost them, and——"

"Just so," Durham interrupted. "It is what would happen again if your suggestion were carried out. This is a one man's job, Mr. Gale. Directly I want assistance I will come to you, but in the meantime I must ask you to keep your fellow-townsmen from interfering."

He went on to the police-station, leaving Gale to convey his refusal of assistance to the men who were keen on taking the matter into their own hands. The refusal was received with open resentment and the group moved towards the station to argue the matter out with the sub-inspector, but before they reached it Durham rode out of the yard and set his horse to a gallop along the road leading to the railway.

"It's all right, boys, he's got a clue," one of the men exclaimed scornfully. "He's going to catch them at the junction!"

"Give him a cheer for luck," another cried, and the ironical shout reached Durham as he galloped. But he paid no heed to it, riding on steadily till he was away from the town and some miles along the road when he saw, coming towards him, a pair-horse buggy accompanied by a couple of mounted troopers. As they came nearer he recognised Wallace in the buggy. The troopers drew to the side of the track as he reined in beside the vehicle.

"Come back along the road a bit," he exclaimed, as he got off his horse and gave the bridle to one of the troopers.

"Why are these troopers with you?" he asked when he and Wallace had walked out of hearing.

"I have close on thirty thousand pounds in the buggy. I have had to bring with me not only sufficient funds to enable the bank to carry on its ordinary business, but a further twenty-five thousand in gold to carry through the purchase of Waroona Downs from Mr. Dudgeon."

"Why is it necessary for all this gold to be used? I did not care to ask Mr. Harding, but if it is not a bank secret——"

"Oh, it is no secret," Wallace exclaimed. "Mr. Dudgeon had a quarrel with the bank some time since, and, in addition to giving himself a great deal of unnecessary trouble, he delights in making everything we have to do with him as unpleasant and difficult as possible. Any payments we have to make to him have to be made in gold. He is legally entitled to demand it, and he avails himself of his right to the utmost. That is why I have had to push through with the amount so as to be able to complete Mrs. Burke's purchase to-day. As we were not anxious to

lose another twenty-five thousand, we obtained an escort from head-quarters, but I fancy the men have to return to-night."

"Eustace would know this second amount would have to be sent up?"

"Of course he would."

"And the presence of your escort would announce to him or his spies, assuming that he is concerned in the robbery, that you have it with you?"

"Naturally; but the risk was more than the general manager would allow for me to travel with it unless I had police protection."

"You expect to pay it out this afternoon?"

"I anticipate Dudgeon will be at the bank clamouring for it, under threat of crying off the sale, by the time I get there. The first thing I shall most probably do is to pay it over."

"So that it will soon be out of the bank, and the bank's interest in it will have ceased."

"Exactly," Wallace replied. "Mr. Dudgeon, who refuses to act through the bank, will have the pleasure of providing his own strong-room for its safe keeping."

"Eustace would know that too?"

"Certainly."

"Then you will have to send one or both of those troopers with Mr. Dudgeon; otherwise he will be robbed to-night. It would certainly be the last thing necessary to identify Eustace with the robbery at the bank, but there is already enough to prove that, to my mind. Your duty ceases when you have handed this sum over, but there mine begins."

"I intend to suggest to Mr. Dudgeon the advisability of his having police protection while the gold is in his possession, in view of what has already occurred. But I am quite sure that the suggestion will be treated with contempt."

"Tell me where Mr. Dudgeon lives."

"He has another station on the opposite side of the township to Waroona Downs, about ten miles out. He wants to sell that, too, and I don't mind saying we all hope he will soon find a purchaser."

"How many men has he there?"

"Oh, he sold off all his stock from both places and discharged his hands some months ago. He might have a couple of men about the place, but not any more, I should say."

"Well, try and persuade him to take the escort. If he will not, send the men out to the station to-night. I shall probably be there by the time they arrive, but you need not mention this to them. Give the impression, if you can, that I am on my way to Wyalla, and don't be surprised if I take you unawares any time between this and noon to-morrow."

"I'm never surprised at anything you do, Durham," Wallace retorted grimly. "We're quite satisfied the money will be recovered if head-quarters leave you alone."

"I hope so—I can't say more," Durham said.

"But I can," Wallace continued. "It's in confidence, of course, but the directors have decided that in the event of your recovering this money they will present you with five thousand. I don't suppose that will make you work any harder, but it may interest you to know it."

Durham rode at a slower pace when he had parted with Wallace than when he came out of the township. The news that a fifth of the missing money would be his when he recovered it gave him a far greater incentive than Wallace anticipated. With five thousand pounds behind him he knew his prospects of winning the woman who had fascinated him would be much greater than if he had only his official salary as a financial backing to his suit. Further, if he succeeded in recovering the gold he would also recover the stolen documents. He had little doubt but what he would be able to woo her successfully, were he able to return to her the papers which had been stolen and go to her with his freshly won laurels of victory.

A mile down the road he turned his horse into the bush and rode straight for the range which rose between the township and Waroona Downs. Skirting the flanking spurs, he followed on until he caught sight of the tracks left by the horsemen who had ridden after the fugitives the night before. In their haste and lack of system, he saw how they had crossed and recrossed the marks left by the riders they were chasing. He walked his horse to and fro until he came upon the tracks of the two horses showing clear beyond the jumbled confusion of hoof-prints the amateur trackers had made.

The two had ridden direct to the range. As he followed the track, bending down in his saddle to note the marks, he laughed aloud. The men were the veriest fools at bush-craft. There were instances by the dozen which revealed to him the fact that neither had had any experience in tracking, and so had failed to avail themselves of the chances the ground they had ridden over offered to render their track difficult to follow. Where the ground was soft, they had not swerved to avoid it, but had left the prints of their horses' hoofs showing so clearly that to the skilled bushman it was as an open book he could read as he rode. Where low-growing shrubs stood in their way they had crashed through, sometimes setting their horses to jump what should have been ridden round. Everywhere the same thing was manifest. The riders were not bushmen; they were in a great hurry; they were in country with which they were not acquainted, and were hastening towards some landmark that would bring them to a locality where they would be more at their ease.

As he followed the track, he sat back in his saddle. There was no need to study the ground when he could see the hoof-prints showing right ahead. So it was that he saw what those other riders had failed to distinguish in the half light of the moon. There was a sudden dip in the surface, a shallow depression sloping down to a little stream. Riding, as they must have been riding, at a full gallop, it was a trap for an unsteady horse and one of the horses was unsteady, for it had propped at the brow of the slope, slipped, and come down on its knees, pitching its rider clear over its head.

The spot where he fell was still distinguishable by the bent and broken herbage and his heels had scored the ground as he scrambled to his feet, caught his horse, and hastily remounted. He had been in a great hurry and so had his companion, for there was no break in the tracks of the second horse—the other man had ridden on without a moment's halt, had ridden past his fallen companion and left him to do the best he could for himself. All this was plain at one glance. Again

Durham laughed aloud at the folly of the pair, as he reined in his horse and sprang from the saddle.

In his fall the fugitive rider had dropped something. It lay white on the ground just beyond the mark he had made in falling. Durham picked it up—a closed, unaddressed envelope bearing the bank's impress on the flap.

He tore it open. Inside was a sheet of paper with the bank's heading, but undated.

> "No one saw me go, and I am safe now where they will never find me. Stay there till you hear from me again. A friend will bring you word. Ask no questions, but send your answer as directed. You must do everything as arranged, or all is lost. Whatever you do, don't leave till I send you word. I am safe till the storm blows over.—C."

As Durham read the words, written in pencil and obviously in haste, he was satisfied that his suspicion not only of Eustace, but of Mrs. Eustace, was correct. The man with the yellow beard whom he himself had seen, was possibly the "friend," through whom communication was to be maintained between husband and wife. He and Eustace had evidently ridden in during the evening with the intention of advising Mrs. Eustace of the successful flight of her husband. Hesitating to approach the bank, until he was certain the way was clear, Eustace had given the note to his companion to deliver. Harding's vision of the face at the window completed the picture. The man had crept up to the window of the room where it was probably arranged Mrs. Eustace was to wait. So long as any other person who might have been in the room occupied the chair Mrs. Eustace placed, the shadow on the blind would warn the visitor that the coast was not clear. It was due to the fact that Harding had noticed the shadow and had moved to another chair that the man had so nearly been captured.

What had followed was equally clear to Durham's mind.

Directly he found he was discovered the man had run to his horse and, together with his companion, had galloped off, too quickly to allow him either to explain how he had failed to deliver the message or to hand it back to Eustace. It was most probably he who had come down with his horse at the edge of the depression, by which time the letter would have passed completely from his mind and so he would not notice its loss. Under the circumstances it was very unlikely he would tell the truth to his companion, but would rather leave Eustace under the impression that the letter had been put where Mrs. Eustace would find it. Sooner or later, therefore, Eustace would make another attempt to communicate with his wife. If he were not captured otherwise there would be every hope of securing him by keeping a close watch upon her.

With the letter in his pocket Durham remounted his horse and continued to follow the track. It led him into the broken country which formed the outlying spurs of the range, and continued along a narrow depression lying between two ridges. The trees grew closer together in the shelter of the little valley, and the track turned at right angles and continued up the side of one of the ridges.

The surface became more rocky and Durham had to watch closely for the hoof-prints as he gradually ascended to the top. For a time the track ran along the

summit and then turned down the other slope, following the course of what, in the rainy season, would be a small rivulet. This again turned where it met the bed of a larger stream and Durham set his horse at a canter as he saw, distinct as a road, the marks left by the runaways right along the bed of the stream.

As he went he worked out the direction in which he was travelling; the stream he was following was evidently one which fed the watercourse crossing the road in the range. It turned and twisted in and out small flanking spurs, down the sides of which other streams had cut narrow scars, now as dry as the stream-bed along which he was riding, but which, in the time of the rains, would be roaring little torrents adding their quota to that great pool dammed back by the mountain road.

Suddenly the creek took a sharp turn round a jutting bluff, and as he passed beyond it he reined in his horse. Scarce twenty yards in front was a sheet of water, its surface, without a ripple, reflecting the tree-clad slopes that encompassed it. In the sand of the stream-bed the track was so strong it might have been made only a few hours ago.

He rode warily to the water's edge. The pool stretched on both sides away into the hills, but it was not that which made him rein in his horse and sit motionless.

Along the margin of the pool there was a strip of sandy soil. It extended to the right and to the left of the creek-mouth. Upon it the marks both of wheels and hoof-prints showed.

The tracks he had been following swung sharp to the right; the wheel-marks came from the left, crossed the creek-bed and continued to the right.

His first impulse was to spur his horse along the track to the right, see where it led, and then return along it to the left, but the twenty-five thousand pounds to be paid to Dudgeon would be at the mercy of the marauders, if, as Wallace anticipated, the old man refused police protection.

Great as the temptation was to learn where the track led and whence it came, Durham set his face against it.

He had stumbled on a clue, but the following it up was not for that day. Later he would return and complete his discovery. For the present he must leave it.

There was a long ride before him if he were to reach Dudgeon's homestead at Taloona by sunset. That Eustace was one of the two men concerned in the robbery of the bank he had now no doubt. The question he had to consider was who the other man was. At the back of his mind there was a lurking suspicion that the owner of Taloona might possess information on the subject if he could be induced or inveigled to reveal it.

He glanced regretfully in the direction the tracks led. He would have preferred to follow them to the end, but after all he might get nearer the solution of the problem by a visit to Taloona.

Chapter IX

Dudgeon’s Hospitality.

Within half an hour of Wallace's arrival at the bank Dudgeon drove up.

He scrambled out of his rackety old buggy and stamped into the place, passing direct into the little room Eustace had used as a private office, where, by the chance of circumstances, he came face to face with Mrs. Burke.

His keen, grey, hawk-like eyes flashed an envenomed look at her, and were met by a glance not one whit less steadfast. For a moment he stood, his shaggy white brows meeting in a scowl as he found himself confronted by one who even to his distorted vision possessed a charm of face and figure such as he had not seen since the days of Kitty Lambton.

Something in the eyes which met his touched a chord of memory long suppressed. So Kitty had looked when he met her for the first time after her flight with O'Guire; so she had looked the last time he had seen her when she had pleaded for mercy to her dying parents and he had taunted her and mocked her till she turned and left him with curses as deep-voiced as any he himself could have uttered.

"This is Mrs. Burke, the purchaser of Waroona Downs, Mr. Dudgeon," he heard, and faced round on the speaker, turning his back upon her.

"Who are you?" he blurted out.

"I am the officer in charge of the bank for the time being," Wallace replied suavely.

"Where's Eustace? He's the only man I know in the matter."

"He is not here at present, Mr. Dudgeon. But that need not concern you. I assume you have come to complete the sale of——"

"I only know Eustace. I'm prepared to deal with him—I don't know you and don't want to."

"Unfortunately Mr. Eustace cannot be present. But I am in his place. I arrived from the head office this morning with the gold you demand as payment for the sale of Waroona Downs. You may have noticed it as you came in—the bags are on the counter in charge of the police escort."

"But where's Eustace? That's what I want to know."

He looked from Wallace to Harding savagely.

"If you are prepared to sign the transfer, Mr. Dudgeon, we can proceed with the business," Wallace replied. "Mrs. Burke is waiting."

Dudgeon glanced at her covertly.

She was standing, as she stood throughout the subsequent proceedings, a silent spectator, irritating him by the mere fact that she was so absolutely impassive. When the time came for her to sign the formal documents which made Waroona Downs hers, Wallace placed a chair at the table; but she ignored it, bending down gracefully as she signed her name in beautifully flowing characters.

Old Dudgeon's hands, knotted and stiff with many a day's toil, were not familiar with the pen. As he laboured with the coarse, splodgy strokes which ranked as his signature, the sight of the delicate curves of the letters she had made fanned the flame of his wrath still higher. He also stood to sign, not because she had done so, but because he scorned to use a chair which belonged to his enemies. When he drew back from the table he saw how she had been standing almost behind him, looking over his shoulder as he wrote. A smile which he read as a sign of derision was on her lips and in her eyes.

He kicked the chair viciously towards her.

"Why don't you sit down, woman?" he exclaimed.

"Because I prefer to stand—man," she replied.

It was the first time he had heard her voice, and he started at the sound, wincing as, with one quick, furtive glance, he met her eyes again.

"Is that all you want?" he asked Wallace abruptly.

"Thank you, Mr. Dudgeon, that is all. Will you take the gold with you, or leave it for safety in the bank?"

"Leave it at the bank, eh?" he sneered. "No, thank you, Mr. Wallace, I trust you as far as I trust your bank, and you know how far that is without my telling you."

"Very good, Mr. Dudgeon. Will you watch it while it is being carried to your buggy? There are two troopers here who have acted as my escort from the head office. If you care to take them with you as a protection——"

"I want neither you nor your troopers," Dudgeon snarled. "I can take care of myself and my money, too, without anyone's help."

He watched, with undisguised suspicion, while the counted piles of sovereigns were replaced in the bags, while the bags were carried away and stacked in the rackety old vehicle. Then, when the tally was complete, he walked out of the bank, climbed into the buggy, gathered up the reins and drove away without a word or a glance for anyone.

The bitterness of defeat was rankling in him, the defeat of his lifelong determination that never, while he was on the earth to prevent it, should a woman live where his faith in the sex had been wrecked. It was bitter to think how he had been foiled after all by a woman, but still more so when the woman was of such a type as the one who had outwitted him. It was a new experience for him to be beaten at his own game, still a newer experience to find himself remembering the one by whom he was beaten as he was remembering the woman whose voice, despite his surly antagonism, rang in his ears with a melody which was as the song of a syren. Each time he had measured swords with her she had triumphed—just as, in the far-off days, Kitty Lambton had triumphed.

Kitty Lambton!

He pulled himself up short as the name passed through his mind. Why should he recall her now as Kitty Lambton when she had ceased to be that the day she left Waroona Downs with O'Guire? Why should this resolute woman recall her as Kitty Lambton and not as Kitty O'Guire?

As he drove along the lonely bush track which led to Taloona, his mind drifted across the years to the time when first he had come to the district, to the time when Kitty Lambton stood for him for all that was noble and generous and pure in life; when he was content to work the livelong day with a light heart and happy mind, satisfied with the reward of her presence when his day's work was done. For a mile or so of the journey he strove to nurse his resentment against this clear-eyed woman whose raven black hair was in such absolute contrast to the flaxen locks of the vanished Kitty, but whose voice had caused the intrusion of these bygone memories into his waking thoughts. But gradually, unconsciously, the long-suppressed recollections of the girl who had charmed his youthful fancies took possession of him.

Hitherto, whenever he had remembered her, it was with bitterness and anger; but now his mind was as free from anger as though the cause for it had never existed. It was the time when Kitty was the charmer which had come to him, the time when the gnawing anguish of betrayal was unknown, and slowly there obtruded itself upon him a dim, shadowy, speculating wonder as to all which might have been had she never changed for him from the charmer to the betrayer.

But he was not used to introspective analysis, and the efforts to grapple with the subtleties of his own subconscious memories brought a tendency to his mind to lose the clear-cut edge of a fact in a blur of misty vision. No longer did the memory of Nora Burke irritate him. Had he associated her with Kitty the betrayer, the irritation would never have passed; but as it was Kitty the charmer her voice brought to him, he drifted, in the sere and yellow age, down the stream of fantasy upon which he had turned his back in scorn when the blood of youth ran in his veins.

For miles the road slipped by unnoticed and unheeded as the old horse stumbled on at his own pace, unguided by the hand that held the reins. The breath of life had sought to fan the withered soul, but only one small spark, deep-smothered by the dead mass of loveless years, smouldered weakly where the record of a long life filled with human sympathy should have blazed in answer. The gold for which he had striven lay forgotten at his feet; the hate which he had nurtured passed, a vapid filmy shade, as the withered soul shrank shivering, chilled at the void the one poor spark revealed.

The sight of his solitary hut, glowing in the warm mellow light of the evening sun, broke in upon a reverie so deep he could never recall all that it had contained.

A horse hitched to one of the verandah posts, against which a man in uniform was leaning, brought him back to the world of reality with a shock. The hawk-like eyes gleamed as suspicion flashed through his brain. Had Wallace, despite his refusal, sent the troopers after him? The whip-lash fell viciously across the horse's back and the old rackety buggy rattled as Dudgeon finished his drive at a canter.

"Well, what do you want?" he cried, as he pulled up opposite his door.

Durham glanced from the stern, hard face of the man to the pile of money-bags clustered round his feet on the floor of the buggy, and over which he had not even taken the trouble to throw a rug.

"I am a sub-inspector of police—Durham is my name——"

"Durham?" the old man exclaimed. "Are you the man who rode down Parker, the cattle thief, when he was making off with a mob of imported prize stock?"

"I arrested Parker—a couple of years ago."

Dudgeon leant forward and held out his hand.

"I'm proud to meet you, my lad. That mob of cattle belonged to me. You saved me a few thousands over that job of yours. I'm much obliged to you. I hoped to meet you some day so as to thank you."

"I don't remember your name in the case," Durham said.

"No, my lad, there was no need for me to appear. It was a Government affair to prosecute Parker. Why should I pay money away for the Government? Look at the anxiety and loss of time I had to put up with. Nobody offered to make that good."

"But you got your cattle?"

"Well, they *were* mine—I paid for them. But that's all right. I'm much obliged to you for the trouble you took to catch the scoundrel—ten years I think he got? He ought to have been hanged. I'd have hanged him if I had been the judge. What are you after now? After more cattle-stealers?"

"Not this time. I'm on my way to Waroona; but I've been travelling all day and my horse is a bit knocked up. Can I turn him into one of your paddocks for the night?"

"Grass is worth money these times," the old man said slowly. "I suppose the Government will pay me for the use of the paddock, won't they?"

"You can demand it, of course, if you care to," Durham replied.

"And where are you going to camp? You'll want a feed, I suppose?"

"I reckoned I could get one here."

"Oh, you can get one here all right. There's no luxury about the place. I'm a poor man and just carry enough stores to keep me going. There's only me about the place now, so you'll have to do your own cooking; but you'll find it as comfortable as any bush pub, and cheaper, for there's no drink to be had, and half a crown for your supper and bed won't hurt you. You can take it or leave it—I'm not particular."

He climbed out of the buggy and began unharnessing the horse.

"You have heard of the robbery at the bank, I suppose, Mr. Dudgeon?" Durham asked.

"Heard of what?"

He stood up with his hand still on the buckle he was unfastening.

"The robbery at the bank. I thought everyone in the district had heard of it."

The old man remained without moving, his eyes fixed on Durham.

"Haven't heard a word. What's the yarn?"

"The bank was robbed yesterday—all the money taken, including the gold which had been sent up to pay you for Waroona Downs. Soon after the robbery, Eustace, the manager, disappeared."

"Then who's Wallace?"

"He is one of the officials from the head office."

"But he had the money ready to pay me. How could that be if——"

"He arrived with it to-day—he was expected about noon, I believe."

Dudgeon let go the buckle and took two slow, deliberate steps nearer Durham.

"Brought it with him?" he exclaimed. "And only arrived about noon?"

"About that, I believe," Durham replied.

The old man snatched the hat from his head and flung it on the ground.

"Sold! by God! Sold!" he yelled. "If I'd been there before that chap arrived, I'd have beaten them—they couldn't have paid, and I'd have cried off the deal. Why didn't you come and tell me earlier? What's the good of your coming here now?"

"Don't you think it rather risky to drive through the bush with a pile of money like that in your buggy while those bank robbers are still at liberty?" Durham said quietly.

Dudgeon stood back and looked at him quizzically.

"Oh, you're on it too, are you? That's your game, is it? Well, see here, my lad, anyone who can take this money without my knowing it is welcome to it. Do you understand?"

He resumed his work of unharnessing the horse, leading it away, as soon as it was clear of the shafts, to a lean-to shed at the side of the hut where he hung up the harness and turned the horse free.

"Well, how about that half-crown? Are you going to stay, or aren't you? Government won't pay that, you know. You find your own tucker, my lad."

"I wish to stay here to-night," Durham answered.

"Then chuck over the cash."

It was obvious that if Durham wished to stay, he would have to pay, so without further demur he passed over the amount Dudgeon demanded for his supper and bed.

"Now we start fair," the old man said, as he put the money in his pocket. "I'm under no obligation to you and you're under no obligation to me. That is what I call trading square."

He unlocked the door and flung it open.

"You'll find some cold meat and bread on the shelf, and there's tea in the canister over the fire-place. You'll have to fetch what water you want from the tank."

As Durham entered the hut, Dudgeon went to the buggy and lifted one of the bags of gold in his arms, carrying it inside.

The hut was a small and unpretentious structure. The door opened directly into the living-room, to which there was only one small window looking out on the verandah. A second door led into a small kitchen, off which opened another small room used by Dudgeon for sleeping.

With the bag of gold in his arms he stood in the doorway.

"You'll have to sleep on that stretcher over there," he said, nodding to a rough framework of untrimmed saplings with a length of coarse canvas fastened across. "You won't be cold. Keep a good fire on. You'll find an axe in the harness shed if you want to get any wood."

He passed on through the second door and Durham set about lighting the fire. As he did so, Dudgeon made journeys to and fro, coming from the back of the hut empty-handed and returning from the buggy with a bag of gold in his arms until he had carried all the twenty-five thousand pounds in. By that time the fire was alight, and Durham went out to turn his horse loose. He returned by way of the harness shed, took the axe and went to the back of the hut to cut some wood for the night. As he turned the corner, he saw old Dudgeon with a spade in his hand, entering the hut by the back door.

"Ah, that's good," the old man exclaimed, when Durham entered the living-room with an armful of cut wood. "That'll last the night through. I see you made the tea, so I had mine as I was wanting a feed. You'll have to boil some more water—there was only enough for one in the first lot you made."

"I made that tea for myself, Mr. Dudgeon," Durham exclaimed.

"Well, make some more. There's plenty of water in the tank—I won't charge you any more for using the can twice, though every time it's put on the fire means so much less life for it."

Durham swung round in heat.

"You're the meanest man on the face of the earth," he cried.

Dudgeon looked at him with his shaggy brows almost obscuring the cold, hawk-like eyes.

"If you hadn't paid me for your grub and a camp, I'd turn you out of the place," he snarled. "You've no more gratitude for kindness than a black fellow."

Durham bit back the angry retort which rose to his lips. Little wonder the bank people were so indifferent to the old man's safety; little wonder no one had troubled to bring him news of the incident which formed the main item of gossip from end to end of the district. If this was the way he treated a visitor who paid, and paid dearly, for his board and bed, how, Durham asked himself, would he treat an ordinary guest?

But he held his peace, refilled the can with water and set it to boil, Dudgeon sitting in the one chair the room contained, as he stolidly cut a pipeful of tobacco.

When the water boiled, Durham made a second brew of tea and took his seat on a stool which was by the table. He helped himself to bread and meat and commenced his meal, but never a word did Dudgeon speak. He sat placidly smoking, his eyes on the smouldering embers of the fire, without as much as a glance in the direction of his visitor.

The sun went down and the interior of the hut grew gloomy.

"Haven't you a lamp?" Durham asked. "I cannot see what I am eating."

"Make the fire up—that's good enough for me," Dudgeon replied without raising his head.

On the shelf over the fire-place Durham had noticed a kerosene lamp, a cheap, rickety article with a clear-glass bowl half-full of oil. He rose from the stool, reached for the lamp, put it on the table and lit it.

"Here, that oil costs money," Dudgeon snarled as he looked round. "Half a crown won't cover luxuries—you'll pass over another bob if you're going to waste my oil."

Durham resumed his seat without heeding.

"Do you hear?" Dudgeon exclaimed. "If you ain't going to pay, you ain't going—"

He stood up as he spoke, stood up and took a step towards the table with one hand outstretched to lift away the lamp.

Durham, looking round as he moved, saw his eyes suddenly open wide and stare fixedly at the door.

At the same moment a voice rang through the room.

"Hands up, or you're dead men!"

Springing to his feet Durham faced towards the door.

Standing in it were two figures, one the yellow-bearded man he had seen at Waroona Downs, the other a man of slighter build whose face was entirely concealed by a handkerchief hanging from under his hat and gathered in at the throat, with two holes burned for the eyes. Each man held a revolver, the masked man covering Durham, the bearded man covering Dudgeon.

"Hands up!"

There was the sharp ring in the voice which betokens the strain of a deadly determination. The eyes which glanced along the sights of the levelled weapon, aimed direct at Durham's head, were merciless and hard. Unless they were the last words he was ever to hear, Durham realised there was only one course open.

He raised his hands above his head. A side glance showed him Dudgeon standing with his arms up.

"Turn your back, and put your hands behind you," he heard the bearded man say, and Dudgeon shuffled round.

A double click followed, a familiar sound to Durham—the click of snapping handcuffs.

"Now, Mr. Detective, it's your turn," he heard the man say. "Put your hands behind you."

The eyes behind the mask wandered for an instant from their aim to glance at the shackled Dudgeon.

On that instant Durham acted.

Straight at the face of the man beside him he hit, and as his clenched fist came in contact with the bearded face, he ducked.

A shrill cry came from the man he had struck, almost simultaneously with the report of a revolver-shot.

Durham heard a scream of pain from Dudgeon, but before he could know more there was a crashing blow on his head, and he fell senseless to the floor.

Chapter X

„Fooled“.

In the dining-room of the bank Wallace, Harding, and Mrs. Eustace sat.

"I have no alternative," Wallace said. "My instructions are peremptory on the subject. If, after investigation, I considered the suspicion against your husband as well founded, I was to request you to leave the bank premises without delay."

"You believe my husband stole that money?"

"I believe your husband stole that money, Mrs. Eustace."

"You may live to change your opinion, Mr. Wallace. My husband is as innocent as I am. He has acted precipitately, I admit, and more than foolishly in going away as he has done; but that does not prove him guilty."

"I am afraid I cannot discuss the question with you," Wallace replied evenly. "I can only carry out my instructions. I have told you what they are, and what my opinion is. I am sorry to inconvenience you, but I have no alternative."

"Do you wish me to leave at once?"

"Scarcely to-night; but I must ask you to get away as soon as you can."

For a space there was silence.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Harding, if you don't mind," she said presently.

"Then I will leave you, for I have been steadily travelling all last night and to-day till I arrived here, and shall be glad to get to bed," Wallace answered. "Any arrangement you can make, Harding, to assist Mrs. Eustace, I shall be pleased to hear about. You will quite understand, Mrs. Eustace, that in asking you to vacate the premises the bank is merely actuated by ordinary considerations and is in no way acting vindictively or harshly."

She inclined her head slightly in response, but otherwise made no sign as Wallace left the room.

For some time after he had gone she remained silent, Harding waiting for her to speak. Raising her head, she looked him steadily in the face.

"I suppose I ought to call you Mr. Harding now," she began, "but I can't, Fred, I can't."

"As you wish," he said.

There came another silence, the woman unable to trust herself to continue, the man fearing to begin.

"How life mocks one," she said, half to herself. "Surely it is punishment enough that I should have to turn to you in my distress, humiliating enough even to satisfy your desire for retribution. I do not blame you, Fred. I deserve it all. I treated you vilely."

"Is there any necessity to refer to that now?" he asked. "I told you the curtain had been rung down for ever upon that. I have no wish either to punish or humiliate you. I don't think that I have given you reason to believe that I do. If you think there has been any reason, I can only say you are mistaken."

She started impulsively to her feet and stood in front of him, holding her hands to him.

"Fred, I must say it. I cannot bear this longer. It may make you hate me—detest and despise me, but I must say it. If you had only shown resentment or anger or spite for the way in which I treated you, it would not have been so hard to bear. Oh, don't you see? Don't you understand? Oh, isn't there one scrap of pity left in you for me? I was trapped into marriage, Fred. I never loved him, never, never! He—oh, have some pity on me, Fred, some pity."

She sank into a chair and buried her face on her arms on the table as she gave way to a storm of weeping.

To the man it was agony to see her, anguish to hear her, more bitter after the confession she had made and while the grip of suspicion still held him. Scarcely knowing what he did, he stepped to her side and laid his hand gently upon her head.

"I have pity, more than pity for you, Jess," he whispered. "Don't think——" He caught his breath to check the quiver in his voice, and so remembered. "I beg your pardon—Mrs. Eustace I should have said," he added as he drew back.

With hands close clenched behind him he stood. The love he fancied he had stifled had burst through the restraint he had placed upon it; the injury she had inflicted upon him, the wrong she had done, the cause for resentment she had given him were alike forgotten. The lingering suspicion alone prevented him from taking her in his arms to soothe and comfort her in her distress. Fighting against himself he stood silent, and the woman, aching for someone on whom to lean, shivered.

"What am I to do?" she moaned. "What am I to do?"

He, thinking only of her, took the words to refer to her present difficulty.

"I think it would be better if you went away," he said gently. "I do not think it will be easier for you to bear if you are here when—should anything else come to light."

"You mean if—if he is arrested?"

"Yes."

She lifted up her head and turned a tear-stained face towards him.

"Have they found him? Have they? Is that why—why I am asked to leave the house?"

"No, Mrs. Eustace. A new manager will be appointed, and the house is wanted for him."

"But I will not leave Waroona," she exclaimed, as she stood up. "I dare not leave it—till I know. If he—suppose he did do it—and wants to find me?"

"I should advise you to go right away," Harding said, still speaking gently. "You will do no good by remaining here where everybody knows what has happened, whereas if you go away you will be able to put all the worry of it away from you."

"I will not go."

She spoke with a fierce emphasis, the more pronounced because she felt that the course he suggested was the one she ought to follow, and resenting it because, by following it, she would pass out of his sight, and perchance out of his life for all time.

"I can only advise you," he said. "The new manager may be here in a day or two, and the bank will——"

"Oh, I'm not going to stay in this house," she interrupted. "I will be out of here to-morrow; but I will not leave Waroona."

"You will make a mistake if you do not, I think, but it is for you to decide."

She sat down again, clasping and unclasping her hands in her lap.

"If I go—will you—will you write to me?"

"No, I cannot do that," he answered at once.

"May I—write to you?"

"I should be sorry if you did."

She raised her eyes and again looked at him steadily in silence, looked until he turned away.

"How hard you make it, how hard!" she said at length. "How am I to know what is happening if I go away? I am sure you are expecting his arrest. Why did those two troopers go off so mysteriously this afternoon? They did not go to the railway. I watched them from upstairs. They rode the other way."

He did not reply.

"Will you answer me this one question? Do you believe I know he is the thief?"

"If there is anything that I can do to help or assist you in your present difficulty, Mrs. Eustace, I shall be only too pleased to do it. But I cannot discuss the robbery with you."

For the first time there was a tone of sternness in his voice.

"Then I take it that you do," she said. "I only want to tell you this. I still do not believe he did it. I know he is—he is not as you are. I have tried to shield this from you. I did not want you to know—then. Now I have told you. I did not know he was going to run away. I did not know he had gone until Brennan came to arrest him. But I can understand why he went. He knew the bank would suspect him at once, knew that there was a black record against him. It was cowardly of him, cowardly to leave me here alone. But he has gone, and I do not think I shall ever hear from him or see him again. That is why I want to remain here. If I go away, I may never know; if I am here, I shall be able to find out. But don't think that I know either

that he intended to run away or where he has gone. At least have that much faith in me."

"I did think so," he said quickly. "Now I do not."

"Thank you," she said softly. "I know how difficult it is for you to say even that. You cannot discuss the matter, but—don't think harder of me, Fred, than you can help."

She turned quickly and hurried from the room. She had scarcely closed the door when she reopened it.

"Constable Brennan is asking for you," she said. "Will you go in?"

She pushed the door wide open and Brennan came forward.

"Is Mr. Wallace here?" he asked, as soon as he had seen the door close.

"He has gone to bed—he is rather tired out after his journey. Is it anything particular?"

"One of the troopers has just ridden back. When they reached Taloona they found the place on fire. The sub-inspector was outside with his head smashed, and Mr. Dudgeon, with a bullet through him and his hands handcuffed behind his back, lying on the floor of the hut. They saw the glare of the fire through the trees and only galloped up just in time to get the old man out. He's in a bad way, Conlon said, and so is the sub-inspector."

"Wait till I tell Mr. Wallace," Harding exclaimed, as he rushed from the room.

Outside in the passage, Mrs. Eustace faced him.

"Fred, what is it? I heard—who is killed?"

"Nobody, I hope. I'll be back in a moment."

He dashed up to Wallace's room and hammered at the door.

"Hullo, what's the matter now?" Wallace cried, as he answered the knock.

"Come down to the dining-room. Brennan is there. One of the troopers has come back. Taloona is burnt and both Dudgeon and Durham injured."

When they reached the dining-room they found Mrs. Eustace with Brennan.

"I can be of use. I know how to nurse. I've learned how to give first aid. Let me go out and attend to them till the doctor comes. He is twenty miles away, and they may bleed to death before he can get there. I've got some bandages. I'll fetch them," Mrs. Eustace was saying.

She turned as Wallace and Harding entered.

"Tell them, Brennan, while I get the things," she added as she ran out and upstairs.

"It's wicked to think of her wasted on a scoundrel like that," Brennan exclaimed. "You heard what she said, sir? I know she's the only one in the township who understands what to do till the doctor comes. We've sent a man off for him, and they're getting a party together to go out and fetch the sub-inspector and the old man in. She's offered to go too. It may save their lives, for, from what Conlon said, they're badly hurt, both of them."

"Has the gold gone?" Wallace asked.

"I reckon so, though there's no saying until we hear what has happened. But it looks like a bad case of sticking the place up and trying to murder the inmates. Hullo, there's Mr. Gale calling. He's got his buggy. There's a seat to spare if either of you like to go."

"You'd be of more use than I should, Harding," Wallace said.

"Yes, I'll go," the younger man replied.

Mrs. Eustace came running into the room, her arms full of bottles and bandages.

"I haven't stopped to sort them out—I'll take all I've got," she exclaimed breathlessly.

"I will put them in the buggy while you get a cloak. I am coming with you," Harding said, as he took the articles from her and carried them out to Gale's buggy, which was drawn up outside the bank.

"You had better bring them here; it's quieter and more roomy than any other place in the town," Wallace said to Brennan when they were alone.

"If they can stand the journey," Brennan said under his breath. "I've told Conlon to ride back and let us know; I'll have to stay here."

"Then I'll tell Harding."

He reached the front door as Harding was returning, after having packed the things Mrs. Eustace had given him in the buggy. At the same moment Mrs. Eustace tripped down the stairs and ran across the hall.

"You had better bring them here," he began when she turned quickly towards him.

"Bring them here? Mr. Wallace, do you want to kill them? If they are badly injured it would be fatal to move them this distance. I will send word back at once, but if the doctor comes before you hear, send him on. Now, I'm ready."

She went out with Harding at her side.

"I am so glad to have you with me," she said softly. "It is good of you to come."

He helped her into the buggy without speaking, though the clinging touch of her hand thrilled him. He had known her as a light-hearted girl, full of frolicsome impulses and mischievous tricks, and had loved her with a passion that kept her ever before him. He had seen her when that love-lit image had been veiled by the gloom of seeming disillusion. He had seen her striving to sacrifice herself in order to shield the man who had blighted her life, and he had seen her as a man loves best to see the woman he reveres, throw aside the conventional reserve for him to learn the innermost secret of her heart. But never had he seen her as she appeared to him at that moment and later, when they arrived at the scene of the outrage, cool, clear-headed, capable, thinking only of the sufferings of others, cheering them with tactful sympathy, tending them with gentle care, the while her own soul was down-weighted with care and sorrow.

Throughout the ten-mile drive little was said, each one of the three instinctively refraining from all reference to the subject which was uppermost in their minds, and failing to maintain even a desultory conversation on more commonplace topics. Gale drove his pair at a hand gallop all the way till the road swerved from the straight and through the dim mystery of the starlit bush an angry red glow showed among the trees.

The last of the homestead, now an irregular heap of smouldering ashes over which stray lambent flames flickered and danced, served to shed sufficient light to show where two still figures lay under the shelter of Dudgeon's rackety old buggy, thrown over on its side. The trooper's horse, tethered to a tree, pawed the ground impatiently as it champed its bit, while its master, with a carbine on his arm,

paced slowly to and fro. As the galloping pair swung into sight he faced round sharply and brought his carbine to the ready, till he recognised Harding.

"Are you the doctor? You're badly wanted," he exclaimed as Gale reined up beside him.

"Quick. Help me out," Mrs. Eustace said as Harding leaped to the ground. She ran lightly over to the two figures. Through the rough bandage the troopers had tied round Durham's head a red stain was spreading. Dudgeon lay with glittering eyes staring vacantly. His right leg was bandaged, but more than a stain showed upon it.

She knelt down beside the old man, and as with deft, quick fingers she untied the bandage, she looked up at Harding.

"Bring me that packet of cotton-wool, the little leather case, all the bandages, and the bottle with the red label, at once. Tell the trooper to fetch the others."

By the time he returned she had the handkerchief the trooper had bound round the old man's leg loosened.

"Open the case and give me the scissors," she said without a trace of excitement or nervousness in her voice.

She slipped a rent in the trouser and held the edges back, revealing a punctured wound out of which a red stream gushed. In a moment she had a wad of cotton-wool rolled and moistened it from the bottle with the red label, placing it with a firm light touch on the wound.

"While I hold this, cut the trouser leg right down," she said, and Harding, his own nerves steadied by the calmness of hers, did as she bid.

The trooper came over with the rest of the articles, and while she watched what Harding was doing she told him, quietly, how to prepare a lotion and bring it to her.

Gale came over as soon as he had secured his horses.

"Will you go down to the men's huts and see if there is a bunk where we can put him?" she said, looking quickly at Gale.

"Why didn't you think of that?" Gale exclaimed as he glanced at the trooper. "You ought to have taken them there at once."

"You had better go too," she added to the trooper. "Bring something back with you, a door or a table or anything that will do to carry him on."

Left alone with Harding, she never ceased until she had the wound stanched, cleansed, and properly bound up.

"There is brandy in that flask, Fred. Mix about a tablespoonful in three times as much water."

He brought her the stuff in a pannikin, believing it was for herself.

"Raise his head gently," she said, and slowly poured the mixture between the old man's nerveless lips.

Without a pause she turned to Durham and had the ugly wound on his scalp laid bare. Snipping the hair away from it, she lightly touched the bruised skin surrounding the jagged cut.

"I'm afraid the skull is fractured—I hope the doctor will soon be here," she whispered, as she busied herself with the cotton-wool and red-labelled bottle.

By the time she had Durham's head bandaged, Gale and the trooper returned, carrying the door from one of the huts.

"There are two huts with a single bunk in each, and one with four," Gale said.

"Use the two with the single bunks," she said. "When are the others coming from the township?"

"They're coming along the road now," the trooper answered.

"Run and see if they have any blankets with them. If not, send someone back at once for some."

But there was more than blankets in the buggy that came up at breakneck speed. By the veriest chance the doctor had been within a mile or so of Waroona and had come away at once, bringing with him such articles as he knew would be wanted. He hastened over to the two wounded men just as Dudgeon gave utterance to the first sound he had made since the troopers had dragged him out of the burning homestead.

The doctor bent over him, rapidly examining the bandage round the leg. He stood up and turned to Durham.

"Who put on those bandages?" he asked sharply, as he looked up.

"I did, doctor. I plugged the bullet-hole with an iodoform wad and stopped the bleeding. I put a pad on Mr. Durham's wound, but I fancy his skull is injured."

"Where were you going to send them?"

"There are two single-bunk huts at the men's quarters. I was going to have them taken there on that door until you came."

"We will take them there at once."

Under his directions the two were lifted and carried away to the huts and made as comfortable as was possible in the rough timber bunks. With Mrs. Eustace and Harding to assist him, he found and removed the bullet from the old man's leg and quickly operated on Durham.

"I don't know what they would say in some of the swagger hospitals, if they were asked to trepan a man's skull under these conditions," he said as the operation was finished. "But he'll pull through, and thank you, as the old man will when he knows, for saving his life. Aren't you Mrs. Eustace?"

"Yes," she answered.

"I hardly had time to notice who you were before. You're a brave woman. For your sake I hope your husband gets away."

The blood surged to her face, and then left it pallid. The shadow of her sorrow had been forgotten during the strenuous moments she had gone through; the tactless remark brought it back upon her with cruel emphasis. She turned aside and slipped through the door at the back of the hut while the doctor, oblivious to his blunder, went out at the other.

Harding was about to follow her, when one of the troopers appeared at the door through which the doctor had gone. He held a letter in his hand.

"I found this where the lady knelt when she tied up the sub-inspector's head—I fancy it's either hers or yours."

On the flap of the envelope Harding saw the bank's impress.

"It probably is hers," he answered as he took it. "I will give it to her at once."

There was no sign of her as he passed out of the little door at the back of the hut and, believing she had gone round to the other, he turned to go back when, in a limp and dishevelled heap, he saw her lying on the ground against the wall of the hut.

Her upturned face was white and drawn as he stooped over her.

"Jess!" he whispered. "Jess! Are you ill?"

She made no response, and he placed his arms gently round her and lifted her till she lay in his clasp, her head drooped on his shoulder.

The movement revived her sufficiently for her to know what was happening.

A long-drawn sigh escaped her lips and she essayed to stand alone.

"No, Jess, no. Lean on me. You must get back home and rest. You have overdone it," he whispered.

"Fred! You!"

The arms that had hung lifeless wreathed round his neck, the head that had dropped on his shoulder nestled close and the white face upturned.

"Oh, take me away, Fred, take me away from this horror—anywhere, anywhere, so that I may be with you."

"Hush, Jess, hush. You must not talk like that," he whispered, the strength of the grip with which he held her and the soft tremor of his voice giving her the lie to his words.

"Darling, I must," she answered. "Give me freedom from the misery that man has brought into my life. Oh, you do not know what it has been and is still. You heard what the doctor said."

She shuddered as she recalled the words.

"The tactless fool," he muttered, resentment rising against the man who had not hesitated to add another twelve hours' work to an already arduous day when the call of suffering reached him.

"No, he only said what others think. I know, Fred. I can feel it. Mr. Gale was the same. They all are."

"You must not think that—you must not," he said. "And you must not stay in Waroona. You must go away."

Her arms held tighter.

"I will never go, never, while you remain. Don't despise me, Fred, don't think ill of me. I know what I am saying. I am on the edge of a precipice. If I go over, I go down, down, down, an outcast, and a—a——"

"Don't," he whispered hoarsely. "Don't talk like that."

"Who would care?" she added bitterly, "even if I did?"

It was no longer merely support that his encircling arms gave her as they strained her to him.

"It would break my heart," he whispered simply. "I am one who would care."

Unconsciously he bent his head, unconsciously she raised hers, until their lips met, and in one passionate embrace the intervening years since they had been heart to heart before passed as a dream, and only did they know that despite all the barriers which had been raised between them they were bound by a tie beyond the reach of custom, circumstance, or force.

With that knowledge uplifting and upholding them, they drew apart.

"You must go and rest now, Jess. You have need of all your strength to face what lies before you," he said gently.

"I don't mind what it is—now," she answered.

"Then I will go and ask Gale to drive you back. I will give you all the news when I return in the morning."

"Are you staying?" Gale exclaimed directly he saw him. "I've harnessed up, so if you and Mrs. Eustace——"

"I'm staying, but she will come back with you—the experience has been rather trying for her."

"Trying?" Gale exclaimed. "She's the noblest woman I've ever met. I don't care what's the truth about the bank affair, but there's not a man in Waroona who won't reverence that woman when he hears what she has done to-night."

"I'll tell her you are ready," Harding answered.

"Where is she? Down at the huts? I'll drive down for her."

She was standing talking to the doctor when Harding returned.

"I'm more anxious about the old man," the doctor was saying as Harding came up. "He'll want very careful nursing, so if you could undertake it, you'll lift a weight off my shoulders."

"I will be ready to come out to-morrow if you want me," she answered. "Send word by Mr. Harding when he comes in—he is going to stay here to-night. You will bring me word, won't you?" she added, turning to Harding. "Is Mr. Gale driving back?"

"He is coming now to pick you up—here he is," Harding replied as Gale's buggy and pair swung into sight.

He helped her in and wrapped a rug round her.

"Don't be late in the morning—I shall be anxious to hear if the doctor wants me," she said as Gale turned his horses and drove off.

"She's a splendid woman that," the doctor said as he stood looking after the buggy disappearing in the dusk. "Pity she's tied to such a rat as that chap Eustace. I suppose you know him?"

"I am in the bank," Harding answered.

"Oh, are you? Then perhaps I've put my foot in it?"

"I don't think so."

"Have you known him long?"

"Eustace? No, only since I've been in the branch—about three weeks."

"I should have judged you had known her for years."

"I have, but I have only known her husband since I have been here."

"Knew her before she was married?"

"That is so."

"Then tell me, why did she want to marry that rat? I've only seen him once, but that was more than enough. Smoke! Women are regular conundrums. There's that one, as true and big-hearted a creature as ever breathed—look at the pluck she showed to-night—and yet she goes and throws herself away on a miserable crawler who can't even respect the trust his employers placed in him. What does it mean to her? Just think of it—the wife of a common thief, worse than a common thief to my mind. What'll become of her? He'll be caught and sent to gaol for years. What's she going to do then? It's a pity someone doesn't shoot him—it would save her from degradation."

The buggy had vanished in the dusk. He turned to his companion. The dim light from the hut fell full on Harding's face. The doctor whistled.

"Hope I haven't said too much, old chap. I forgot. If you've known her for years—well, you know what I mean, don't you? I must get in to my patient. You'll look

after the old man? I've given him a draught that'll keep him asleep. But call me if you want me."

He went into the next hut where Durham lay. Harding stood where he left him, staring away into the night, in the direction the buggy had gone. The click-clock of the trotting horses came in a gradually diminishing clearness, beating time to the refrain which was running in his mind, the refrain of the doctor's words.

If Eustace were captured there was little doubt what the sequence would be. A long sentence and his wife branded with the stain of his guilt. Better if he were dead—better if he were killed, rather than that destiny should overtake her.

Harding's jaw set firm as his teeth gritted.

The memory of her white, drawn face as he saw her lying on the ground outside the hut; the memory of her desolate wail for him to take her away from the horror of her surroundings; the memory of her patient care of the two injured men, injured, perhaps, by the "rat" who had ruined her life and his; the memory of her as he had first known her, jostled one another in his brain.

Better, a thousand times better, if Eustace were dead.

The doctor, looking out of the next hut, saw him still standing staring into the night.

"How's the old man? Restless?" he asked as he came over.

The voice brought Harding back from the clouds—the thunder-clouds, towards which he was drifting.

"I'm just going in," he answered.

The doctor followed him to the door. Dudgeon lay breathing peacefully in a deep sleep.

"You can roll up in that blanket and make yourself as comfortable as possible—I don't think he'll awaken till the morning," the doctor said in a low tone when he had crossed to the bunk where Dudgeon lay and looked at him. "I must get back to my man."

He went out of the hut without waiting for a reply and Harding made no attempt to follow him, but spread the blanket on the floor and lay down upon it.

Until that moment he had entirely forgotten the letter the trooper had given him. As he lay back it suddenly recurred to him. He sat up and put his hand in his pocket to make sure it was still there. As he did so the old man stirred, and Harding waited to see whether he was going to wake.

He remained with his hand in his pocket until Dudgeon's breathing showed he was again soundly asleep. Then, momentarily forgetful of the reason why he was holding the letter, he drew it out, took it from the envelope, and opened it.

"No one saw me go, and I am now safe where they will never find me. Stay there till you hear from me again. A friend will bring you word. Ask no questions, but send your answer as directed. You must do everything as arranged, or all is lost. Whatever you do, don't leave till I send you word. I am safe till the storm blows over.—C."

The writing was only too familiar, even without the peculiarly formed initial which was Eustace's particular sign.

He sat like one paralysed, his eyes reading and rereading the words which changed to mockery all the revived faith in her. His brain grew numb. Like a man upon whose head an unexpected blow had fallen, he was only half conscious of

what had happened. Even as he read and re-read the letter he failed to gather all that it meant, all that it revealed. The very simplicity of the situation stunned him.

Then through the darkness of his mind there came, in one lurid flash, clear as a streak of lightning in the night, the full significance of it.

Eustace, having made his escape, had sent the message to her!

The scene in her boudoir the night before; the vision of the horsemen coming from the range; the face of the man with the yellow beard at the window, all passed before him. While he and Brennan were dashing across the yard, she or Bessie had found the note.

So it had come into her possession, and it must have been in her possession while she was talking to him after Wallace told her she must leave the bank; must have been in her possession while she drove with him to Taloona, and, for aught she knew, was in her possession when he found her lying senseless outside the hut.

He sprang to his feet, crushing the damning sheet in his hand.

While she clung to him, and he held her in all the fervour of his re-awakened love, she must have believed the message he had read was still in her keeping.

The sordid duplicity, the rank treachery of it seared and scorched.

Forgetful of the sleeping man whom he was there to watch, forgetful of everything save the bitterness of his betrayal, he paced the floor with rapid, raging steps.

He had been fooled, heartlessly, callously fooled. The bitterest thoughts he had ever had of her were all too gentle in the face of this final revelation. She was false to her finger-tips, a syren in cunning, a viper in venom.

At the door of the hut he stopped to stand staring out into the dark in the direction whither she had gone.

The last echo of the click-clock of Gale's trotting horses had died away; the bush lay mysterious and motionless under the silent veil of night; no sound came to him save the heavy breathing of the wounded man asleep in the hut; but through his brain, with the deadening monotony of numbing drumbeats, there throbbed the mocking, taunting words, "Fooled! Fooled! Fooled!"

Chapter XI

Mrs. Burke’s Rebuff.

When Harding returned to the bank the next morning, he presented such a careworn appearance that Wallace was genuinely concerned.

"Hullo," he exclaimed, "you look as if you had had enough of acting night-nurse to wounded men. It has been too much for you, my lad."

"It has been an anxious night," Harding replied. "At first both were fairly well, but towards morning old Mr. Dudgeon became very bad. You have heard all about the affair, I suppose?"

"I have had a visit from Mr. Gale. There was only one thing he could talk about. You will guess what that was. The heroism of Mrs. Eustace."

A cloud came over Harding's face at the mention of her name.

"I have a message for her from the doctor. She offered to return to-day if he wanted her help. He asked me to let her know how bad the old man had been, and is, and say he would be glad if she could go out at once. I've had no sleep all night and am fairly tired out. If you don't mind, I'll go and have a few hours' rest."

"Why, of course, my lad, I'll manage the office by myself all right. Go and get all the sleep you can. You have earned it."

"Will you let her know what the doctor said?"

"I'll send word to Mr. Gale—I've no doubt he'll let her know," Wallace said with a short laugh.

"But isn't she here?"

"No. Gale said the place was in darkness when they passed and rather than disturb me she went on to the hotel, where they put her up. Very considerate of her, I must admit. She seems to have made the most of her time on the drive back with Gale, for he knew all about her having to leave the bank premises, and told me he had secured a vacant cottage there is in the township for her. But don't waste time talking, my lad. You look worn out. Go and get to bed for a few hours. I'll see she has the doctor's message."

Harding went to his room with heavy steps. He locked the door and sat down, took the crumpled letter out of his pocket and read it through again.

Then, sitting on the side of the bed with the letter in his hand, he stared at it as he asked himself once more the question which had been haunting him since the first rush of indignation passed.

What should he do with it?

Had the letter come into his possession the night of the scene in the boudoir, he would have had no hesitation. But much had happened since then. He had learned what he believed was the truth about the Eustace marriage; he had learned that the love he had treasured so dearly was still his. It was the latter which made it so hard for him to know what course to follow.

A doubt had come into his mind, a doubt which operated in her favour. To hand the note over to the police was to admit he had no faith left in her, and he had faith. He could not bring himself to regard her as being so absolutely conscienceless as the circumstances suggested. Rather did he lean towards the idea that, after all, despite the evidence of the facts as they stood, she was innocent. And on that point he wanted to be sure rather than sorry.

The opinion of another would be a help to him in coming to the right conclusion, but to whom could he turn?

He dare not consult Wallace, who was already prejudiced against her; Brennan was out of the question. There was only one other—Durham—and he was out of reach, and would be so for some time to come.

So the matter came back to where it started, and Harding, urged one way by his love and another by his reason, ultimately adopted a middle course.

He determined to confront her with the letter, and tear the mask of hypocrisy from her face—if one were there—at the first opportunity. For the present the letter should be placed where no one but himself could find it.

Taking off his coat, he cut through the seam of the lining, placed the letter inside, stitched it to the lining and resewed the seam.

"I will not condemn her unheard," he said. "She shall have the chance of defending herself to me before I denounce her. But, if this is true, then God help her—and me too."

He flung himself on the bed. He was too tired to worry further. The irksome question was shelved—for the moment there was peace, and before that moment passed Harding was sound asleep.

Before he awakened, Mrs. Eustace visited the bank, received the doctor's message and went on her way to Taloona.

She came with Gale.

"Has Mr. Harding returned yet?" she asked, before Wallace could speak. "He was to bring me word whether the doctor wanted me to help to-day."

"He came in about half an hour ago, utterly worn out. I have sent him to bed for a few hours," Wallace replied. "He left a message for you—old Mr. Dudgeon is very bad, and the doctor sent word that if you could go out at once it would be a great help to him."

"Of course I'll go," she exclaimed. "Mr. Gale, you offered to drive me if I were wanted. Will you go for the buggy while I get some things together to take with me?"

She turned to Wallace when Gale had left the office.

"I suppose you have no objection to my going upstairs?"

"None whatever," he answered.

"I will get what things I want. The others can be taken away later to the cottage I am renting. I will give Mr. Gale a list, as he very kindly offered to see to the removal if I had to go out to Taloona again."

He held the door open while she passed into the residence portion of the building, and closed it after her. He was not a lady's man, even under the best of circumstances; with the conviction that Eustace was the culprit, not only in the bank robbery, but also in the outrage at Taloona, he wished to have as little to say to her as possible. The sooner she was out of the place the better he would be pleased.

As he returned to his work, which, at the moment, was a lengthy report he was preparing for despatch to the head office in condemnation of Eustace, she went through to the kitchen, where she found Bessie.

"I am leaving the bank to-day, Bessie, and all my things are going away. I have taken Smart's cottage and am going to live there. Although I engaged you, if you think you will do better for yourself by staying here, don't let me prevent you."

"Stay on here, Mrs. Eustace? What, after you've gone? No, ma'am, no! If you don't want me any longer, there may be someone else in Waroona who does, but if this is the only place where I can stay, I'm off to Wyalla," Bessie exclaimed.

"I would not like them to think I took you away, Bessie."

"I'm not the Bank's servant; I'm yours. Shall I help you get the furniture ready now?"

"No, not just at once. I am going out to Taloona to help the doctor nurse Mr. Dudgeon. I only want to take enough with me for a few days. Mr. Gale will arrange for removing the rest, but I would like you to see they are all taken."

"I'll see that they're taken, and go with them, too, Mrs. Eustace. I don't want to stay in a place where everything I do is spied on and made bad of. Let me come and help you now."

By the time they had packed a small box, Gale drove up in front of the bank.

"I'll take this down," Bessie exclaimed. "It's not heavy."

Mrs. Eustace followed her out of the room.

At the door she stopped. On the other side of the landing was Harding's room. She glanced at the closed door.

Stepping over to it, she tapped. There was no response. She turned the handle; the door was locked.

She did not want to go without a word for him. She opened her bag to see if she had a scrap of paper or a card on which she could scribble a line. As she did so, Bessie came up the stairs to ask if there was anything else she could do.

"No, that is all, Bessie. You might tell Mr. Harding I have gone. He is asleep at present."

Bessie sniffed, with her nose in the air, as she followed her mistress down the stairs. Tell Mr. Harding? Tell the man who was, in Bessie's mind, the person solely responsible for the indignity placed upon her and Mrs. Eustace of being locked in their own rooms by Constable Brennan! All the message he would ever receive through her would do him good, she told herself.

In the office Wallace heard the buggy drive away and caught a glimpse of it as it passed the door. Mrs. Eustace was sitting beside Gale, looking up at him and smiling.

The sound of another vehicle driving up to the door interrupted him. He looked up from his work as Mrs. Burke came into the office.

"Good morning, Mr. Wallace," she exclaimed, "I've looked in as I was passing, to inquire what is the latest news about the scoundrels. Have they got them yet? Is there any word of my papers?"

"Have you not heard? Has no one——"

"Heard? Heard what? Heavens about us, man, you're not going to tell me my papers have been destroyed?"

"Oh, no, I'm not going to tell you that, Mrs. Burke. As the news is all over the place, I fancied you must have heard it also. I forgot you were away in the bush. Taloona was stuck up last night and burnt to the ground; old Mr. Dudgeon was shot and is lying dangerously ill, while Mr. Durham had his skull fractured and is at death's door."

Mrs. Burke reeled.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped.

Before Wallace could reach her she lurched heavily forward and fell, striking her face against the edge of the counter.

Rushing to the door leading to the house, Wallace called to Bessie.

"Come quickly," he cried, "Mrs. Burke has fainted."

He was raising her from the floor as Bessie came.

"Help me to get her into the dining-room," he exclaimed. "What a silly woman! I'm afraid she has hurt her face rather badly. She struck it against the counter."

Bessie lent a somewhat unwilling aid. She disliked Mrs. Burke as cordially as she disliked Wallace, but she helped to support the semi-conscious woman, and undertook to revive her as soon as they had placed her on the sofa.

Wallace returned to the office, leaving the two together. Presently Mrs. Burke came back, pale and agitated, and with a pronounced discolouration on her face where it had come in contact with the counter.

"I must apologise, Mr. Wallace," she began, as soon as she entered the office. "Sure it's only us poor weak women who know the cruel pain of an unexpected blow. You'll not believe me, but when I heard the terrible news, it just turned my heart to stone, it did. Poor Mr. Durham! A fine, brave, clever gentleman if ever there was one, Mr. Wallace, and to think of him with all his brains scattered. It's no wonder I fainted."

"But I did not tell you that, Mrs. Burke. I said his skull was fractured, and that he is at death's door."

"Well, isn't that what I was saying?"

"No. I did not say his brains were knocked out. As a matter of fact, they are all in his head where I hope they will always remain, so that he can complete his task of catching your friends who were so considerate as to carry off your papers."

"My friends, do you call them, Mr. Wallace? Sure I'd teach them a new form of friendship if I had my hands on them for a few minutes. But tell me now, what's being done with those poor wounded creatures? The girl told me the old man had had his leg blown off. Well, well! He won't refuse a chair next time he comes to see you, I'll wager. Or maybe he'll have his twenty-five thousand sovereigns made into a special wooden leg to take the place of the other live one he's lost."

"His leg was not blown off—he was shot."

"It's all the same. He won't be able to walk about any more, and sure that's bad enough for any man to have to put up with, isn't it, Mr. Wallace? How would you like to have it happen to you now? Having to go about on a wooden stump or just sit about in the same place from morning to night and never a chance of stretching a leg or crossing the road."

"But it's not that at all, Mrs. Burke," Wallace exclaimed impatiently. "What I said was——"

"Oh, I know, I know," she interrupted. "Well now, don't you think it a terrible thing for them to be lying out there without a single woman's hand to soothe them in their agony? Only a doctor to look after them and maybe a bushman or so to boil a billy and make some tea between whiles. It's more than I can bear to think of, Mr. Wallace."

"You don't feel faint again, do you?" he asked.

"Oh, no, not at all, Mr. Wallace. Bessie was very good to me. She would be better out there helping to relieve those poor wounded creatures instead of idling away her time here, I think; but still, she does her best, poor thing, such as it is. But do you know what I thought of doing? As soon as I heard the news I said to myself, there was only one thing I could do unless I were just a mere bloodless image of a woman. I'm going to drive straight away now to Taloona and soothe the pain of those poor unfortunates. It's the sound of a woman's voice that is cheering to a lonely man when he's in pain, Mr. Wallace."

"Is it?" Wallace said curtly. "I hope you are right, Mrs. Burke, for you see Mrs. Eustace is there already."

"Mrs. Eustace! Out at Taloona? Mr. Wallace, it's enough to bring down the wrath of Heaven to think of that woman—that—well, I'll not say it; but there's her husband robbing me of my papers and the bank of its money and maybe robbing and murdering that poor old gentleman as well, and she—she of all women on the face of the earth—nursing his victims back for him to slay a second time. Sure, I'd—oh, I'd—I don't know what I wouldn't do, Mr. Wallace, to a woman like that."

"It will be an interesting meeting between you," Wallace observed drily. "I am sorry I cannot come to see it."

"But it's not the old gentleman she's after, Mr. Wallace. I suppose they robbed him of his gold?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Burke."

"Oh, you may be sure they did. So there's no more to be had out of him; but what would it be worth to that villain of a husband of hers if Sub-Inspector Durham were below ground? The only chance I have of ever seeing my papers again, Mr. Wallace, is with him. I'll go and drive him out to Waroona Downs and nurse him myself. I'll not let it be said that Nora Burke forgot a friend in his hour of need."

"I am afraid the doctor will not let him be moved. I suggested bringing them in here, but Mr. Gale tells me the doctor said it would be fatal to move either at present."

"Then I'll stay and nurse him there. Sure it's that woman I'll watch. I'll go away at once."

He did not detain her. He did not even suggest she was going on a useless journey. But he sighed deeply as she left the office.

"Little wonder she is a widow," he murmured to himself. "I wonder how long the late Mr. Burke managed to survive it? I hope they keep her at Taloona for a month."

But she did not reach there that day.

On the way she met Gale returning.

"And what's the news of the poor injured creatures?" she cried as she reined in.

Gale shook his head.

"You were not thinking of going out there, were you?" he asked.

"I'm going out to do what I can to soothe the suffering of the unfortunates," she answered. "Mr. Wallace was telling me. What a frightful thing to happen to them, Mr. Gale. Sure the awful news was too much for me to bear, and I just fell like one dead at the sound of it. You'll see the mark on my face. They tell me I fell against the counter in the bank and might have killed myself entirely with the terrible smash I came against the wretched sharp edge, only that I struck it with my face instead of the back of my head, though it's little thanks to the bank, seeing the way they made the clumsy thing."

"It's no use your going out to Taloona," Gale exclaimed. "No one is allowed near the huts where they are. The doctor and Mrs. Eustace are the only persons allowed to see the patients."

"And by what right is that woman there?"

"The best right of all, Mrs. Burke. Had it not been for her splendid courage, they would both have been dead long before the doctor could reach them. She is the only one Mr. Dudgeon will bear near him."

"Oh."

For once the voluble Irish tongue was reduced to the use of a simple monosyllable, but into the word there was thrown as much venom as would have taken a hundred of the snakes St. Patrick banished from the island to supply.

"So it is fortunate I met you, otherwise you would have had a drive for nothing," Gale added.

"And how's the sub-inspector?"

"The doctor tells me he is doing as well as one can expect."

"I was going to see if I could not take one of them out to Waroona Downs—it's good nursing they'll want, and that they'll get if they're in a place where they are properly looked after."

"They are getting that now," Gale retorted shortly.

"I'll go and see for myself."

"If you want to tire your horse, do so, but that is all which will happen."

"And why am I to be shut out when that woman is allowed to be there, with her husband probably hanging about the place all the time to see who else there is to shoot and maim?"

"You have no right to say that," Gale cried angrily. "There is only suspicion against her husband, and even if there were more, it would not affect her. A noble-hearted woman such as she is should have sympathy, not unjust accusation."

"Sure Mr. Eustace would be pleased to know how well his deserted wife is getting on with all the admirers she has in the place traipsing after her wherever she goes," she retorted.

"You cannot go on even if you wish to," Gale exclaimed. "One of the troopers will stop you before you reach the huts."

"Oh, the troopers are there too, are they? It's well to be a miserly old skinflint to have the State providing troopers at the ratepayers' expense to watch over one. Or maybe they're also giving sympathy to the poor distressed lady. Well, I'll interrupt them."

"You will do nothing of the kind, Mrs. Burke. I tell you the doctor sent to stop me from driving up to the huts where they are. You would do no good by going there; you may do a great deal of harm."

"Oh, indeed. And pray what is there about me that is likely to do harm to any man?"

"You know Mr. Dudgeon's character. The doctor says he is in a most critical condition. For him to see you now would probably mean his death. You remember how bitterly he resented the sale of Waroona Downs to you—your presence now would only irritate him and then——" he shrugged his shoulders.

"My presence? And what of the presence of the woman whose husband——"

"You must not say that," Gale exclaimed quickly. "It is unjust—unwomanly——"

The grey eyes flashed like steel.

"Unwomanly?" she cried. "Me unwomanly?"

She snatched up the buggy whip and in her anger cut at him, but the lash fell short, striking one of the horses. The animal plunged at the sting and its companion also started.

By the time Gale had them under control, Mrs. Burke was vanishing down the road in a cloud of dust.

Where the track to the station branched off the main road one of the troopers met and stopped her. The man recognised her from the previous day.

"Very sorry, Mrs. Burke," he said, "but I've been sent to stop anyone going near the place."

"Why can't I go? I want to know how they are and whether I can't help to nurse them," she said.

"They're both pretty bad, I believe," the trooper answered. "I don't think you could do anything now, because there's the doctor and Mrs. Eustace and my mate looking after them. But I'll tell the doctor, and maybe to-morrow——"

Mrs. Burke slowly wheeled her horse.

"I shall not come to-morrow," she said. "It is evident I'm not wanted. But I shall come in a few days and take one of them away with me to my house. I'm sure Mr. Durham would be much better away from here. Tell the doctor I say so. Who is taking Mr. Durham's place?"

"Taking up his work do you mean?"

"Yes—who is looking for the man who stole my deeds from the bank? Why aren't you doing it, instead of wasting your time here?"

"Oh, that'll be all right, Mrs. Burke. We've got a clue—don't you be uneasy."

"I shall be uneasy until Mr. Durham is able to look after it again. He is the only hope I have of ever seeing my papers again."

"You're right," the trooper exclaimed. "He's the smartest man for the job there is. That's why he's lying there now—we know for certain he was on their track when he got here, and as soon as they saw who it was after them, they went for him. It wasn't the fault of the chap who tried to brain him that the sub-inspector is alive to-day."

"He is very badly hurt?" Mrs. Burke asked.

"The chap who hit him saw to that—I'd just like to have my hands on him for a few minutes, the mean hound. There was probably more than one, and while the sub-inspector was facing the others, this one must have crept up behind him and tried to brain him from the back. But we'll get him, and then he will know something."

"You think you will catch them?"

"Catch them? Of course we shall. But it's the chap who knocked the sub-inspector on the head we want mostly."

"You'll punish him when you do catch him?" she asked, with a gleam in her eyes.

"Ah!" he exclaimed.

She leaned forward.

"I hope you do," she said. "I would—if I were a man—even if they had not stolen my papers."

Chapter XII

As Through a Mist.

Wallace had scarcely completed his report when once more he was interrupted by Gale entering the office.

"Mrs. Eustace has given me this order to remove all her belongings at once," he said, as he entered the office and handed the order to Wallace.

"Very good. I'll tell the girl to bring them downstairs. Will you be at the front door?"

"Tell the girl?" Gale remarked. "You don't think it's a girl's job, do you, to move a houseful of furniture?"

"There's no furniture; there is nothing here belonging to Mrs. Eustace beyond her clothing, and some few odds and ends, I suppose?"

"Then you know very little about the matter, Mr. Wallace. Everything beyond that door belongs to Mrs. Eustace; everything in the residence portion of this building is hers absolutely, her own personal private property. Even that lamp on your table is hers. I have it down on my list."

"Oh, that is nonsense, utter nonsense," Wallace exclaimed pompously. "The furniture is the property of the Bank."

"The furniture is not the property of the Bank. Ask Mr. Harding."

"He is asleep at present, but——"

"Then he had better get up, because I am about to remove the bed on which he is sleeping. It belongs to Mrs. Eustace; so do the blankets, the sheets, the coverlet, everything, in fact, even to the towels in his room."

"What absolute preposterous nonsense!" Wallace replied. "I never heard of such a thing. The Bank always provides furniture for its branches."

"And does the Bank always allow the wife of a branch manager so much a year for the use of that furniture, napery, linen, cutlery, and the rest?"

"Why ask such a ridiculous question?"

"Because Mrs. Eustace has been paid such an allowance since she has been in Waroona. Refer to the office records. They will show you whether it is so or not."

Wallace turned to the book-racks, and pulled down the ledger. Running his eye down the index, he saw the item "Furniture Account." Opening the book at the page indicated, he read enough to prove to him that Gale's statement was correct.

"Then all I have to say is, that it is extremely unusual," he said, as he slammed the book, and returned it to its place.

"I am not concerned in that, Mr. Wallace. All I know are the facts. Now that you are also satisfied, you will see the work is hardly what a girl can carry out. I'll send half a dozen men down at once."

"But," Wallace exclaimed, looking up aghast, "you don't mean to say you are going to remove everything?"

"Mrs. Eustace has given me her order to remove all her belongings. That, I understand, includes everything in the living portion of the premises, and the lamp now standing on your table."

"But what am I to do? What is Harding to do? We cannot sleep on the bare boards and eat our meals raw."

"I don't see what concern that is of mine. You requested Mrs. Eustace to vacate these premises at once, and she is doing as you asked. It is not for you to complain, surely?"

"It is, under the circumstances, most decidedly it is. Someone must always be on the premises after what has occurred; but if there is nothing on which to sleep, what can be done? Mrs. Eustace knew the furniture belonged to her and should have said so."

"I am afraid I cannot agree with you," Gale replied. "You should have known the furniture was hers. Your one desire, it seems to me, was to vent on her head the wrath of the Bank at what may, or may not have been, her husband's fault. Whether it added to the trouble she already had did not matter to you in the slightest. But directly you find that your spite recoils on yourself and entails some inconvenience for you, there is a very different tale to tell. Personally I am very glad to think you can be inconvenienced. You had better have Harding called, as I shall be back in half an hour with my men. Oh, by the by, the servant is engaged by Mrs. Eustace, not by the Bank. She will leave with the furniture."

He enjoyed the look of consternation on Wallace's face. The banker could not deceive himself. Gale held him in a cleft stick.

"But this cannot go on," he exclaimed. "Mrs. Eustace must see how unreasonable it is. The Bank is entitled to at least a month's notice, before the things can be removed."

"It is the Bank that gave the notice. Mrs. Eustace was told to go at once. Well, she waived her right to demand time and said she would go at once. Now you blame her!"

"Will she sell the furniture?"

"No, she will not."

"I shall go to Taloona and see about it."

"It will not assist you if you do. In the first place, you will not be able to see her, and, in the second, even if you did see her, you would only learn that the matter has been placed in my hands."

"Then, if it is in your hands, deal with it as a reasonable business man. While Mrs. Eustace remains at Taloona she will not require the furniture; it will be at least a couple of weeks before we can have any sent up to serve us. How much does Mrs. Eustace want for the hire of what is in the house at present?"

"Twenty pounds a week," Gale replied, without moving a muscle, even when Wallace flared up at the proposal.

"Utterly preposterous," he cried. "Ten shillings a week was what was allowed her. That amount is ample."

"You are the buyer, not the seller, Mr. Wallace. You pay twenty pounds a week, or the furniture goes. Even at that sum I consider that Mrs. Eustace is placing the Bank under a distinct obligation to her."

There was no escape; reluctantly Wallace admitted it, and agreed to the terms, humiliating though they were. But it was still more humiliating for him to learn the following day that Mrs. Eustace declined to accept anything whatever, but

allowed the Bank to use the furniture and retain the services of Bessie until other arrangements could be made.

"What is the game she is playing?" he said to Harding. "Is it all part of some elaborate scheme between herself and her husband, or is she really sincere?"

The letter sewn into the lining of his coat seemed to burn itself into Harding's back. Was it all part of an elaborate scheme, part of the "everything" she had to do "as arranged"? If he could only be sure!

"I don't know what to make of it," he answered. "I don't know." But while they were speculating at the bank as to the sincerity or insincerity of Mrs. Eustace, she was driving her own troubles from her mind by the constant and unremitting care of a taciturn and exacting patient.

For the first two or three days after the bullet was extracted from his leg, Dudgeon was in a high state of fever. In his semi-delirium he babbled incessantly of Kitty, grew dangerously excited whenever the doctor came near him, and would only be pacified by the presence of Mrs. Eustace. In his lucid intervals he told her over and over again the story of his betrayal; when his mind wandered, he regarded her as the Kitty he had known before the shattering of his life's romance. It was difficult for her to decide which experience was the more trying.

Later, when the fever left him, he was as a child in her hands, listening while she read or talked to him, taking anything she brought him without demur, and only showing signs of impatience when she left the hut for a while.

Consequently, she was unable to give any attention to Durham, and as the days slipped by the doctor began to chafe, for there were patients scattered through the bush whom he was anxious to visit, but he could not go away and leave both men to Mrs. Eustace to nurse.

It was at this juncture that Mrs. Burke put her threat into execution, and drove over to Taloona in a big old-fashioned waggonette with Patsy perched on the box and a store of blankets inside.

"I've come to do my share of the work," she told the doctor. "They stopped me from coming before—I was turned back by a trooper a mile from the house. But I'm tired of waiting for word how the poor fellows are, and have just come to take one of them away with me."

She had driven right up to the huts, and the sound of her voice penetrated both. Old Dudgeon, striving to sit up, stared at Mrs. Eustace with gleaming eyes.

"That devil," he muttered. "It's her voice. I'd know it in a million. Keep her away! Don't let her come near me, or I'll——"

"Hush, you must not get excited," Mrs. Eustace said, as she gently pushed him back. "No one is coming in here. I'll see to that. I'll shut the door and bolt them out."

In the other hut the patient's eyes also gleamed, but with a different light. The forced inaction, the solitude, the wearying monotony of lying still, to one accustomed to a life full of incident and action, was more than trying; but when, as was the case with Durham, there was urgent and engrossing work to be done, the compulsory delay aggravated the evils of the injury he had sustained.

Through the long hours he chafed against the helplessness which prevented him from following up the clue he had already obtained, but still more did he chafe

against his inability to renew his acquaintance with the woman who had fascinated him.

He was anxious to make headway in her estimation so that he would have some understanding, however slight, with her when the recovery of her papers and the winning of the reward gave him the opportunity of offering her marriage. His impatience bred many fancies in his mind. Daily he pictured to himself the danger of someone else becoming his rival in her affections.

Were he free to see her he did not fear defeat; but while he was lying helpless at Taloona anything might be happening at Waroona Downs.

That morning the doctor had told him it would be weeks before he would be well enough to resume work if he did not make more rapid progress. He had poured out professional platitudes against the folly of fretting and worrying against the inevitable, but neither his platitudes nor the soundness of his reasoning could still the eager longing which was at the root of the patient's retarded convalescence.

If he could only see her the days would not be so blank; even to hear of or from her would be something; but this complete separation, this seemingly hopeless isolation racked him with impatience. Wherefore the sound of her voice breaking in upon his mournful reveries, of which she was the central figure, made his heart leap with delight.

Come to take one of them away with her! Saving that his head swam so much when he moved he would have crawled out of his bunk and appealed to her that he should be the one, lest the other should be before him.

He strove to catch something more of the conversation carried on between her and the doctor, but their voices were not sufficiently loud for him to hear more than the sound of them. The creaking of the door as it opened made him turn his eyes as the doctor came in.

"I've a visitor to see you. Do you think you can stand it?" he asked.

Over the doctor's shoulder Durham caught a glimpse of Mrs. Burke, and the smile that rippled over his face was all the answer he had time to give before she stood beside him.

"Oh, the poor, poor fellow," she exclaimed softly. "Sure he's just pining for a change of air and a sight of the bush once more. It's Waroona Downs that's the place where he can get what he wants and recover so as to catch those villains that have done him so much harm. I've come to fetch you, Mr. Durham. I've a waggonette outside and a storeful of blankets, and Patsy to drive—sure he can't go faster than a funeral at the best, so there's no fear of any jolting on the way. If you want to come, the doctor says you may, and he'll ride along later and see you are all fixed up before he goes after his other patients who are all dying, poor things, without his help one way or the other."

Would he go? His pale cheeks flushed at the chance of escape from the deadly solitude of the past few days. Anywhere would be better than inside that bare, cheerless hut, anything preferable to lying on the hard wooden bunk with only a blanket over him, and only an occasional flying visit from Mrs. Eustace and the periodical dosing by the doctor. But Waroona Downs with the woman he was beginning to idolise daily with him!

"Will you come?" she asked softly, as he did not speak.

"If I only could," he answered.

"There, doctor, you heard him? I'll tell Patsy to spread the blankets on the floor of the waggonette, and sure he'll never know he's moving till he's there."

"It may shake you up a bit," the doctor said, as Mrs. Burke left the hut. "But I must get away to a case to-morrow, and the old man is as much as any woman can look after. Do you think you can stand the drive?"

"I'd stand anything to get out of this place," Durham answered. "If you think I can stand it, I'm satisfied."

"Oh, you're tough enough to stand anything," the doctor replied. "You could not be alive to-day if you had not the constitution of a steam-engine. They'd charge me with manslaughter down in one of the cities, moving a man who had barely had a week's rest after a crack in his skull; but we have to take things as they come in the bush, my lad, and it's mostly rough at the best."

New life seemed already to have come to him, and when they had placed him in the waggonette, lying comfortably on the pile of blankets Mrs. Burke had spread, the wan weariness had gone and Durham smiled up into the face that looked down on him with so much softness in the dark-lashed eyes.

Overhead the sky was blue as turquoise, and the clear sunlit air fanned him with a faint breeze redolent with the aromatic perfumes which float through the atmosphere of the bush. The horses moved along at the slowest pace they could manage beyond a walk, and the gentle sway of the waggonette on its easy, old-fashioned springs lulled Durham into a delightful sense of restfulness and content. Gradually his eyelids grew heavy and drooped; peaceful, restful, he floated away into slumber as easily as though he had been a child rocked in a cradle.

The sunlight had given place to the shade of evening when he opened his eyes. The rhythmic beat of the horses' hoofs blended harmoniously with the sway of the vehicle in which he was travelling, and the cool air was filled with a delicious fragrance. He awakened with so keen a sense of vitality that for the moment he forgot he was an invalid, and made an effort to rise. But the strength he felt in his muscles was only the trick of his imagination; he could barely lift his head.

But that was sufficient to show him that he was in the waggonette alone. The seat where Mrs. Burke had been when his eyes closed was unoccupied. He turned sufficiently to look at the box-seat. A figure loomed through the dusk, but it seemed more sturdy than the withered frame of old Patsy.

He made another effort to sit up. It was not entirely successful, but it enabled him to see out of the vehicle. Away behind them the dark shadow of the range between the township and Waroona Downs rose against the sky.

"Where is Mrs. Burke?" he called, turning his face towards the form of the driver.

The horses stopped, and the figure on the box leaned back as a merry laugh came down to him.

"Oh, are you awake then? Sure I thought you were asleep for good and all the way you never moved all the journey. And did you think I had vanished and left you to the tender mercies of that old fool? Well, now, that's a poor compliment to yourself surely, to think I'd run away from you as soon as I saw your eyes were closed. No, no, I've got charge of you till you are well and strong again, though maybe I'll have hard work to shunt you at all then, you'll be so used to being

nursed. But I had to come and drive while I sent the old man on ahead to get the door open and a fire alight so as to give you something hot to cheer you as soon as you reached the house."

"But he cannot walk quicker than we are going?"

"Going? Why, we're standing still. So we were at the top of the hill where the horses, poor beasts, wanted a long rest to get their wind again, seeing how they had come all the way without as much as a five minutes' break since we started. You were sleeping through it all so peacefully I had not the heart to disturb you, but sent the old man on ahead while I climbed up here. Sure we're nearly there; I can see the light of the lamp shining out of the window. Just keep quiet and rest now till we're there."

She started the horses again, and Durham lay back on his blankets till he felt the waggonette turn off the main road and drive slowly up to the house.

As it stopped, he managed to raise himself into a sitting position. There was a momentary humming in his head, and he gripped the seats to steady himself. The cessation of the noise made by the moving wheels and trotting horses accentuated to his ears the still silence of the night. So quiet was it that as the humming passed from him the creaking of the springs when Mrs. Burke swung herself down from the box-seat seemed an actual noise.

Patsy's heavy tread echoed on the bare boards of the verandah. For a second they stopped, and through Durham's brain there rang a curious stifled sound, something like a cry coming from afar, a cry indistinct and choked as if it were muffled.

The loud tones of Mrs. Burke's voice, speaking quickly and decisively, drowned it before the dulled brain could either locate whence it came or decide whether it was anything more than a variation of the humming in his ears.

"Come along now, Patsy. Hasten, you slow old fool. Don't you know Mr. Durham will be tired?"

The old man stumbled and blundered down the steps, and Mrs. Burke came to the end of the waggonette.

"Oh, now, now! Sure is it wise to do that?" she exclaimed, as she saw Durham sitting up. "Why didn't you wait till we could help you?"

She leaned in and took hold of his arm.

"If you back the waggonette against the steps, I can get out easier," he said.

"Of course, of course. Now then, Patsy, why didn't you think of that?" she exclaimed. "Turn the horses round while I stay with Mr. Durham."

She sat on the floor of the vehicle, still holding Durham's arm.

The touch of her hands, the sound of her voice as she maintained a steady stream of directions to Patsy, the fact of being so near to her, filled Durham with a gentle soothing. The dreaminess which had been upon him when the journey began, and before he sank into the contented slumber, returned. Her voice reached him as from a distance; his grip of the seats loosened, and as the waggonette turned he swayed until his head drooped upon the shoulder of the woman by his side.

Thereafter all was vague and misty until he came to himself and knew he was ascending the short flight of steps leading to the verandah, with Mrs. Burke supporting him on one side and Patsy the other.

As he reached the verandah his legs trembled beneath him, and he stood for a moment, leaning heavily upon the arms which supported him.

Again there came to his dulled brain the sound like a distant stifled cry.

"What's that?" he muttered. "What's that?"

"Oh, lean on me. Don't fall now. Oh, keep up, keep up. Sure what will the doctor say when he comes if you've hurt yourself?" the voice of Mrs. Burke said in his ear.

"But that—that cry," he gasped. A cold shiver ran through him.

"There's no cry; there's nothing but me and old Patsy. Keep up, now. If you're worse, oh, what will the doctor say?"

The glare from the lamp shining through the open window grew dim; the floor of the verandah rose and fell; his arms dropped nerveless to his sides and, with the faint muffled cry still ringing in his ears, Durham went down into oblivion.

Once the veil partly lifted, and he saw, as through a mist, Mrs. Burke standing defiantly before a man who slunk away out of the room while she turned quickly and came to the couch where he was lying and bent over him. As in a dream he felt her cool hand touch his brow and her face come close to him.

"Oh, why? Why?" he heard her whisper. "Why have you come into my life—now—to bring love to me? Better if I were dead; but I cannot let you go, I cannot! Oh, my love, why have you come so late to me?"

Her lips were pressed to his, her arms encircled his neck, and as he thrilled at her touch, at her voice, at her presence, he essayed to answer her. But he had no strength even to move his lips in response to her kiss, no power to raise a hand. It was as though his will no longer had control over his muscles, as though his consciousness were something apart from his body, something floating in space, voiceless, nerveless, motionless, apart from himself, apart from all save the love she had for him, and the love he had for her.

And in the glamour of that love, the bare knowledge that he existed at all faded away, until he was as one enveloped in a mist through which neither sight nor sound could penetrate.

The sunlight was streaming around him when next he remembered. He was lying in a bed in an unfamiliar room. By his side the doctor was standing. His first memory was of the stifled cry which had come to him as he stepped on to the verandah.

"Ah, you're awake again, are you?" the doctor said cheerily. "Well, how do you feel now?"

"Where am I?" Durham asked weakly.

"Oh, you're where you're all right, if you feel all right. Do you?"

"I'm—this isn't the hut."

He glanced round the room which was at once strange and familiar to him.

"Don't you remember leaving there? You ought to. Don't you remember how we got you into the waggonette? When we put you on the blankets? Just think. You're at Waroona Downs. Mrs. Burke brought you."

"But I—how did I get here?" Durham repeated, glancing again round the room. Then it was that the memory of the cry forced itself to the front.

"Who was it?" he asked. "Who was it?"

Another figure joined the doctor, and Mrs. Burke looked down at him.

"Who was what?" the doctor asked.

"That cry—the cry I heard," Durham replied.

"There was no cry," the doctor said. "You've been dreaming."

Durham looked from one to the other. As his eyes rested on Mrs. Burke's, vaguely there came to him the visionary recollection of her kneeling beside him with her arms around him and her lips pressed to his.

"Dreaming?" he said slowly. "Dreaming? Was it all dreaming?"

He was looking straight into her eyes, as he spoke, forgetful of the doctor's presence, watching for the return of the soft love-light which had filled her eyes in that memoried scene. But no love-light shone from them. They were unmoved, cold in their grey-blue depths almost to hardness.

"Listen to me, my lad," the doctor said briskly. "The drive in from Taloona shook you up a bit, they tell me. Made you delirious, so that they had to keep you on the sofa all night watching you. That's where I found you when I got here at dawn. But you'll be all right now, I fancy, if you keep quiet and don't think about things that never happened. You're at Waroona Downs in bed, and Mrs. Burke and that old idiot of a doddering Irishman are looking after you. That's all you've got to remember."

"Except to get well," Mrs. Burke added.

"Yes, except to get well; and I reckon your nurse will see to that. I'll call in again to-morrow or the next day. But remember—no more dreams."

Chapter XIII

Revenge is Sweet.

As the days wore on and Durham won his way back to health, he waited in vain for a token from Mrs. Burke that the memory which persisted so clearly was other than the figment of a dream.

Although she gave him every attention a sick man required, there was neither look nor word from her to justify him in believing that the memory was of an actual scene. For hours she would be with him, reading to him, talking to him, meeting his glance freely and frankly; but never was there the veriest hint of the emotion he had seen in her eyes on that occasion.

Nor did he hear again the curious stifled cry which had seemed to ring in his ears the night he arrived. He was constantly on the alert for it, both by night and day, while he was confined to his room and later when he was able to get out on to the verandah. But there was no repetition of it, until at last he had perforce to accept the doctor's view and regard it, as well as the other memory, as merely the vagaries of delirium.

But if she gave him nothing whereon to feed the love he had for her, that love did not diminish as the days passed. It took a deeper and firmer hold upon him until he lived in a veritable Fool's Paradise, giving no thought of the morrow, saving that it would be spent with her, and forgetting even the task which had

brought him to the district. The outside world did not obtrude itself upon him, till the doctor declared that only once more would he visit him. Then it came with a rush.

A dozen questions forced themselves upon his mind.

Since his arrival at Waroona Downs, no word had reached him from Brennan, no mention had been made of the robberies. When, once or twice, he had attempted to speak of them, Mrs. Burke told him the doctor's orders were that he was not to be allowed to dwell upon anything likely to disturb him, and she insisted on carrying out those orders. He had always yielded, lest she put into execution the threat she made, to leave him to the tender mercies of old Patsy for a whole day. But now the injunction was removed, for the doctor himself had asked whether he should tell Brennan to come out.

Durham awaited his arrival with impatience. Now that he allowed his mind to revert to more prosaic matters than the object of his adoration, he concluded that, as he had not been troubled with official detail, someone else had been sent up to continue the investigation into the mystery.

He ran over the names of the men most likely to be entrusted with the work, speculating which one it was, and what course he had followed. He hunted for the letter he had found the day he discovered the track leading to the lake among the hills, and when he could not find it, he inferred that after he had been struck down at Taloona, the two marauders had searched him and had recovered what would have been invaluable evidence against Eustace.

The excuse Mrs. Burke had put forward for refusing to discuss the matter with him suggested she knew he had been superseded; the belief grew in his mind that his successor had succeeded in either tracing the stolen gold or securing the arrest of Eustace, and perhaps his companion also. Mrs. Burke, knowing this, had declined to talk lest she revealed the secret and gave him, as she would consider, cause for mental anxiety and distress.

It was therefore a great surprise for him to learn from Brennan, as soon as he came out, that no one had been sent up to take charge of the case; that no arrest had been made, nor clue discovered; but that everything had been allowed to remain as it was until such time as he was sufficiently recovered to resume duty.

"They should not have done that," he exclaimed. "Look at the time wasted."

"I understand the Bank wished it, sir," Brennan answered. "Mr. Wallace told me as much. He said he and his directors were satisfied no one could solve the riddle as you could, and head-quarters had been asked not to put anyone else in charge, but to leave you with an absolutely free hand."

"It is very good of them," Durham said. "But still—look at the chance it has given the thieves to get away with the gold."

"They haven't gone, sir," Brennan said quietly.

"How do you know?"

"One of them was seen only last night," Brennan continued in a low tone. "He was seen on the Taloona road, riding the white horse. That is what puzzles me. How does he hide that horse? It's never been seen in any of the paddocks for miles round, for everyone is on the watch for it. And a man can't hide a white horse in a hollow log—it must run somewhere some time."

"Where is Mrs. Eustace?"

"She's at Smart's cottage. She came in from Taloona yesterday. That's what makes it strange, to my mind, this white horse and rider being seen on the Taloona road the day she leaves the place."

"Where are the troopers—Conlon and his mate?"

"Went away three days ago, sir, on orders from head-quarters."

"And Mr. Dudgeon?"

"Oh, he's still at Taloona. They say he's pretty well right again, except that he limps with a stick."

"I suppose his gold was taken?"

"Every atom of it, sir. We found the spot where it had been dug up under the ashes of the house. But that doesn't seem to trouble him very much. All he wants is to have the men who stuck up the place caught and hanged."

"How did Mrs. Eustace come in?"

"Mr. Gale drove her in, sir. He's been to and fro most every day."

"But he didn't meet the man on the white horse?"

"Yes, sir. It was Mr. Gale who brought me word of it. He said he thought it must be Eustace, and asked if he would be justified in shooting him if he met him face to face. Mr. Harding asked the same thing."

"Of course, you told them no."

"Well, sir, to tell you the truth, I said it might be the best thing for Mrs. Eustace, seeing what the conviction of her husband meant for her, but that it might mean a charge of murder if it were done."

Durham sat silent for a time.

"Come out for me to-morrow, will you, Brennan?" he said presently. "I can't wait for the doctor. This has got to be dealt with promptly, unless we are to lose the game."

When Brennan had gone, Durham sat on the verandah alone. Now that he had taken hold of the case again, all the fascination his work had for him returned. He became so engrossed in the contemplation of the problem that unnoticed the sun went down to leave the young crescent moon shedding a fitful light over the silent bush. Unnoticed, also, were the sound of footfalls as Mrs. Burke came out on to the verandah.

For a time she stood watching him. Had he turned quickly he might have seen in her eyes something of the expression for which he had looked so often. But reading the riddle of the robberies was too enthralling a subject, and so he missed his opportunity, for when she crossed to the hand-rail against which he was sitting, every suggestion of the expression had gone from her face.

Standing where the moonlight fell upon her, she leaned against one of the verandah posts without speaking. It was then he saw her, and from within the shadow he feasted his eyes upon the beauty of her face and form so clearly outlined against the soft-toned evening sky.

"Brennan has gone?" she asked, suddenly turning towards him.

"Yes. Brennan has gone. And this—this is my last evening here," he answered in a low voice. "To-morrow I resume duty."

He waited for the remark he hoped she would make, but she merely looked away over the silvery haze of the bush apparently unmoved, nay, even uninterested in the announcement he had made.

"Don't you ever feel compassion for the poor creatures you are chasing to their doom?" she asked presently.

"Why should there be compassion for them?" he asked in reply.

"Don't you ever feel it? Don't you ever stop to wonder if only they are to blame?"

"I am merely concerned in what they have done. Until they have placed themselves in antagonism to the laws of society, I have nothing to do with them. When they violate the law, then I am bidden to track them down so that they may be made to answer for the wrongs they may have done. It would assist neither them nor myself were I to lose myself in compassionate consideration of things I know nothing about."

"But surely—you must sometimes feel sorry for them—must pity them in their misfortune?"

"There are too many who deserve pity, Mrs. Burke, for me to waste any of mine on people who only injure others. All my pity and sympathy go to the victimised, not to the victimisers."

"It seems so hard, so merciless, so hopeless," she said after a few minutes' silence.

"Have you any compassion for those who stole your papers? Would you have them escape capture and punishment, and so lose for ever all hopes of recovering those papers?"

"I don't know."

There was a note of sadness in her voice, a note almost as unfamiliar as the brevity of her reply.

"To what compassion is the man entitled who struck me down?"

"You don't know—you don't know what made him do it. He may have been forced to do it for the sake of his companion, to save both of them."

"Save himself and his companion from what? From capture while committing an outrage and a robbery. I do not see where any reason for compassion comes in, Mrs. Burke."

"And you would show him none?"

"None," he answered fiercely. "I look upon that man, whoever and wherever he may be, as a menace to mankind. He is unfit to be at large."

"If you saw him, you would shoot him?"

"If I saw him I should try and capture him and hand him over for trial."

"But if you could not capture him? If he were escaping from you?"

"Then I would shoot him—shoot him like a dog, and be satisfied I had done my duty."

He stood up as he spoke and came into the moonlight, his face hard set, his eyes gleaming.

She raised her hands and held them out towards him with so impetuous a gesture that he drew back.

"I hope that you may never meet him—never—never," she said in a low voice which vibrated with emotion.

"Why?"

Durham rapped out the question in a savage staccato.

"Because I—oh!" she exclaimed, as she shuddered. "It is so horrible to think of, to think that you who—when you were delirious, Mr. Durham, you used to talk—

you used to say things so full of tenderness and sympathy that I wondered—wondered whether you were then your real self or whether your real self was the man you are now—hard, stern, pitiless, relentless. It was because of that I asked you if you ever felt compassion for those you chase to their doom. I would rather remember you as the man I learned to know when you unconsciously revealed to me your other nature. It is only as that I care to remember you. But if you met that man and killed him—oh, how could I bear to think of you as a murderer? It would kill me!"

"I should not be a murderer. I should be carrying out my duty—a duty I hope I may never be called upon to perform, but one which I should not shrink from performing if I were called on by circumstances to perform it."

For a space there was another silence between them, until he remembered she was standing.

"Will you not sit down?" he said quietly. "Let me bring you a chair. This is my last night here," he said, when she had taken the chair he brought. "Do not let us talk about that wretched side of life. I want, before I go, to thank you for all the goodness and kindness you have shown to me. You have been——"

She made an exclamation of impatience.

"You have nothing to thank me for, Mr. Durham. Surely there is nothing deserving of thanks in doing what one could to relieve unmerited suffering. I only had—compassion."

"It was more than compassion. It was the——"

"Now, please. You will only annoy me if you say any more about it. If you had had a skilful nurse, you would have been cured long ago; it was my foolish blundering which delayed you so long."

"Your blundering? If everybody would only blunder as you have, Mrs. Burke, then there would——"

"You must not say that, Mr. Durham," she interrupted.

"But indeed I must," he answered softly. "You have not only brought me back to health, but you have given me new life—something I never had before—not until I met you. I want to tell you. I want——"

"No, no," she exclaimed, as she rose to her feet. "You must not talk like that. You must not, really. I will not listen to you, I must not."

He lay back in his chair and she resumed her seat in silence.

"What news had Brennan?" she asked presently. "You see, I have not been in the town since you came here," she went on. "One likes to know what is going, especially when one is isolated. Has the new manager arrived at the bank yet?"

"I think not, but I did not ask. Brennan would probably have mentioned it though, if it were so."

"I must come in and see about engaging someone to get the place ready for stock," she said. "The old man is not a scrap of use. In fact, I wish he were back in Ireland. He has the usual Irish failing, Mr. Durham. You know what that is. I'm always afraid that he will break out if ever he gets into the town by himself."

"Drink?" Durham asked.

"Oh, something terrible. I don't think he has had any since you have been up here, but one never knows. Any time I may find him helpless. It makes me uneasy until I have someone else about the place. Sure you can never say what a man like

that will do. He might set the whole place on fire over my head, and I should never know it till I was burned to death perhaps."

"May I make inquiries for you to-morrow, when I get into town? Mr. Gale may know——"

"Mr. Gale? Oh, he's a likely man to bother himself about my affairs now. It was Mr. Gale stopped me from going to Taloona when I heard first about your—accident. All he could talk about was the good Mrs. Eustace was doing, and I said it was as well perhaps that Mr. Eustace was not at home, seeing the interest all the men in the place were taking in his lady. Sure now, is there any news of the creature—Mr. Eustace, I mean—there's no need to ask about Mrs. Eustace. Has any trace at all been found of the scoundrel?"

"I can't say, really," he answered slowly. "I shall know to-morrow. We did not go into everything to-day. Brennan only reported certain matters of official routine."

"Well, well. I should have thought he would have given you all the news seeing how long you have been away, and knowing how anxious you would be to have the latest tidings. Did he say at all how the old curmudgeon was? Is Mrs. Eustace still dancing attendance on him, and making herself a public martyr to cover up the tracks of her levanting husband?"

"I believe Mr. Dudgeon is practically well again—the doctor could have told you about that."

"Oh, he did, but I wondered whether you had other news. Sure it's not always a doctor's word that is worth considering. They lie almost as well as lawyers—or the police."

"To whom you come for verification."

"Now, that's just like me, giving away my own private opinion of you without the asking. But there! Did you ever hear the reason why the old man hated so much to let me buy this place? The doctor was telling me. He said the old man was never done telling him and Mrs. Eustace all about it. It's the funniest story ever you heard. Do you know it?

"Sure I'll tell it to you," she went on, without heeding the absence of any reply to her question. "The old man was once in love. You'd hardly believe that, would you? But you never know. It's the most unlikely people on this earth who are the most like to make fools of themselves in that way. You and me and the rest of us, sure we're none of us safe, though I will say I'd like to see the woman who could get the blind side of one man I've met in these parts. Who he may be is no matter. But about old Dudgeon. It's long since he was in love, you must know, but when he was it was with a girl who was the daughter of the people who owned this station, years and years ago, before you and I were born, indeed. Well, the girl wouldn't have him, or preferred someone else, which is about the same thing. Kitty Lambton was her name when he was after her; it was a man named O'Guire she married to get away from the old soured rascal, though he was young at the time, and mayhap a sour young man at that. Would you say she was wrong? Would you?"

"I suppose every woman has a right to please herself in such a matter," he replied evasively.

"That's what I say, and it's what poor Kitty did, rest her soul, for she is dead now, poor thing."

Her voice dropped to a softer tone suddenly, and she was silent for a few seconds; but when she resumed her story the shrill tone, the tone which irritated and hurt him, he knew not why, rang out again.

"But the old man would have none of it. He swore all the vengeance he could think of against her and hers. He swore no woman should ever set foot in this place again. He hounded the father and mother of that unfortunate girl to their graves; he chased her and her husband from pillar to post, robbing them, swindling them, betraying them until there was no place on the face of the earth they could call their own, no, not even a stick nor a shred. The devil was good to him—sure he always is good to his own. Money came to him by the waggon-load, and ever did he use it to hound those two unfortunates down, lower and lower until there was no hope nor peace for them, and they wandered outcasts in the sight of man and woman. And that's the man, that old double-dyed, heartless scoundrel that you police flock to preserve and protect, while the likes of Kitty and her husband are forced down and down and down to the lowest dregs of life. Is that justice? Is that law? Is that right? Answer me that now."

"Probably Mr. Dudgeon coloured his story a good deal when he told it: old men usually do when they recount their youthful doings," he said quietly. "But, in any case——"

She held out her hand impulsively.

"Wait a moment," she said. "Supposing he did. Supposing the tale is only half true; but supposing that he did drive Kitty and her husband to the gutter, and suppose they had children—do you think if those children knew what that old scoundrel had done they would not be right to pay him back in his own coin? Sure I'm glad I was able to make the old vagabond eat his own words when I bought the place over his head. He's met one woman in the world who has defied him. And do you know what? If I knew where any of Kitty Lambton's children were at this moment—or her husband, seeing she is dead, poor thing—at least, so the doctor said—I'd go to them and say they could have the place free if only they would go and taunt that old fiend and fling it in his face and hound him down as he hounded down their parents."

"What good would that do either you or them?" he asked.

"Good?"

She sprang out of her chair and stood facing him.

"Don't you know what it is to hate?" she cried. "Is it only Irish blood that can boil at rank injustice? Is it only Irish hearts which burn to aid the oppressed and torture the oppressors as they tortured their poor unfortunate victims? You said you would shoot the man who struck you down, shoot him like a dog, if he were escaping your clutches. Don't you think Kitty Lambton's children have as great, if not a greater right to shoot that bloodless, heartless monster like a dog or a cat or any other vermin, if they met him on this earth? I'd tell them to do it; I'd tell them to do it if there were no other way to make his last hours more full of misery and agony. That's what I'd do, the dirty old traitorous villain that he is. Pah!"

She uttered the words with a tigerish pant as she swung on her heels and strode away to the end of the verandah, where she stood for a moment staring up at the sky, before she returned.

"It's the curse of the Irish to feel the wounds of others as keenly as though they were one's own," she said, as she sat down again. "What concern is it of mine whether the old fool hoards his money and drives lost souls to perdition? I've no right to worry about other people's troubles. Sure I have enough of my own. But it just maddened me to think of it. Oh, it's the Irish hearts that suffer!"

The harsh vibrant tones had gone; the voice he heard was that of the woman who had pleaded earlier in the evening for compassion for the men who had injured her.

Impulsively he reached out his hand and touched hers.

"You must not," he said. "You must not heed such tales. You are too warm-hearted. The sordid side of life is not for you. We who have to come in contact with it, and know it in all its wretched squalor, know only too well that rarely, if ever, can one of the high-pitched stories of personal wrong be justified. The greater the criminal, the greater the protestations of innocence and injustice. Do not be deceived. You, who are so full of sympathy and gentleness, you who would not, by your own hand, hurt the hair of a man's head, you——"

She sprang up.

"Don't!" she cried. "Don't! You must not—never—never—I told you I would not have you speak to me of—I must not hear such things. I——"

He was by her side, his two hands clasping hers.

"Nora, I must. Darling, I love you. I cannot bear to see——"

She pushed him back, flinging her hands free from his grasp, to clasp and press them to her bosom as though to still the great heaving gasps which made it rise and fall in tumultuous spasms.

"Mr. Durham! You forget!"

Her voice fell like a whip-lash, cold, haughty, stern.

"I forbid you ever to speak to me so again. Good night."

She swept past him and entered the house, closing the door after her.

Hours passed before he could obtain control over his thoughts, before he could face the blackness her rejection of his declaration had brought upon him. Then he rose and stood staring blankly out over the sombre mystery of the bush, long since bereft of the faint glimmer of the new-born moon, veiled in shade, silent as the thin wisps of filmy mist which floated in the still air along the course of Waroona Creek.

In the morning Mrs. Burke met him without a trace in her voice, face, or manner of the resentful indignation she had shown on the previous night. She talked, as she had talked on many a morning at the breakfast-table, with an uninterrupted flow of chatter, inconsequential, airy, frivolous. She met his eyes openly, frankly, without a glimmer to show she noticed the lines which furrowed his face. Yet they were so marked that when Brennan drove out for him later, he glanced at his superior officer with apprehension.

"Do you think you are well enough to return to duty, sir?" he asked. "You don't look half so well as you did yesterday, and you were not looking too well then. If a few more days' rest——"

"Oh, I'm very fit, Brennan," Durham interrupted. "You had better turn the horses out for an hour or so; Mrs. Burke insists on my waiting to have lunch before I go."

Mrs. Burke came out to them as they stood talking.

"Oh, Brennan, did you see old Patsy in the town?" she exclaimed.

"Why, he was here this morning," Durham said.

"Excuse me, Mr. Durham, he was not. You remember what I told you last night. I did not care to say then, but the old man was very strange in his manner before dinner, and I believed he had had drink. I spoke to him about it, and I have not seen him since."

"But—who got breakfast ready?" Durham asked sharply.

"I did myself, Mr. Durham."

"Oh, Mrs. Burke; why did you not tell me? I could have——"

"An Irish lady, Mr. Durham, does not ask her guests to do her housework."

Durham turned away at the sting of her words and voice.

"Did you see the old man in the town, Brennan?" she asked.

"No, Mrs. Burke, he was not in town last night. I should have seen him."

"Oh, dear, then what can have happened to the creature? Sure I wish I had left him behind me in Ireland."

"He may be about the place somewhere. Will I look for him?" Brennan said.

"He's not about the house; I've looked everywhere," she answered.

"He might be in one of the outhouses or stables."

"I never thought of that," she exclaimed. "Maybe that's where he is. Oh, the trouble of the wretched old fool! I'll pack him off back to Ireland."

She went into the house and Durham turned to Brennan.

"Have you ever seen him in the town?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, sir. He comes in at night mostly and buys drink, but he never stays. Soden told me yesterday the last time he came in he took away half a gallon of rum with him. Maybe that's the cause of his disappearance."

"We'll look for him," Durham said shortly.

In an outlying tool-shed they found him, stretched out on a tumbled heap of old sacks and rubbish, the place reeking with the scent of rum and a half-gallon jar lying on its side near him, empty.

"He's dead to the world for a day," Brennan said as he stood up after bending over the old man and trying to rouse him. "He must have been drinking steadily for days to get through that quantity and into this state. What are we to do with him, sir?"

"If Mrs. Burke will give him in charge we will take him to the station and lock him up, but we cannot take him otherwise. He's on her private property."

"That settles it then," Brennan replied. "She's Irish, sir. You know what that means."

His anticipation was correct. Mrs. Burke refused point-blank to allow her helpless retainer to be touched. He could remain where he was, she said, and she hoped the snakes and the lizards and the mosquitoes and all the other fearsome things she could mention would come and devour him—but the police were not going to touch him.

She was equally hostile when Durham suggested they should start off for the town without giving her the trouble of preparing anything for them to eat. In fact, he could not now open his lips to her that she did not snap some biting retort at him.

"She'd set the dogs on you if she were in her own country, sir," Brennan remarked, when at last they drove away from the house with a final envenomed shaft ringing in their ears. "I don't think the old man is the only one who has a taste for the drink, if you ask me, sir."

Chapter XIV

The Last Straw.

Since Mrs. Eustace returned to the township Harding had never once been to see her nor, when passing the house, had he glanced at it.

His attitude was inexplicable to her. That she had not had even a word from him while she was at Taloona perplexed her, for it did not occur to her to question whether he had received the message she left with Bessie for him. Yet there were several reasons which might account for that omission. But his failure either to see or to communicate with her after her return to Waroona was entirely another matter.

When the third day came without a sign or word from him she took the bull by the horns and sent a note asking him to see her that evening.

She was waiting for him in her sitting-room when she heard him come to the door, heard him ask Bessie if she were at home, heard him approach the room. As he opened the door she rose to greet him. He stopped on the threshold.

"I received your note—you wish to see me?" he said stiffly.

"Fred!" she exclaimed, looking at him in amazement. "Why, what has happened? Why do you speak so? What is it?"

He remained where he was, silent.

"Don't you wish to see me?" she asked, still regarding him with a look of wondering amazement. "Has anything happened? Is that the reason you have never been to see me since I came back—why you never sent a word to me at Taloona? Have they—have they found out anything more about Charlie?"

He closed the door and walked across to the table by the side of which she was standing.

"Mrs. Eustace," he began, but before he could say more she interrupted him.

"You have something unpleasant to say. What is it? At least be frank. Whatever it is I am prepared to hear it."

He took the letter from his pocket.

"This came into my possession the night we were at Taloona," he said slowly. "I should have returned it to you at once, but it slipped my memory until after you had gone. Then, accidentally, unthinkingly, I came to read it. I—I wish to hear what you have to say about it. I wish to know——" The sentences he had so carefully thought out fled from his brain before the calm, steadfast look with which she was regarding him. "Do you recognise it?" he asked abruptly.

He held out the cover to her, turning it over so that she could see both sides.

"It is one of the Bank envelopes; I don't recognise anything else," she replied.

Taking the letter from the cover, he spread it open and held it out.

"Now do you know it?"

"Charlie's writing!"

Her eyes, after one rapid glance at it, were raised to his.

"You recognise it?"

"I recognise the writing, yes. It is his. Do you wish me to read it?"

"If you have not already done so."

She took the letter from him. As she read the first sentence she raised her eyes, filled with piteous anguish, to his.

"Oh, Fred!" she exclaimed. "Oh, what is this? Where did you get it?"

Without waiting for an answer she looked at it again. Her face went as white as the paper, a violent fit of trembling seized her, and she sank to her knees beside the table, burying her head on her arms.

"Oh, Fred! Fred! Why—why did you let me see it?" she moaned.

"Is it not yours?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Mine?"

She was on her feet, facing him, with eyes that blazed through the tears which filled them.

"You believed that? You believed I had this when—that I had read it when we were at Taloona? You believed that?"

"It was given to me by one of the troopers, who picked it up where you had been kneeling when you attended to Durham's wound. The man said it was either yours or mine. I knew it was not mine, so I took it to give it to you. I should have given it at once, but I forgot it at the moment. When I read it——"

"Go on," she said in a hard voice as he paused.

"When I read it I——"

Her eyes disconcerted him; he could not bring himself to say to her face he suspected her.

"When you read it—you believed it was mine," she said steadily.

"For the moment, yes; I had no alternative. Then—later—I was uncertain."

"Uncertain of what?"

"Uncertain whether it was yours. At first I intended to hand it over to Brennan, as Durham was too ill to understand. Of course, that would have made it public, and you—well, you would have been suspected, at the least, of complicity in the robbery. I could not believe that of you—could not, even with this in my possession. I came back to Waroona in the morning intending to see you and hear what explanation you had to offer before taking any further steps. But you were not at the bank, and when I got there I was done up."

The steady look in her eyes never changed.

"Go on," she repeated.

"I ask you now—what explanation have you to offer?"

"Please finish your story first," she replied. "Then I will tell you mine."

"I have little to add. I could not bring myself to give up the letter until I was sure it was really yours. Lest anyone else should see it, I hid it where no one could find it. But when I came down from my room again, Mr. Wallace told me you had been in and had gone back to Taloona. So I kept it until I could be sure."

"Sure of what?"

"Whether—you had had it."

She laid it on the table in front of him.

"Take it," she said. "Do what you will with it. I am sorry you showed it to me. I would rather not have seen it. How it came where it was found I do not know. Until to-night I did not know it existed."

She met his glance openly, frankly, proudly.

"And you believed it was mine!" she added.

"I had no alternative—until I saw you," he answered.

"You have had that letter for weeks; I have been here three days. Yet you only come to me now—when I have asked you to come."

"I dared not see you—lest——"

"Lest you discovered me to be even a greater traitress than you had already learned me to be," she said in measured tones. "I cannot blame you. The fault was mine. I have given you ample reason why your faith in me should have ended."

"That is not true," he exclaimed. "I could not bring myself to believe you had acted so. But it was horrible enough as it was. It was because I had not lost faith in you that I hid the letter so as to prevent anyone else seeing it. By doing so I was not acting as I should have acted towards the Bank."

"I never had it, never. I wish I had not seen it, for it"—her voice lost its hardness as she spoke—"it is the last straw. Whatever else I knew my husband to be, I held him innocent of that crime. When you and all the others suspected him, I would not, could not bring myself to believe it. But now——"

Her voice caught and she turned aside, sinking into a chair where she sat with averted face and bowed head.

"No wonder you did not wish to see me again," she added presently, as he did not speak. "What am I now? The wife of a thief, an outlaw, one who was almost a murderer. Oh, leave me! I should not have sent to you. Leave me. There is nothing for me now but death or degradation."

"You must not say that, Jess, you must not say that," he said in a strained voice as he came and stood beside her. "Whatever he may have done, you are not affected by it. Appearances cannot well be blacker against him than they are at present, but you must still remember you are not responsible for his ill-deeds. No one here, least of all myself, blames you. Besides, he has not yet been convicted."

"Not after that letter? There can be no doubt after that. He must have had it with him when he was at Taloona, and dropped it."

"But it was opened, torn open, when the trooper found it. If Eustace had dropped it, surely it would have been sealed up."

She glanced at him quickly.

"Do you still suspect me?" she exclaimed.

"I should not be here if I did," he answered quietly.

"Oh, I don't know what to think," she said. "I would rather you had come to tell me he was dead than to show me that hideous thing. Better if he were dead, far, far better, than that he should live to end his days on the gallows or in gaol."

She was voicing his own thought, a thought which had been with him for many days.

"It was because something of this kind might happen I wanted you to go away," he said.

"I know. I understand that. But I told you—told you why I could not go."

She spoke scarcely above a whisper, with her head bent over her clasped hands as though she feared he might see her face.

"But the reason you gave no longer exists. Will you go now? Will you go and leave all this wretched strain and worry behind you?"

"I dare not. It would drive me to perdition. You don't know how a woman thinks. So long as she has someone near her whom she knows has respect for her, she will fight against the temptation to drown all her sorrows in one reckless plunge. When that one is no longer near her, no longer her stronghold, then—what has she to live for?"

"You have the respect of all who know you."

She pressed her clasped hands to her lips to stop their quivering.

"No, Fred, no. I must stay. I could not bear to go. A man can think for the future; a woman lives only in the present. You, a man, cannot understand that. You would say I should go away, and in a few months or a year or so everything would have blown over. That would be all right for a man, but not for a woman. It is while the affair is blowing over that she is in the greatest danger. It is then she wants sustaining. She is only conscious of the precipice at her feet. Left to herself she must lean over, nearer and nearer to the edge until she falls.

"That is the road to ruin thousands of women tread," she went on. "It would have been the road I should have gone but for you. The knowledge that despite all I have done to merit your scorn, you still hold to the love you gave me in the happier days, is the rock to which I have clung. Had you acted differently, I should have gone—gone from here, gone from everything, gone out into the world and lost myself under the weight of the disgrace which had come upon me. People would say I have no right to tell you this, that I am false to my sex in doing so. They don't know. It is easy to theorise when one is not in danger. I tell you because I trust you and know I can trust you. It is such men as you who save women, save them from themselves, as it is such men as Charlie who ruin them—as he ruined me."

With her face still averted from him she ceased, and he also was silent, not trusting himself to speak.

"That is why I must stay here. The mere fact of being near you gives me strength. If you are going away, then I will go also, for Waroona would then be impossible for me. But not till then, Fred, not till then. I only want to know you are here, only to see you sometimes. Do not deny me that."

"You know I will not deny you anything that will help you in facing your difficulties, Jess," he answered.

"Yes, I know," she said. "I could never have come through what I have if I had not always known it.

"Will you have to go when the new manager comes?" she asked presently.

"The new manager is here," he answered.

"Here? Why, when did he arrive? I did not hear of it. Did they keep it from me on purpose? Mr. Gale was in this morning, but he said nothing about it."

"He probably did not know at the time. I told him this afternoon."

"What is his name? Is it anyone I know, or who knew Charlie?"

"Yes."

She faced round quickly.

"Fred—you?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Oh, I am pleased," she began impulsively. Then she stopped. "That was why you did not come sooner," she added.

"Yes," he replied. "Mr. Wallace told me three days ago it was to be, and I thought it better not to call immediately you returned."

She had risen with her hand outstretched to him, but, before she could speak, a knock at the front door interrupted her.

"Is Mr. Harding here?" they heard Durham's voice ask when Bessie went to the door.

"Tell him I wish to see him at once," he added.

She went to the door of the room.

"Ask Mr. Durham to come in," she called out. "I am glad to see you out again," she added as Durham came forward. "Mr. Harding is in here. Will you come in?"

He followed her into the room without speaking, his face so stern that a tremor of fear ran through her.

"Will you give me a few minutes alone with Mr. Harding, please, Mrs. Eustace?" he began, when his keen eyes caught sight of the open letter lying on the table.

He sprang forward and picked it up.

"How did this come here?" he cried, looking from one to the other.

"I brought it," Harding answered. "One of the troopers found it at Taloona and thought Mrs. Eustace or I had dropped it when attending to you."

"It must have fallen from my pocket," Durham said as he folded it up.

Mrs. Eustace was looking at him with anxious eyes.

"Will you tell me—where you—got it?" she asked hesitatingly.

"I found it—in the bush, lying unopened on the ground. By the marks on the ground someone had evidently been thrown from his horse, and this, I assume, had fallen from his pocket."

"Was it—near the bank?"

"No, Mrs. Eustace, it was in the bush miles away."

She gave a deep sigh of relief.

"Will you leave us for a few minutes now, if you please?" he repeated.

She inclined her head and went from the room.

As soon as the door was closed, Durham turned to Harding.

"I went to the bank for you," he said, "to ask you to come here. I am glad you are here already. I have an unpleasant task to perform. Will you give me your assistance?"

"Certainly," Harding answered. "What is it you wish me to do?"

"I wish you would do it altogether. It will be easier for her if you tell her, than if I do."

"Eustace is arrested?" Harding exclaimed in an excited whisper.

"Eustace is dead," Durham replied in the same tone.

Harding started as though he had been struck.

"How? When?" he exclaimed.

"Brennan and I found him, as we were returning from Waroona Downs this evening. He was lying on his face in the creek where it crosses the road in the range. He was drenched with water from head to foot, but the water at the ford is

barely six inches deep. There were no footprints on the track either side of the ford to show how he had entered the water. He was shot in the back, the bullet having passed through his right lung, coming out at his chest. His wrists were bruised and chafed as though he had been tightly bound and had struggled to escape. The only thing found on him was this."

He produced a handkerchief with two round holes burned in the centre.

"It was such a handkerchief one of the men who stuck up Taloona was wearing," he added.

"Where is he now?" Harding asked.

"We brought him in and took him over to the police-station. It is for Mrs. Eustace, of course, to say what is to be done about the funeral. Will you break the news to her by yourself, or shall I do it?"

"You have told Mr. Wallace?"

"Yes. He suggested I should see you. The news upset him very much."

"It will be better if I see her alone, I think."

"I think so too. Not that I want to put the burden upon you, but coming from me——" he shrugged his shoulders. "I will leave you then, and ask her to come in."

Harding met her at the door. Closing it behind her, he took her hand and led her to the chair where she had been sitting before Durham arrived.

"Jess," he said softly, as he stood by her, still holding her hand, "I have sad news to tell you."

Her fingers closed tighter upon his, but beyond that she made no sign.

"Durham asked me to tell you."

"Charlie," she said in a tense whisper. "It is about him. He is——"

A shudder went through her and her voice broke.

He placed his other hand upon hers gently.

"He is gone, Jess."

She rose to her feet with a gasp, clutching his arm.

"Not dead!"

"Yes, Jess."

Her hands fell to her sides, limply, nervelessly; her lips parted, but no sound came from them; for a second she stood motionless.

He took her hand again and rested his arm upon her shoulder, fearing she would fall.

"Dead!"

The word came in a low whisper, but the parted lips did not move nor the staring eyes change.

"My poor, poor Jess," he whispered.

"Oh, Fred!"

A great wavering sigh escaped her, a sigh that ended in a sob, plaintive, wailing, sad. But still her eyes stared blankly.

"Sit down, Jess," he said softly.

"No, no. Let me stand. Let me—I want to face it. Don't leave me, Fred, don't leave me."

She swayed, and the staring eyes closed. He slipped his arm round her waist to support her and at the touch she came forward, flinging her arms round him as

her head drooped upon his shoulder and she burst into a fit of wild, tempestuous weeping.

So he held her, his head bent upon hers, his arms supporting her. Not until the storm of sobs had abated did he speak.

"Sit down, now, Jess. You will be better resting," he whispered.

"No, no," she answered. "No, no. Let me stay—a moment."

A hum of voices came from the road outside, for the news, flying through the town, brought everybody out to tell and hear.

With one accord they gathered round the police-station, which was almost opposite the cottage, and stood in the road discussing the latest phase of the mystery, the phase which brought into it the note of tragedy. Then someone remembered the cottage and who was in it, and passed the word along. The loud voices were hushed as the men, actuated by the rough sympathy of the bush, quietly moved away so that the sound of their voices should not reach the woman on whom a fresh blow had fallen.

Bessie, hearing the noise, went out to ascertain the cause. Hearing what the news was, she rushed back into the cottage and precipitately burst into the sitting-room. As she opened the door, Harding signed to her to keep quiet.

"Here is Bessie, Jess. Will you stay with her?" he said.

She drew away from him slowly.

"No, don't go yet," she answered. "Tell me everything. I can hear it now."

Bessie slipped out of the room and softly closed the door after her.

Mrs. Eustace took the chair Harding placed for her and he sat down by her.

"Who—did it?" she asked.

"No one knows yet," he answered.

She looked at him quickly.

"Do they think—it was—himself?"

"No; it could not have been."

"I am glad of that," she said. "I have always feared he would. Then there could have been no doubt. Was he found?"

"Yes. Durham was driving in from Waroona Downs with Brennan. They found him in the water where the creek crosses the road in the range."

"Drowned?" she asked wonderingly.

"No, not drowned; he had been shot."

She shuddered and gripped his hand.

"They did not——" she began brokenly. "They—it was not because he was—escaping?"

"They found him," he said gently. "He was lying in the water—the shot had been fired from behind him."

For a time she sat silent, still holding his hand firmly.

"Where is he now?" she asked presently.

"They brought him in and Durham came across to tell you. Will you——"

"No, no. Oh, no," she interrupted as she shuddered and hid her face in her hands.

Presently she raised her eyes to his.

"It is better so," she said. "They may find out now that he was innocent; they would have condemned him had he been taken alive."

He laid a hand on hers without speaking.
With a quick gesture she raised it to her lips.
"Oh, Fred, what a friend you have been to me!" she murmured.

Chapter XV

The Rider's Scorn.

Late into the night the townsfolk of Waroona stood in knots and groups in the roadway discussing the mystery surrounding the death of Eustace.

Until the closing hour compelled the hotelkeepers to turn their customers out, the bars were crowded and a roaring trade was done, all the loose cash in the place passing into the tills which were full to overflowing.

Everyone had a theory, which differed from that of everyone else, but as one after the other told his particular views on the question and heard them criticised and discussed, and heard also the views of others, there was a rapid falling off in individual opinions and a tendency to concentrate on one or two which withstood the test of criticism the best.

On one point there was unanimity of opinion. Eustace and the man with the yellow beard had been in league. They had robbed the bank together, Eustace having drugged the other inmates so that there should be no chance of the work being disturbed.

Eustace had also participated in the robbery and outrage at Taloona. He it was, the townsmen decided, who had his face hidden by the handkerchief mask. The indifference of his companion whether his face was seen or not suggested to them a stranger, one who was not known in the district, but who had come there for the purpose of carrying out the robbery of the bank.

When the first sum of twenty-five thousand was so successfully secured, Eustace would know that the Bank, for its own protection, would have to hurry forward another similar sum to meet the obligation of its client. He would know that old Dudgeon would refuse to leave it in charge of the Bank, and would decline any police protection even if it were offered. Therefore, the crowd argued, he and his companion had waited until they could make a dash for that second sum.

So far the events as they knew them corroborated their views. There had been the attack on Taloona; the second sum of money had been stolen and the rough treatment meted out both to old Dudgeon and the sub-inspector showed that the two outlaws were men who were prepared to play a desperate game to preserve their liberty and booty.

It was this desperation which gave the most popular clue to the solution of the mystery surrounding the death of Eustace.

The money, fifty thousand pounds in all, had been safely carried off to the hiding-place the robbers had chosen. In addition to the money there were other articles, and over the division of this spoil there had been a quarrel. Eustace had gone down, probably taken unawares, seeing that he had been shot in the back.

Little as anyone sympathised with him in the course he had followed, there was a feeling of resentment against his companion for having obviously taken a mean advantage over the man who had thrown in his lot with him. A quarrel was possible at any time, even so deadly a quarrel as would result fatally for one or other of the combatants; but at least it should have been fairly conducted.

Thereafter the completion of the story was easy.

The victor had emptied his victim's pockets of everything except the incriminating handkerchief—leaving that, perchance, to fasten upon him a part responsibility of the Taloona outrage; had taken the body on his horse and ridden with it to the ford, dropping it in the middle of the stream where it was bound to be discovered by the first person passing that way.

There was a callousness, a cynical indifference to all human instincts in this method of disposing of his victim, which deepened the feeling of resentment against the assassin who everyone held to be the unknown man with the yellow beard. To have left the body where it fell would have been less brutal than to flaunt it in the face of police and public as a taunt and a mockery. Following the outburst of amazement which the discovery had aroused, there came a sense of bitter hostility against the man who had done this, to their minds, needless act of savagery.

As Brennan passed to and fro he was assailed with questions as to what the sub-inspector was going to do. Volunteers on all sides offered their services to scour the range, where all believed the murderer was hiding, and ride him down. But Brennan would say nothing. The sub-inspector had barely spoken since he returned to the station; but if he wanted help he would not hesitate to appeal for it, Brennan told them, adding that they need not worry—the criminal who could outwit the sleuth-hound of the force was not yet born.

"But the Rider of Waroona is no fool," one of the men remarked.

"Neither is Sub-Inspector Durham," Brennan retorted.

Gale, who was standing in the group listening to the remarks made, but advancing no theory of his own, spoke out for the first time.

"I'm not so sure," he said. "He may be smart enough in following up town robberies, but he hasn't done much here yet. Twice he has come in contact with the pair, and each time they have got ahead of him. He stops everyone else from doing anything. I offered to go out with a dozen men and scour the range, but he wouldn't hear of it—that was before he was cornered at Taloona."

"Don't you worry," Brennan replied. "The sub-inspector knows what he is doing."

He passed away from the group and the men turned to Gale.

"That's what I don't follow," one of them said. "The chap must be hiding somewhere with that white horse of his. Why not scour the range for him?"

"Brennan told me he didn't believe there was a white horse—that it was all a yarn," another exclaimed.

"Well, I saw it," Gale retorted. "I saw it on the Taloona road. I'd have gone after it only I was in a buggy and it vanished into the bush."

"Is the range the only place you'd look, Mr. Gale?" one of the men asked.

"No," Gale replied. "I'd look there first, and then I'd go the other way."

"Taloona way?"

"Well, not far off."

"That's what I think," the man went on. "Old Crotchety takes the loss of his money too quietly to please me. He's a pretty fly old chap and does not stop at a trifle to get his own back."

"Like he did when he fired you out, Davy," someone exclaimed, and there was a general laugh, for the story of how Davy had been sent about his business at a moment's notice by Dudgeon was one of the stock anecdotes of the district.

"Oh, that's as it may be," Davy retorted, "but I know too much about the old man to trust him very far."

"Do you think he's the Rider?" Gale exclaimed.

"No, but he may know who the Rider is—there are plenty of men who'd do the job for a round sum down."

"But how about Eustace?"

"Oh, well, that would be a bit of luck to get him to join. They may have thrown him over when he was no more use to them, and then there may have been a row and somebody's gun may have gone off a bit too soon. You never know. But anyhow, I'm with you when you say things look as if they are getting too much for the police to handle."

"That's all very fine, Davy, but what I'd like to know is why the old man got shot? Did he pay a man to do that?"

"Of course he didn't," Davy exclaimed. "I had a yarn with one of the troopers about that. He told me what the sub-inspector said in his report. Maybe that's something you don't know."

It was, and the attention of the group concentrated on Davy, much to his satisfaction.

"Go on, let's have the yarn," someone said impatiently, and there was a chorus of assent from the others.

"This is what happened," Davy went on. "The Rider and his mate—Eustace, as I believe—came into the hut to settle the sub-inspector. As a blind they put handcuffs on the old man and were going to do the same with Durham when he, finding himself cornered again, made a fight for it. One of the chaps fired, meaning to finish him, but missed and hit the old man instead. Then, in the fight, the lamp was upset and the place in a blaze. Durham got a crack on the head and staggered outside, and before the others could get the old man out of the place the troopers arrived, and they had to bolt to save their own skins. That is pretty much what Conlon told me was in the sub-inspector's report. It was after hearing it I suspected the old chap."

The group was silent as Davy ceased.

"You've got the bulge on us this time," one of them remarked presently. "Why didn't you tell the yarn before?"

"Because it was told to me in confidence—I knew Conlon years ago in the South. But now this other thing's happened it makes all the difference, doesn't it?"

"But how about the money, Davy?" Gale asked. "That had gone, you know; I saw the place where it had been dug up."

"Did you? You saw a hole in the ground; but how do you know the money was ever in it? And how could two chaps carry away a lot of loose bags of money on horseback?"

"That's so," one of the group cried. "I reckon Davy's on the right track this time."

"Anyway, so far as the money is concerned, only those who can afford to lose have been robbed. It won't break the Bank and old Dudgeon can stand it," Gale observed.

"But there's murder in the case now. That counts more than money. It means hanging for someone," Davy replied.

"Or ought to—if the police can catch him," Gale said, as he left the group and went on to Soden's bar, where he found Allnut and Johnson carrying on an animated discussion with the hotelkeeper on the one topic.

"Have you heard the latest?" he inquired as he joined them.

"What's that? A clue? Have the police got a clue?" Soden exclaimed.

"There's a clue—of a sort, but the police haven't got it. Davy Freeman has been giving us a new theory. He says old Dudgeon's at the back of it all."

"I'm not sure he's far wrong, Mr. Gale, to tell you the truth," Soden said in his slow manner. "They say funny things about the old man, especially those who were here in the early days."

"What's Freeman's yarn?" Allnut asked.

By the time Gale had repeated the story his audience had grown, and the waning interest in the subject was revived as the theory was passed from one to the other until it spread through all the groups and was debated and discussed from every possible and impossible standpoint. When the hour arrived for closing the bars the men clustered in the road, still wrestling with the problem.

The night wore on and the young moon was sinking to the west before they began to knock the ashes out of their pipes, preparatory to adjourning the open-air parliament until the following day. One man was still pouring out his views and opinions and the others crowded round him, their own energies spent, but listening listlessly before they separated.

Suddenly the sound of a horse galloping wildly startled them. With one accord they turned towards the direction whence the sound came.

In the faint half-light, right in the middle of the road, racing with maddened speed, charging straight upon them, they saw a white horse with a bearded rider.

To the right and left they scattered to get clear of the flying hoofs as through the midst of them, with a mocking shout and a wave of his hand, there flashed past the man with the yellow beard.

A howl of execration and wrath broke from their lips. Those who had gone to their homes rushed out. Brennan, with Durham at his heels, dashed from the station.

"The Rider! The Rider!" came in a chorus of hoarse shouts. "After him, lads, after him."

There was a scatter and scamper as men fled for their horses. Barebacked, many with the bridle scarcely secure, all without weapons, the men of Waroona raced pell-mell down the road.

Behind them, armed and orderly, Durham and his constable spurred their horses in pursuit.

"The fools! They'll help him to escape," Durham cried as they came in sight of the confused rabble racing along the road.

Ahead of the charging mob the road for a hundred yards showed clear as it topped a slight ascent. A belt of scrub a quarter of a mile through intervened between the mob and the open stretch of road. But from where Durham and Brennan were the view was uninterrupted.

The white horse and its rider were half-way to the top.

Acting with one impulse, both raised their carbines and fired from the saddle. The noise of the reports echoed through the still air and made the men in the scrub below rein in their horses to listen. As the smoke drifted clear Durham and Brennan saw, on the summit of the rise, the white horse prancing, riderless.

Reloading as they rode, they dug their spurs home and raced through the patch of scrub. The men heard them coming, and waited, the lack of a leader making them undecided how to act. They made way for the two police, closing in behind them and pressing up to learn what had happened.

"He's down. Keep back," Brennan called to them over his shoulder, and they slowed their horses until Durham and the constable rode twenty yards in front.

Through the shadow of the scrub the two galloped side by side, each with his carbine resting on his hip ready for instant use. The road was soft and sandy and the beat of the horses' hoofs was muffled.

With a sharp turn the road was clear of the scrub, and the open stretch rising to the top of the hill lay before them. In the centre one small dark object was on the ground, but there was no sign of the man they expected to see.

Reining in as they came up to the small object, they saw it was an ordinary bushman's slouch hat. In the roadway, close to it, two long furrows were scored, while at irregular intervals up the rise flecks of blood glistened.

Durham leaped from his saddle and picked up the hat. On the lining was stamped the name of the chief Waroona storekeeper, Allnut.

"He's a local man," Durham said quickly. "Keep those fools back."

While Brennan checked the charging crowd, now racing up the slope, Durham went forward alone. On the sandy roadway the marks made by the prancing horse were clearly visible to the top of the hill. The animal had evidently been badly frightened and had reared and plunged from one side of the road to the other, but nowhere was there such a mark as he knew must have been made had the rider fallen. Nor had the horse plunged as a riderless animal, but as one straining against a tight-held rein.

At the top of the hill the marks showed down the other slope until the horse had reached a point where it would no longer be visible from the spot he and Brennan had been when they fired. There the track gradually approached the edge of the road and vanished on to the rough ground.

Durham sprang out of the saddle and bent over the marks where they left the road. The horse had been pulled round and ridden directly into the bush. With the last faint rays of the moon dying away it was hopeless trying to follow the tracks through the sombre shadow; nothing more could be done until daylight to follow where the man had ridden.

He had remounted and was riding back when the remainder of the men came up with Brennan.

"The track runs into the bush; there's no hope of following it to-night," he cried.

No hope? A dozen voices answered him with a flat contradiction, and past him there was a rush of barebacked riders hot on the trail. They scattered in a wide-spreading line, riding straight ahead and watching only for a gleam of the white horse amid the shadows of the bush.

Durham stood up in his stirrups and shouted to them to come back, but he might as well have called to the wind. The fever of the chase was in their veins, the reckless dash of the hunter fired by the excitement of the greatest of all pursuits, a man-hunt. While this held them, they raced, aimlessly, uselessly, but persistently.

Those with cooler heads and better judgment reined in their horses. Gale found himself in the midst of an excited throng with whom he was carried forward for some distance before he could get free.

"He's right, lads, he's right," he shouted. "There's no chance to follow the track till it's daylight. Don't smother it. Come back."

"Chase him to the range, boys, chase him to the range. We'll catch him at the rise," yelled one of the men in the lead, and with an answering cheer the galloping crowd held on.

Those who had remained on the road were starting to return to the township when Gale rode back. Hearing him coming, they waited to see who it was.

"They're mad," he cried, as he came up. "If they get near him, he'll shoot them as they come, and they'll destroy every sign of his tracks."

"It's done now," Durham exclaimed impatiently. "We'll have to leave them; it's no use going after them now."

He turned his horse's head and set off for the township with Brennan at his side and the rest trailing after him. At the station he and Brennan wheeled their horses into the yard while the others went on to their homes.

"I shall be away with the dawn," Durham said, as soon as the horses were stabled and they were in their quarters. "It's the old story. That fellow has had so much luck up to the present he's lost his head. He wants to show us how clever he really is."

"There's not much sense in what he did to-night; anyone in the crowd might have had a rifle, and there was no doubt who he was—he carried his life in his hands for nothing, it seems to me."

"They always do sooner or later. He's an old hand at the game, or he wouldn't be so anxious to let us know he's still in the neighbourhood."

While he was speaking, the door opened and Soden, the hotelkeeper, excitedly entered the room.

"Here, come across the road, quick. Come and have a look at it. Hang me if this doesn't beat cock-fighting. They've stuck up the pub and cleared off with the till and all the takings," he exclaimed.

He led the way to his hotel, the front door of which was open.

"As I found it," he said as he pulled it to until it was ajar. "When we closed for the night it was locked and bolted. Look at it."

Durham carefully examined it.

"Opened by an expert burglar," he said quietly.

"No one but a master of the craft could have done it so neatly. Show me the till."

Soden led them into the bar. The till, empty, was on the floor; every cupboard door was forced and the place in chaos.

As they stood looking at the wreck, voices sounded outside and other men trooped in.

"Here, I say," the first-comer cried. "Here's a pretty go. Someone has been in my place and cleared every pennypiece out of it and—hullo!" he exclaimed as he looked at the state of Soden's bar, one of the show places of the town under ordinary conditions. "You seem to have had them too, and there's a mob outside, all with the same story."

There was no gainsaying what had happened. While the men of the town were out careering after the mysterious Rider, their homes had been rifled of everything of value. The town was stripped as clean as though a tribe of human locusts had swept through it. Two places only were unvisited, the bank and Mrs. Eustace's cottage, in both of which places lights had been burning.

Not even the police-station escaped, though not until Durham and Brennan returned to it did they realise the fact. What money there was in the place had vanished; a watch Brennan had left hanging over his bunk had disappeared and, as if to emphasise the visit, the pages of the record book were smeared with ink and defaced.

Brennan glanced covertly at his superior who, with a heavy frown on his brow, stood scowling at the defaced book.

"Have the revolvers gone?" he asked suddenly.

Brennan turned to the locker where they were kept.

"No, sir, they are here all right. I fancy he must have been disturbed before he could finish his work here. None of the cupboards have been touched."

"Whom do you suspect?" Durham asked sharply.

Brennan scratched his head and screwed up his face.

"Well, to tell you the plain, honest truth, sir, I'm bothered if I know who to suspect. What gets over me is that white horse. No one believed the yarn about the buggy and pair of white horses, and no one believed the yarn about the men on white horses being seen on the Taloona road. But here the chap comes clean through the township riding a horse of a colour that isn't known in the district. You can't put a white horse out of sight like you can a stray cat, sir. But where do they go when the Riders are not on the road? It gets me, sir, I'm free to admit."

"That hat I picked up was bought at the store in the town. That suggests someone who has been about the place."

"Well, he might have stolen it. He might have taken it from the bank, or Taloona, or it might have been that other poor chap's—out there, I mean," he added, nodding towards the shed where Eustace lay.

"He's no bushman," Durham said.

"He rides well enough for one."

"Oh, yes, I admit he rides well enough for one, but many men ride besides bushmen. I know neither he nor his partner have any practical bush experience. I know that. Just as I know the man who went through the town to-night is a burglar who learned his craft in one of the big cities of the world. The way that hotel door was opened was one of the finest pieces of expert burglary I've ever seen, and there are some pretty smart men at the game in our cities."

"He's a pretty daring chap," Brennan remarked, with a touch of admiration in his voice.

"He's too daring. That is what puzzles me. With fifty thousand pounds in gold and the valuables stolen from the bank, what sense is there in dashing through the place as he did to-night and then taking a bigger risk by doubling back past us and stealing what at the most can barely have been a hundred pounds in all?"

"Do you think he doubled back, sir? Don't you think the dash through the town was a trick to draw everyone away so as to leave the way clear for a second man to do the burgling?"

"I don't see who the second man could be. The handkerchief shows Eustace was the man who was with him at Taloona. I don't think he has another man with him now. He is doing it single-handed and seems to be enjoying it, too."

"We ought to be able to pick up his tracks in the morning, if he doubled back."

"Yes, if those fools have not smothered them. I'll see to that. I'll be away with the dawn. Mind you, no one is to know."

"You can be sure of that, sir," Brennan answered.

Chapter XVI

Love‘ Conquest.

In the grey half light which is neither night nor day, Durham saddled his horse in the station yard.

No one was stirring in the township as he passed slowly along the road, but lest there should happen to be anyone who might see him, he turned into the bush at the first opening he came to. Only then did he set his horse at a faster pace, riding direct for the range to pick up the track leading to the hidden pool.

The air was soft and cool, with filmy streaks of vapour floating amid the trees. As he cantered along, the mist rose and formed a pearly haze overhead into which there came a tinge of pink, dissipating it, before the colour could grow into a deeper tone, to reveal the clear sky, blue as a sapphire and bright with the first rays of the rising sun.

In long swinging strides his horse carried him easily, and his spirits rose above the gloom which had weighed upon him since the evening before when, for the third time, he had been foiled by the mysterious Rider.

There had been little sleep for him during the night. Had the discovery of Eustace and the raid of the town been the only events of the day he might have succeeded in banishing them from his mind sufficiently to allow himself to sleep. But there was more than these, disquieting as they were, to fill him with restlessness. The way in which Mrs. Burke had rebuffed him on the previous evening, the hostility of manner she had displayed towards him up to the time he and Brennan left Waroona Downs, weighed upon him.

He could not account for the change which had come over her. From the time he arrived from Taloona she had always shown kindliness and gentleness towards him, even when, during the early days of his convalescence, he had been impatient and exacting. Nor could he find a reason for the change in the brief

profession he had made of his love for her. Had that been the cause she would, he argued, have shown it the morning after; but she had met him then with the same light-hearted raillery with which she had greeted him every morning he had been in her house. Only when Brennan arrived on the scene had she suddenly developed antagonism.

There must be some other reason for her anger than his declaration of love. For hours he had sought for it, cudgelling his brain to discover an explanation; but only now, as he cantered along through the bush with his spirits rising in harmony with the glories of an Australian dawn, did illumination come to him.

"Oh, my love, why have you come so late to me!"

Through the sombre shade of his brooding there flashed the memory of the scene when he had heard those words spoken. Like the touch of a magic wand the memory changed gloom to sunshine, shadow into light.

It was not because he had professed his love for her that she had been displeased; it was because he was going from her, leaving her house, parting with her perhaps for all time.

What a fool he had been not to know that earlier. Of course, she had repelled him when he had spoken on the previous evening, repelled him, not because she resented, but because she, like all of her sex, could not yield the truth at the first asking.

Yet why should he have doubted with the memory of that earlier scene in his mind? He asked himself the question and answered it frankly.

He doubted for the reason that still he did not know whether that memory was of a real scene, or was merely a figment of a delirium-haunted brain. If he could be sure, then no more need he doubt; but how was he to be sure? There was only one way—only one person in all the world who could tell him whether he was right or not—Nora Burke alone could say whether he had been dreaming.

Some day he would ask her to tell him, some day, after he had asked and compelled her to answer that other question which had now become insistent. For the time the mystery of the Rider occupied a second place in his thoughts; yet the trend of his mind unconsciously brought it again to the front.

The mission on which he had set out was one which might clear away the initial obstacle in the pathway of his love; he might locate the hiding-place of the Rider; might secure a clue to his identity; might, by great good fortune, discover the stolen money.

If he could only do that, if he could only go back to the bank with the news that he had recovered the stolen gold, five thousand pounds would be his. Then he would be able to go to Mrs. Burke without the feeling, unbearable to a man of his temperament, that he, a poor man, was aspiring to one who had money, and who might attribute to that money the secret of his fascination.

By the time the sun showed above the trees, he was up to the outlying spurs of the range and nearing the ridge along which he had previously followed the tracks of the two horsemen. With the knowledge he had gained how the track turned and twisted, he set his horse to the rising ground, and rode steadily and cautiously until he arrived at the summit of the steep immediately above where the creek entered the pool.

Below him was the narrow sandy strip running round the edge of the water, and even from where he was he could see the marks of the horses' hoofs upon it. His glance wandered from the shore over the surface of the pool. It was a long sheet of water, more an exaggerated reach in a stream than a lake, for except along the sandy margin below him, the water everywhere rippled right up to the dense verdure-clad slopes of the hills.

A curious discolouration appeared in a streak across the pool at the far end. The otherwise clear water was marred by a ledge of rock which stretched from one side of the pool to the other and came so near the surface as to give a suggestion of muddiness to the water.

Dismounting, he led his horse to a sheltered gully, and securely tethered him to a tree. Then, with his carbine on his arm and his revolver pouch unfastened, he walked down to the dry bed of the creek and followed it to the mouth.

Fresh marks were on the soft ground near the water, coming from the end of the pool where the streak of muddy water showed, and passing onwards round the pool. He decided to go in the same direction, and for a few yards walked along the level before he discovered other hoof-prints, equally clear, going the opposite way. The horseman, whoever he might be, had both come and gone within the past few hours, but Durham was uncertain which way had been the last.

Leaving the level ground he forced a way through the thick herbage growing on the bank above and crept forward. As he went he obtained through the foliage an occasional glimpse of the track below, until the bank rose so steeply and the vegetation became so dense that he had to climb higher to move along at all. Presently he came to an easier grade, and was able to see once more the margin of the pool, but he was surprised to discover that all marks of the horses had ceased.

He crept down to the water. Looking back, he saw that the bank, on the top of which he had been, ran out to the water's edge, forming a barrier across the track and terminating in a steep bluff jutting out into the pool.

Crouching almost to the ground, Durham crawled through the undergrowth until he reached the summit of the bluff, and was able to see once more the narrow sandy strip which skirted the bank and formed the margin of the shore.

Peering through the low-growing shrubs he saw how the bluff fell away in a precipitous descent on the other side down to where the narrow strip widened out into a level space screened by a clump of bushes reaching from the high bank to the water. The whole of this space was trampled upon, and it was evident that horsemen had been there frequently and recently.

A step forward showed him something more. Right under the bank a dark patch showed. It was the mouth of a cave.

He listened intently, but no sound came to him, and he again crept forward until he was able to see into the cave. It was low-roofed, and formed by rocks which had fallen loosely together, and over which vegetable soil had accumulated.

Satisfied it was empty, he advanced boldly towards it. As he pushed between the shrubs which grew close up to it, he caught sight of what, in the shadow, looked like a crouching man. In a moment his carbine was thrown forward and he was about to challenge, when he realised he was aiming at a heap of clothes.

He stepped into the cave. The clothes lay in a carelessly thrown heap, and with them, half hidden, was a false beard of long yellow hair.

Picking it up, he held it at arm's length. So the Rider was disguised after all!

The flimsy thing brought clearly back to him the features of the man as he had twice seen him. The close-clipped fair hair, the light sandy eyebrows, the peculiarly light lashes which gave so sinister an expression to the eyes, were distinct; but when he tried to reconstruct the face as it would be without the beard, he was baffled. The form of the nose, the moulding of the chin, the shape of the mouth, had been hidden by the disguise, and without a knowledge of them Durham could not grasp fully what the man was like. As Harding had expressed himself, when describing the face he had seen at the window of the bank, it was the impression of a familiar face disguised, and yet a familiar face which could not be located.

Beyond that he could not go.

He picked up the clothes and examined them. They were of nondescript grey, such as can be bought by the hundred at any bush store in Australia, and were similar to what the man was wearing the night he visited Waroona Downs. The hat was missing, as Durham expected it would be. The pockets were empty.

Replacing the articles as nearly as possible in the position in which he found them, Durham turned his attention to the cave itself.

The floor was rough and uneven. What sand clustered in the hollows was too much trampled upon to reveal any detail of the feet that had walked upon it.

There were innumerable nooks and crannies where articles could be stored, but in every instance they contained nothing. Nowhere could he find anything more than the clothes.

He went to the mouth and stood peering round to see if there was another similar cave near, but everywhere else the ground rose solid and unbroken.

In the open space under the shelter of the bluff where the ground had been so much trampled by horses, the wheel-marks of a vehicle also showed. He walked over and examined them carefully.

They were the marks of what was evidently an old and rackety conveyance. One of the wheels was loose and askew on the axle, with the result that it made a wobbly mark on the ground, while the tyres on all the wheels were uneven in width and badly worn.

"Almost as ancient as old Dudgeon's rattle-trap," Durham said to himself as he looked at the marks.

The story, fanciful as he had regarded it at the time, of the buggy driven by two men with a pair of white horses, the story told by the travelling bushmen the day the bank robbery was discovered, recurred to him. If this was the vehicle in which the gold had been carried off, and the wheel-marks he was looking at had been made by it, then that gold was probably secreted somewhere in his immediate vicinity.

The thick-growing shrubs and stunted gums made it difficult for him to see far from where he stood. The level stretch along the margin of the pool showed clear enough, but around him the vegetation was so dense that, unless he had some clue to guide him, to prosecute a search within it was like trying the proverbial search for a needle in a haystack.

During the time that had elapsed since those wheel-marks had been made they had been greatly obliterated, but it was still possible to distinguish where the

vehicle had been stopped, for the horses had turned suddenly, and the wheels cut deep as they came round. He stepped to the spot. Later tramplings had removed all clear traces of footmarks. Nothing was now to be learned from that source.

His eyes swept along the line of shrubs which fringed the open space. A twig, snapped near the stem, dangled, its leaves brown and withered. It was a finger pointing where someone had forced a way through.

Durham went down on his knees beside the shrub. Near the root the bark had been stripped for a couple of inches, the scar showing brown, while in the soil the impression of a heavy boot was just distinguishable.

On hands and knees he pushed his way between the stems. Other footmarks, old and faint, showed, and he crept along with his eyes on them. Some weeks before there had evidently been much coming and going through the scrub at this point. Looking straight ahead he saw the grey sheen of a sun-dried log. He stood up. The thick undergrowth reached to his armpits, but through it, a couple of yards from where he stood, and ten from the spot where the wheel-marks turned, was the fallen trunk of an old dead tree.

Such a log, hollow for the greater part of its length and absolutely hidden by the shrubs growing round it, was exactly the place where anything could be secreted, and remain secreted, for an indefinite period.

Pushing his way carefully through the tangle of shrubs he came upon it at the root end. It had evidently fallen in some bygone bush-fire, the jagged charred fragments showing where it had snapped off close to the ground. The fire had eaten its way into the heart of the timber and there was space enough in the cavity for a man to crouch.

Stooping down, Durham peered into it. At the far end he saw, indistinctly, a confused mass, pushed up closely. He reached in, but could not touch it, without creeping into the opening.

He looked round for something that would serve as a rake to pull the articles out, but there was no loose stick sufficiently long near to hand, and he did not want to cut one. Higher up the bank he saw one that would suit his purpose and went to get it.

As he returned with it in his hand he saw, at the other end of the log, a patch of white on the ground. Going over to it he found it was caused by a chalky powder which clustered thickly near the tree.

This end of the log was also hollow, and in the cavity were a couple of bags which, when he pulled them out, he found to be full of the chalky powder.

The white horses flashed into his mind as he looked at it.

"The cunning scoundrel!" he exclaimed. "Even the horses were disguised."

He replaced the bags, and went to the root end of the tree. With his stick he was able to reach the objects stored in the hole, and pulled one out.

By the weight he knew what he had found, before he opened it—the bag was full of gold.

Slowly he drew everything out of the place. All the gold taken from the bank and from Taloona lay at his feet, together with a miscellaneous collection of jewellery wrapped up in a small square of canvas. But there was no sign either of papers or bank-notes.

It was out of the question for him to attempt to remove the treasure to the bank there and then. All he could do was to make it as secure as possible until, at a later day, he could return with a conveyance and carry it back to the town.

On the far side of the bluff he discovered a crevice formed by an overhanging ledge. It was a place even more difficult to trace than the fallen tree, and here he placed everything, keeping only a gold watch which bore Harding's name. Then, having obliterated, as nearly as he could, every mark which would be likely to reveal the hiding-place, he made his way back to his horse.

He rode to the margin of the pool, and walked along the track until he was opposite the streak of mud stain in the water. The horse and wheel-tracks turned towards it and, standing up in his stirrups, Durham saw that the water shoaled with a wide ledge of rock running directly into the pool.

Putting his horse to it, the water was barely a foot deep on the rock all the way across to the opposite bank. Here the horse and wheel-tracks reappeared, turning sharp to the left through the bush, and passing over a dwarf ridge from the summit of which he caught sight of the mountain road where it turned down to the ford.

Still following the tracks, they led him once more to the water's edge. He entered it, and continued close to the shore until he suddenly emerged on to the rock which formed the break in the road over which the stream rippled.

He rode on to the road and reined in his horse near the spot where he had first seen the pool the night he was on his way to Waroona Downs. Had he not just ridden along the track round the edge of the water, he would not have believed it was there, so absolutely was it hidden from the roadway.

For a moment he hesitated whether to go on to Waroona Downs or return to the township at once, and arrange for the treasure to be removed. But the anxiety gnawing at his heart decided for him and he wheeled his horse and set off at a canter for the station.

As he came out to the level road he saw, riding towards him, the object of his regard. Mounted on a fine dark chestnut she was coming along at a hand gallop. She waved her hand as she caught sight of him, and he pulled up to wait for her, watching, with more than admiration, the magnificent seat she had and the easy grace with which she managed her horse.

"Oh, Mr. Durham, I'm so glad to see you," she cried as she came up. "I am in such trouble about that old reprobate. Sure he's gone and I'm just after riding into town to see if he is getting more of the wretched drink. If I find him——"

"Brennan will have him if he is in there, Mrs. Burke. You need not be uneasy. I'll inquire as soon as I return. I am on my way——"

"Oh, but I can't," she interrupted. "What would they say if ever it got to Ireland that I let the old fool fall into the hands of the police over a trifle like this—for it's only a trifle they would call it in Ireland, Mr. Durham. Sure if it were known there, and you may be certain he'd leave no stone unturned to make it public, they'd boycott me and all my belongings, if they didn't do something worse."

"Then it would be better for you not to go back there," he said, smiling at her.

She gave him a sidelong glance with her head on one side.

"Not go back there? And what should I be doing anywhere else with all my responsibilities waiting over there for me?" she asked coquettishly.

"You may have responsibilities over here as well, some which would——"

"Oh, now, you're making fun of me, Mr. Durham," she exclaimed. "What's a bit of a place like this with never even a single pig on it, let alone all the sheep and cattle it ought to have, to keep me from my own home? When I get stock on the place it might keep me here, but sure where's the money to come from to buy the creatures if I don't go back and sell everything I possess to pay for them?"

"Won't you turn back, Mrs. Burke? I was riding out to see you. I want to—ask you something."

"Ask me something? What, more police questions? No, no thanks, Mr. Durham. They don't agree with my constitution—nor my temper."

"It is not a police question," he said seriously. "It is to do—with—with yourself."

A merry peal of mocking laughter answered him.

"Come along now, come to the township with me before they get poor old Patsy where it would break his honest old heart to be."

She started her horse.

"Come along now," she called over her shoulder, flashing a mischievous glance back at him.

He had no alternative but to follow, and he cantered to her side.

"It would teach him a good lesson, Mrs. Burke, if you let him spend a few days in the lock-up," he said. "It would give him a chance to get really sober, whereas, if he keeps on getting drink, you will have him out of his mind."

"Now you're trying to frighten me, Mr. Durham. Sure, what sort of a man is it I've met this morning? I believe you'd like to see old Patsy inside a cell, and then maybe you'd be after me too."

"I might be," he answered.

"What would you give me? Six months hard or just a caution?"

"I should offer you something entirely different," he said in a serious tone of voice. "I should offer you——"

"Oh, yes, it's a lot you police people offer folk. Sure they have to take what is given them, whether they like it, or want it, or not."

"I may not always be one of the police people, as you term us," he said.

"Are you thinking of joining the ministry?" she exclaimed. "I'd like to hear you preach your first sermon, Mr. Durham. I'd come twenty miles in the rain for it."

The mockery in her voice irritated him, and his face showed it.

"Oh, now, Mr. Durham, don't talk nonsense. What would become of the place if you left the force of which you are such an ornament? It's fairy tales you are telling me. And you have never said a word yet about your journey. What news did you hear when you reached Waroona?"

"I suppose you have not heard about Eustace?" he asked.

"Eustace? What's the matter with Eustace now?"

"He was found yesterday."

The jerk she gave the bridle brought her horse back on his haunches, and Durham was a couple of lengths past her before he could bring his horse round. When he turned she was allowing her horse to walk, the bridle hanging loose.

"Eustace was found yesterday?" she asked in a dazed tone as she came up to him. "Found yesterday? Is that the news you had to give me?"

"It was not to tell you of that I was on my way to Waroona Downs," he replied. "Though I should probably have mentioned it."

"Where was he found, Mr. Durham? I suppose he is arrested now?"

All the raillery had gone from her voice, which had grown so sorrowful that he looked at her wonderingly.

"He was not alive when he was found," he said quietly, still watching her.

Her hands convulsively clutched the bridle, and her mouth twitched.

"Oh, Mr. Durham, how awful! What a terrible thing! Oh, poor Mrs. Eustace! Sure I'm glad I'm going into the town, for I'll be able to see the poor thing. Is she much upset? But she is sure to be."

"It is a great trial for her. She will be very glad to see you, I should think," he answered.

"Oh, well, well; what a funny thing life is, Mr. Durham. One never knows. It's all a muddled-up sort of affair at the best. If only people could do what is in them to do, instead of being placed in positions where there is only sadness and trouble crowding in on them and crushing them out of existence! It's a weary world, very, very weary."

"We can only take it as we find it, and make the best of it," he said. "You must not allow this to worry you. Perhaps, after all, it is the best thing that could have happened for him. There are worse things than death. Think what it would have been for Mrs. Eustace had he been captured and sent to penal servitude. Her whole life would have been ruined. We see so much of that in cases where the husband gives way. It is the wife who suffers most, Mrs. Burke."

"Oh, I know, I know," she exclaimed in a tone so full of sadness that he feared he had touched on some secret grief.

He rode beside her in silence, not knowing what to say lest he added to her distress, but yet tormented by the idea that he should speak out what was in his heart and learn, once and for all, whether his hopes were to be realised or shattered. Keeping slightly behind her, he was able to watch her without her knowing it. She was staring between her horse's ears, her lips tightly closed, her head erect, and her cheeks pale. Lost, apparently, in the reverie his words had called up, she seemed to have forgotten his presence as a mile went by without her turning her head or opening her lips.

But she had not forgotten he was there. At a turn in the road she uttered a sharp exclamation and held out her hand, pointing.

"Oh, it is too bad," she exclaimed bitterly. "It is too much for anyone to bear. Look at that!"

Away down the road Durham saw a horse and rider. The horse was making its own way, the rider having as much as he could do to keep in the saddle. He was swaying from side to side, occasionally waving his arms in the air and howling out a tuneless ditty in a strident cracked voice.

"Old Patsy," Durham said shortly.

"Oh, what will I do?" she exclaimed.

"Better let me take him back and give him a few days where he will have time to recover his senses, I think," he said.

She flashed a furious glance at him.

"I shall do no such thing," she snapped. "The best thing you can do is to get out of sight before he sees you. He hates you, Mr. Durham. Irishmen of his class always hate the police. The sight of you will only aggravate him in his present state."

"He is not in a fit state to return with you," Durham said.

"Oh, I can manage him if I'm left alone with him," she replied.

"But I shall not leave you with him," he said firmly.

"You must; you must," she exclaimed sharply. Then, as though a mask had fallen from her, the expression of her face changed and she leaned towards him, laying her hand on his bridle arm. "Oh, yes, please, for my sake. For the sake of—of what I said you—you were not to mention again—will you—please will you do this?"

Her wonderful eyes, soft and melting with a look of appeal, were turned full upon his; her red lips pouted and her voice thrilled with a winning gentleness.

"Please, please do this for me. I would not ask it, only I know—I know—I can ask you."

Her voice sank to a whisper, more alluring, more devastating upon him than when she spoke before. So taken aback, and yet so elated was he at her change of manner, that he could not answer her at once.

"You were coming to tell me again—I read it in your face. Oh, do this for me now. Leave me alone with him. Come and see me to-morrow. Come and tell me then—tell me—what I want to hear."

"Nora!"

The word escaped him in a gasp. What she wanted to hear! Were his ears playing him false? Was he dreaming? He had his hands on hers, holding it with a grip of a strong man stirred to the depths, crushing the fingers one on the other, but there was no waver in the eyes that looked with so much entreaty into his.

"Leave me now before he sees you, before he gets here. I can manage him best alone. Look, he is hastening. Oh, don't wait. Ride away into the bush. I appeal to you—in the name of my love for you. Dearest—go!"

The tumult surged up and over him; had she bidden him at that moment to ride into the jaws of death, he would have galloped, shouting his delight. Nothing else counted with him then, nothing but her wish. Bending down he pressed her hand to his lips.

"Go—go—quickly—dearest!" he heard.

"Till to-morrow, Beloved, till to-morrow," he answered, as, pulling his horse's head round, he drove his spurs home and plunged into the bush, racing in the wild abandon of his joy.

What did it matter that a drunken old Irishman was saved from arrest? He would probably have contented himself with warning the old reprobate to get home as quickly and as quietly as he could. But she did not know that. All she could do was to think how to save her foolish servant from the penalty of his folly—how like her that was, how like the great warm-hearted noble creature she was! Pride in her, pride, love, adoration, welled up in his heart. The yearning of his soul was satisfied, the longing of his being set at rest.

Her love was his! In that knowledge all the contradictions of her attitude became clear. She had only sought to hide the truth from him lest he should think her too easily won. He laughed aloud as he galloped.

Too easily?

No matter how great the sacrifice he had been called upon to make, it would have ranked as nothing if, at the end of it, her open arms were waiting to enfold him. But there was no sacrifice, no toll to be exacted from him. Of her own initiative she had sounded the note which called him to her and made her his. To-morrow he would ride out to her, not alone to give her the pledge of his affections, but to carry to her the tidings of his discovery. Although he had not yet recovered her papers, he would be able to assure her that he would have them as soon as he captured the man who stole them, the man who had murdered Eustace, the Rider whose hiding-place he had discovered.

For there was no doubt in his mind about that capture. Once let the gold be safely removed to the bank, he would return to the cave and wait till, as he was certain would happen sooner or later, the Rider came for his disguise.

Then Nora Burke should have her papers returned in safety, and he would have won more than the promised five thousand pounds reward.

Chapter XVII

Dudgeon Proposes.

For the first time since the outrage at Taloona, Dudgeon visited Waroona.

He drove up to Soden's hotel in the old rackety buggy at a crawl, for his horse had gone dead lame on the way. At the time he arrived Patsy was making ineffectual attempts to mount his horse for the ride which led to so dramatic a turning in Durham's romance, having just staggered out of the bar highly indignant because Soden had refused to allow him to have anything more to drink on the premises.

"Have you a horse I can borrow from you, Soden? My old crock has gone in the off hind-leg and wants a rest. Can you let me have one to get back?" Dudgeon called out.

"I'll have to send out to the paddock, Mr. Dudgeon, but I'll have one in by four this afternoon, if that will suit you."

"It'll have to suit, I suppose," Dudgeon replied. "I didn't want to hang about the place so long, but if you'll have it in by four I'll be here ready to start. I'll leave the buggy with you."

While they were talking Patsy and his horse were slowly going round and round, the old man missing the stirrup every time he put his foot up, and only avoiding a fall by hanging on to the bridle so firmly that he pulled the horse round at each ineffectual attempt to mount.

"Give him a leg up, Jim," Soden said to his barman.

Old Patsy, with the help of the barman, managed to clamber into the saddle, where he sat for a few minutes swaying unsteadily before he started to ride off through the town.

"Where's he from?" Dudgeon asked, looking after him.

"Oh, that's Mrs. Burke's Irish body-guard," Soden said. "Says he should never have left Ireland, and I agree with him. There'll be trouble out at the Downs some of these days, if she doesn't clear him out or he gives over drinking. Don't you serve him any more, do you hear, Jim? Hand him over to Brennan if he comes in again," he added to his barman.

"Well, what's the news?" Dudgeon exclaimed as he got out of his buggy and limped over to Soden.

"The leg's not all right yet, I see?" Soden said.

"Oh, that's getting on. Anything fresh about the bank?"

"Why, haven't you heard?" Soden cried. "They've found Eustace, found him with a bullet through him, lying in the water at the ford in the range. He's over there now," he added, jerking his head towards the police-station.

"What's that you say?" Dudgeon exclaimed, open-eyed and open-mouthed.

"They found him only yesterday—the sub-inspector and the constable. And last night, what do you think? His mate, the man with the beard who stuck your place up, galloped through the town here, and afterwards, when we were all out chasing him, doubled back on us and stole everything he could lay his hands on."

Dudgeon still stood staring open-mouthed and open-eyed.

"There were only two places he missed, the bank and the cottage down the road—Smart's place—where Mrs. Eustace is living."

"Ah! Then that poor thing's a widow?"

"That's so," Soden replied. "But, between you and me, I don't think for long. You know she and Harding—he's our new bank manager, by the way—are old friends, Mr. Dudgeon, and from what I hear from Jim, my barman, who's got his eye on the girl Mrs. Eustace has, they're pretty good friends now, if not a bit more. I shouldn't be surprised, speaking as between man and man, to see her back at the bank again before many years are over, that is, if young Harding stays on here."

"Oh!" Dudgeon exclaimed. "Oh!"

"He's a fine young fellow, Mr. Dudgeon, and you ought to be interested in him, for he was the first to look after you when you were knocked over. But, here, won't you come in for a bit? You're in no-hurry."

"Yes, I am," Dudgeon replied. "I'm in town on business, and when I have business to do, Mr. Soden, I do it. See?"

"It's a good plan."

"Yes, it's a very good plan. So I'll move along. Don't forget to have that horse in sharp at four—I don't like waiting."

He limped away down the road and Soden turned back into his house.

"Old Dudgeon don't seem to have lost much of his sourness since he was laid out," he said to his barman as he passed. "He's never been inside this door since I've been here, and they say he hadn't been in for years before then. Queer old chap he is. I wonder if he is mixed up with the Rider?"

Limping along, Dudgeon made straight for Smart's cottage and knocked at the door.

"I've come to see Mrs. Eustace," he said gruffly when Bessie answered.

"I'm sorry, sir, but Mrs. Eustace can't see anyone to-day. It's——"

"You go and tell her it's me, do you hear? Mr. Dudgeon of Taloona. I'll come in and sit down till she's ready."

He pushed the door wide open and stepped inside.

"But Mrs. Eustace, sir——" Bessie began.

"Did I speak loud enough for you to hear, or didn't I?"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"Then go and tell Mrs. Eustace I'm here."

He was nearly at the door of the sitting-room when Mrs. Eustace, having heard his voice, reached the passage.

"Ah," he exclaimed. "I want to talk to you. Just come in here, will you?"

He held the door open for her and waited till she passed in. Then he followed and closed the door.

"Just excuse me one minute," he said as he remained standing by the door which he suddenly flung open again.

"I thought so," he cried, as he saw Bessie in the passage. "You clear out of it. What I've got to say to Mrs. Eustace don't concern you, nor Jim the barman. Do you hear?"

Bessie heard, and scurried.

"It's only fair to tell you," he said, turning to Mrs. Eustace, "that what that girl sees and hears here goes to Jim the barman who, if you don't know it, tells Soden, and Soden tells the town. You understand?"

He limped across the room and sat down.

"I've come in to tell you something," he went on. "When I got here I heard the news. But that makes no difference to what I had to tell you. I can still tell you. But I must say something else first. You wouldn't stay on at Taloona when I asked you, but that was your business. Now this has come to you. I'm no hand at talking sympathy, but if you want anything that I can get for you it's yours—you understand?"

He leaned forward, with his hands on his knees, looking her steadily in the face.

"Thank you, Mr. Dudgeon, I—I understand," she said haltingly.

"That's what I thought you'd say," he remarked as he sat back. "I know it's a sad business for you, as it stands, and I'd rather you never had it. You're the first woman I've felt that way about for more years than you've lived. But I'm sorry for you, hang me if I'm not."

"It is—good of you to say so," she murmured.

"Still, you're young, and there are many years before you which won't be all sad, you may be sure. But now you're a widow will you come to Taloona?"

She looked up quickly without replying.

"I don't care how it is. You can make it your home as a guest, or you can come as Mrs. Dudgeon."

"Oh, please, Mr. Dudgeon," she exclaimed as she stood up. "You—I know you don't mean to hurt me, but——"

She broke off and turned away.

"It wasn't said to hurt you," he said. "It was only to show you what I'd do for you. Seemed to me it was the best way to put it. I only want you to understand I'm with you whatever comes along. Will you take it that way?"

"I know," she exclaimed impulsively, as she crossed over to him and laid her hand on his shoulder. "I know how you mean it, Mr. Dudgeon, and I appreciate it more than I can say. It was the——"

"The clumsy way I put it," he said, as she hesitated. "That's all right. Don't mind speaking out your mind to me—you used to pretty well when I shied at that physic you poured into me a few weeks back."

"I should have asked how the leg is," she said leaping at the opening to change the subject. "Is it still very painful?"

"Oh, it comes and goes," he replied. "Mostly goes."

"Don't you think it would be a good thing if you took the doctor's advice now and went away for a change and a rest? It would make you all right again in a few months. The hard, rough life you lead at Taloona makes it very difficult for you to get up your strength after the experience you have had."

He smiled grimly—his facial muscles had been so long strangers to anything approaching tokens of mirth or pleasure that they did not move easily.

"I suppose it is a bit rough out there," he said. "But then, you see, I'm used to a rough life—I've had it all my days. Is that why you wouldn't stay? Was it too rough for you?"

He looked round the little sitting-room in which she had the furniture and nicknacks from her room at the bank.

"There's a bit of a difference I will say," he went on as she did not reply. "It's a flower-garden to a stock-yard to compare this room with the hut you had out at Taloona. Look here. I'll build a new house, build it as big as you like or as little as you like, and you shall furnish it and fit it up just as you fancy—if you'll only make it a home for yourself."

She shook her head.

"No, Mr. Dudgeon, I am afraid that is impossible," she said. "At the same time, I want to thank you very much for what you say."

"Look here," he exclaimed. "I don't want thanks. You know what my life has been—I told you the story often enough when I was lying sick and you were waiting on me like an angel—oh, I mean it," he added, as she looked up. "Just let me say what I've got to say. When you came back here, and I was by myself again, I began to think. Somehow the old views didn't seem quite to fit together. There was something wrong somewhere and I reckon that somewhere was me. I've put a wrong twist on things. It never struck me there was more than one woman in the world who could do anything to make me contented. So I set out to make money. I made it, made it by the ton. And now I've got it what's the good of it to me?"

"There is no limit to the good it may be if it is properly applied, Mr. Dudgeon."

"Where will it do good?" he exclaimed. "That's just what I want to know. Tell me."

"There are hospitals," she said. "And schools. You might found scholarships for poor students to——"

"And chapels and missions and dogs' homes—go on, trot out the whole list," he interrupted. "None of them will ever get a pennypiece out of me. More than half the

money given to them goes to keep a lot of lazy, patronising officials in luxury—I know—I've come in contact with them when they have been cadging after me for subscriptions. They cringe till they find out there's nothing for them, and then they snarl. I've no time for that sort of people, no time nor money either."

"Then I hardly know what to suggest," she said, "unless——"

"Unless what?"

"You helped Mrs. O'Guire and her children, if she has any."

His mouth went into its old hard lines, and he sat silent for a time.

"It's no good talking about that," he said presently. "The best thing I can do for them is not to think about them—I'd be after them again if I do—if I could find them. Help them? No. I'd rather give the money to the Government to build gaols. Can't you think of anything else?"

"I'm afraid I cannot," she answered. "But I am still sure your money will do good if it is properly applied."

"Ah, that's it. If it's properly applied. I'm an old man now. How am I to apply it? There's only one way that I can see, and that is what I am going to do with it. I'm going to give it away. What do you think of that?"

"If you give it away where it will do good I think it is a very excellent idea," she answered.

"You know that youngster at the bank, don't you? Young Harding, I mean."

"Yes," she replied.

"Do you think he is a man to be trusted?"

"I know he is, Mr. Dudgeon."

"I'll take your word for it," he said as he stood up. "I'll get along and see him. You can let him know if you want anything and he'll send on word to me. I'll look in again next time I'm passing. Good-bye."

He held out his hand, hard, knotted, and roughened with toil, and she placed hers in it. His fingers closed on hers, and he stood looking into her eyes till she grew uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

"I'd give everything I've got in the world," he said hoarsely, "for a daughter like you."

He dropped her hand and limped quickly to the door, opening it and going out without looking back.

Through the window she saw him pass along the road towards the bank, his head up in the old defiant way, the limp robbing his stride of much of its sturdiness. Without a glance at the cottage he passed out of sight.

Right through the town he walked until he came to the bank.

Harding, looking up at the sound of footsteps, was surprised to see him limping to the counter.

"Good day, Mr. Dudgeon," he exclaimed.

"Do you know how to make a will?" the old man asked, without replying to the greeting.

"That is more the work of a solicitor than a banker, Mr. Dudgeon."

"Oh, I know all about that. If it's going to be a long, muddled, complicated affair a solicitor's the man to go to. But that's not what I want. I want to make a will leaving everything I possess to just one person. I'm no hand with a pen, so I thought you might be able to do it for me."

"Mr. Wallace is inside; perhaps he could advise you better."

"Well, I'll see him."

Remembering his last interview with the crotchety old man, Wallace was particularly circumspect when he met him.

"What I want is this," Dudgeon exclaimed. "I want to say it in such a manner that there can be no questioning the thing afterwards, that is when I'm gone, you understand?"

"I understand," Wallace replied.

"I want to leave everything I possess to one person. If that is written on a sheet of paper and I sign it, isn't that enough?"

"If your signature is witnessed by two persons."

"Then go ahead. Write it out for me. You and this young man can be witnesses."

"It is an unusual thing for the Bank to do, Mr. Dudgeon; but if you really wish it, of course we shall be only too happy to oblige you. Don't you think Mr. Gale——"

"No," the old man snapped. "I've finished with Gale."

"Then will you come into my room and we will do the best we can for you."

Wallace drew up a simple form of a will and read it through aloud.

"I have left the name blank," he said. "If this expresses what you wish, you can fill in the name and sign it, either before Harding and myself or two other people."

Dudgeon took it and read it through again.

"That'll do," he said. He put it on the table in front of Harding. "Fill in Mrs. Eustace's name—I don't know it," he added.

Harding wrote the name in the blank space, the name of one who, in another minute, would rank amongst the greatest heiresses of the world.

"That is the full name," he said as he handed back the document to Dudgeon.

He looked at it.

"Jessie, is it?" he said. "Jessie Eustace, née Spence. There is no chance of a mistake being made, is there? Hadn't you better add whose wife she was?"

"If you wish it."

"And say where she is living now, and where she came from before she came here. I don't want this to go wrong. I want to make sure she will get everything."

When the additions were made he read the whole document through once more.

"Yes, that seems to fix it," he said. "Give me a pen."

The signature affixed, and witnessed, he looked from one to the other.

"I'll take your word to keep the matter secret till I'm gone," he said. "I don't feel like dying just yet, but one never knows, and, in the meantime, I don't want this known. She don't know, and if she does, it will only be through one of you two talking."

"You may rest assured, Mr. Dudgeon, that both Mr. Harding and myself will respect your confidence and hold the matter absolutely secret," Wallace replied.

"That's good enough," he said.

Turning to Harding, he added, "I'll leave this in your charge. If I go, see that she gets it. Good day."

He was at the door when Wallace spoke.

"Will you not stay and have some refreshment, after your long drive in?" he said.

Dudgeon looked over his shoulder, with his hand on the door-handle.

"That's all I want from you," he replied.

"There is one other matter," Harding exclaimed. "If this will ever has to be used, we have no information what property you are leaving."

Dudgeon let go the handle and faced round.

"Young man," he said, "you've got a head on you. Just sit down and I'll tell you, and you can write them down."

Leaving the two together, Wallace went to the outer office.

"I am glad he's gone," Dudgeon remarked. "This don't concern him."

Then he reeled off a list of properties, securities, cash deposits, and other possessions, dazzling in their value and variety.

The name of a firm of lawyers in a southern city was added.

"That's the lot," he said unconcernedly. "I needn't tell you to see she has her rights. Give me your hand, my lad. I hope she shares it with you."

Without another word he was gone.

Harding was still running his eye over the list of properties Dudgeon had dictated when he heard Wallace call.

"All right. We'll come in," Wallace added, and appeared with Durham at his heels.

"Do you know this?" Durham asked, as he held out his hand.

"My watch! Where on earth did you find it?" Harding cried.

"It is yours?"

"It's the one which disappeared from under my pillow the night the bank was robbed."

"I thought so."

"Have you found anything more?" Wallace asked breathlessly.

"All the money and a lot of jewellery. I would like Mr. Harding to come along with me to-night to the place where I have it hidden. We can bring it in quietly without anyone knowing. But till then, don't let this be seen, and don't breathe a word of what I have told you. Now I've got the money I want to make sure of the man."

Wallace slapped him warmly on the back.

"You're a marvel, Durham. I knew you'd do it somehow, but I'm bothered if I could see how. May I wire to head office?"

"Not till to-night, Mr. Wallace. When the stuff is handed over to you will be time enough."

"How about Mr. Dudgeon's money?"

"It's there, too."

"He's in town. Will you tell him?"

"Not a word, Mr. Wallace. You are the only people I mention it to; not even Brennan will be told about it till it's here."

"Well, you know more about these things than I do, so your word's law. But I shall be glad to let the head office know—I want to have the general manager's authority to do what I told you was going to be done."

Durham smiled in answer. So did he want the general manager to authorise what was to be the news he wished to give Mrs. Burke on the morrow. With five thousand pounds behind him he anticipated less difficulty in persuading her to

postpone her intended return to Ireland, postpone it long enough, at all events, for her to go, not as Mrs. Burke, but as Mrs. Durham.

He stood at the door chatting to Wallace before going on to the station, when Dudgeon rattled past in his old buggy drawn by a borrowed horse.

He did not look towards the bank as he passed.

"If I told him I suppose he'd scowl at me and say, 'Oh, have you?'" Durham exclaimed as he watched the crazy old vehicle disappear along the road.

"You are sure his money is there too?" Wallace asked.

"Quite."

"That's curious."

"Why? It was obviously stolen by the same man who robbed the bank, and naturally they took it to the same spot."

"Have you any idea who the men were—or rather the man, for I suppose there is only one now to be considered?"

"That is so," Durham answered. "Only one—and he may be—anybody."

"You have no suspicions?"

"I don't want any. If I begin suspecting different persons I may miss the real individual. As matters stand, I know where, sooner or later, I shall meet him under conditions which will identify him as the man I want. The trap is set and the bird will be caught. That is all I can say."

"Have you heard what they are saying in the town?"

"I've heard a good deal one way and another, but not to-day, as I have been away since dawn. Is it anything special?"

"Someone started the yarn last night, so Gale told me. There's an idea that old Mr. Dudgeon is at the back of the whole affair; that he hired the man they call the Rider to rob the bank in the first instance, so as to prevent the sale of Waroona Downs being completed. Eustace is supposed to have been bribed to join the conspiracy."

"That's rather an ingenious theory. Whose is it?"

"One of the men in the town; Gale did not mention his name. But he has evolved a very workable theory—at least to my mind."

"Let me hear it all," Durham said.

"Well, when the bank had been robbed, and the second lot of gold was hurried forward in time to save the situation, one part of the scheme failed, for the sale of the property was completed. The Rider and his mate—Eustace, as is generally believed—went out to Taloona to settle up with the old man. They found you there and, to blind you as to the real character of Dudgeon, they pretended to make him a prisoner. Then you showed fight, Dudgeon was shot by the bullet intended for you, the lamp was upset, and the place set on fire just as the troopers I sent arrived on the scene."

"That sounds all right as far as it goes. Is there any more?"

"Oh, yes. Dudgeon being laid up delayed the settlement and the pair had to wait—every time up to last night that the white horses have been seen was on the Taloona road, you may remember, which adds colour to the theory. Then they got tired of waiting and quarrelled between themselves, with the result that one of them got killed. The general idea is that they quarrelled over the division of the spoil, and, seeing what you have discovered to-day, I am inclined to agree with it.

Last night's escapade was sheer bravado to mock at you and Brennan. What do you think of the idea?"

"Oh, it's all right, as far as it goes. When my man walks into the trap waiting for him I may be able to tell you whether it is the correct solution, but, for the present, I should neither accept nor reject it."

"That is all you have to say about it?"

"That is all; and now I must get along to the station. I'll be back in an hour or so to tell Harding where to meet me."

It was just on sunset when he returned to arrange for Harding to go out with him about midnight. With Harding and Wallace he was standing at the private entrance of the bank when, with a clatter, there dashed down the road the horse and buggy in which Dudgeon had driven by during the afternoon.

The horse was galloping with the reins trailing behind it, the splash-board was smashed and hanging loose, striking the horse at every stride and adding to its panic.

Durham and Harding rushed out to stop the runaway. It swerved to the edge of the road, the buggy overbalanced and rolled over, the shafts snapped, and the horse, breaking free, raced through the town.

"Look!" Harding cried. "What has happened?"

On the seat of the vehicle was an ugly red splash, while the floor was smothered with blood.

"Send along to Brennan to follow me, will you?" Durham exclaimed as he sprang to his horse, which was standing at the door of the bank, mounted it, and spurred away along the road the runaway had come.

Four miles away on the Taloona road he found Dudgeon.

The old man lay in a heap in the middle of the road, riddled with bullet wounds, any one of which would have proved fatal.

There were abundant signs of a fierce struggle. As Durham read the indications, an attack had been made upon him while he was driving along He had been shot and had struggled from the vehicle, probably returning the fire, for there was the mark where another man had fallen and added another red stain to the ground. Then the two had closed and, in the contest which ensued, Dudgeon had gone down, his assailant venting his mad rage by firing bullet after bullet into the prostrate form.

While he was still examining the marks Durham was joined by Brennan and half a dozen of the townsmen who had ridden out in obedience to Harding's warning. Durham drew Brennan aside.

"I only have my revolver with me," he said. "Give me your carbine and what cartridges you have. I must get away on his tracks before any of the men lose their heads and ruin the chance of capture by smothering them."

"Give Brennan what help you can, will you?" he called out to the men who stood by their horses looking, horror-stricken, at the lifeless form of the old man.

Mounting his horse he sped away. For a time he watched the track of a horse which had galloped just off the road. It had evidently lacked a firm hand on the bridle, for it seemed to have taken its own direction.

The rider was wounded. Of that Durham was certain.

Under such circumstances where would he go?

As Durham turned his horse into the bush, making for the range where the little cave was situated, he answered his own question.

Riding at topmost speed, he reasoned as he rode. The other man had at least two hours' start. With such a lead he could easily reach the cave first if he could ride steadily. But he was wounded, and in that lay Durham's hope of getting there before him.

The light was waning by the time the commencement of the foothills was reached. At the bottom of the gully lying at the foot of a ridge across which he had to ride, Durham gave his horse a spell. The top of the ridge rose steep and bare. As he looked towards it, estimating which was the better direction to take to get to the cave, he heard the sounds of a horse walking.

Presently, on the sky-line, immediately above him, he saw a horse and rider. There was just light enough for him to distinguish the form of the man.

He was clad in grey, the jacket open, his hat in his hand. He was a bearded man—a man with a yellow beard.

It was the Rider!

Even as Durham watched, the man saw him, saw him and swung his horse round so sharply it set back on its haunches.

In another moment he would be flying away through the gathering gloom, away into the broken fastnesses of the range, away, perhaps, for all time, from capture.

The horse was recovering itself. Durham threw his carbine forward and, as the horse reared at the pain of the spurs driven into its side, he fired.

Amid the echoes of the report there came a sharp scream of agony.

Durham leaped to his saddle and spurred his horse up the steep slope.

When he reached the summit only the marks of the flying horse's hoofs showed which way the man had gone.

Chapter XVIII

Unmasked.

The silvery sheen of the rising moon glittered on the surface of the pool and lay over the sombre-foliaged bush as Durham came out upon the top of the bluff above the Rider's cave.

From the moment he reached the ridge to find only the marks made by the plunging horse he had raced to get there first. Down the sharp slopes of the gullies, across the dry, rock-strewn bed of the mountain-streams, up the opposite steeps, with never a care for the risks he ran, he kept his horse at its topmost speed, sparing neither spur nor lash to urge it along. There was no time to choose the easy paths, no chance of picking his way; every moment was of value, for he knew how the wounded outlaw would make desperate haste to get to the shelter of his haven.

The gloom of the bush ere the moon rose added to his difficulties. With no landmark to serve as a guide he had to rely absolutely upon his instinctive sense

of locality, and kept steadily in the one direction, although that meant riding over the rugged ground, barred by tumbled boulders and thickly growing trees, which formed the almost precipitous sides of the gullies. At any time a fall was possible; he carried his life in his hands and knew it; but the ride was a race against odds, and there was no time to heed.

He was breasting the rise of what he believed to be the last of the ridges he would have to cross, when the laboured breathing of his horse told him it was almost done. Leaning forward in his saddle, he patted it on the neck and spoke to it as a man who has realised the companionship between himself and a favourite horse will do. Responding to the encouragement, it mounted to the summit of the ridge and quickened its pace as it felt it was on level ground again. But where the other ridges had been flat on the top, this one was little more than a razor-back. No sooner was the ascent completed than the descent began. The horse caught in its stride to steady itself, tripped, stumbled, and came down. Durham was flung over its head like a stone from a catapult.

Fortunately he came to the ground on the broad of his back, though with such force that he was momentarily stunned. His horse picked itself up and stood trembling and panting long before he was able to scramble to his feet. Even when he did so his head was spinning and he could barely stand.

With unsteady steps he went to his horse and took hold of the bridle. To attempt to ride it further was obviously out of the question, and he led it slowly down to the bottom of the slope, tethering it securely to a tree in the shelter of the gully. Then, pulling himself together, he set off up the opposite slope on foot.

His head was still swimming from the concussion of his fall, and into it there came the humming he had experienced after his adventure at Taloona. It made him so dizzy that he sank down on a boulder, resting his head on his hands until the humming and throbbing should pass. As he sat there came a sound to his ears which made him start to his feet, forgetful of the giddiness, forgetful of everything save the sound and all that it signified.

Through the silence of the bush came the measured tread of a walking horse.

It was evidently crossing the gully below, for, as he listened, the pace quickened to a trot and then to a canter and then became suddenly faint and muffled.

In an instant Durham read the significance of it. The horse had crossed the gully on to level ground and, urged by its rider, had cantered out of hearing. Exactly such a thing would happen were the gully he had crossed the one which came out on to the level sandy margin of the pool.

The realisation sent a chill through him. The rise up which he was climbing must be the ridge which formed the bluff above the cave. If he were not over it quickly, the Rider would be the first at the cave and Durham's scheme for his capture defeated.

The thought drove the last vestige of dizziness from his brain. He faced the slope and forced his way through the tangled undergrowth until he came to the top and saw the moonlight gleaming on the surface of the pool and illuminating with its silvery sheen the open space at the foot.

There was no sign of the horse he expected to see, and no sound came from the cave. With his carbine ready, he crept slowly and silently down until he was at the

mouth. A stray moonbeam fell upon the spot where he had seen the clothes on his former visit. The spot was bare.

He was about to step into the cavern when he heard the distant tread of the horse. Quickly drawing back, he hid himself behind a clump of shrubs which sheltered him, while leaving him a clear view in front up to the line of bushes stretching from the bank to the water's edge. There he waited, while the sound of the horse approaching became more and more distinct.

Presently it was so clear he could hear the snapping of the twigs of the undergrowth as they were trampled down, and he levelled his carbine so as to cover the man immediately he and his horse emerged from the line of bushes. But when the animal appeared, for the moment Durham thought it was riderless. Only when it reached the middle of the open space and was almost directly below him did he see the man, lying forward over the withers, with his arms weakly clinging to the horse's neck and his legs swaying limply as they dangled with the feet out of the stirrups.

Of its own accord the horse stopped. The man painfully pushed himself up until he was able to turn his head and look from side to side.

He was scarcely ten yards from Durham, and the clear light of the moon revealed the face as distinctly as though it were day. The close-cropped hair, fair almost to whiteness, the eyebrows and eyelashes of the same hue; the general form of the face showing above the beard were incongruously, yet elusively, familiar, while the pallor of the cheeks and the anguish of the eyes told of the terrible injury the man had sustained.

He was trying to push himself up so as to sit in the saddle. Only his arms seemed to have any strength, for the legs still dangled limply and the fingers clutched the horse's mane convulsively as the body swayed. The moonlight fell full upon the face, glistening on the beads of moisture which stood out on the skin.

A twinge of pity passed through Durham's heart as he watched the agony of the stricken wretch. The effort to maintain his balance was more than the weakened muscles could stand. A deep groan broke from his lips as his arms gave way; his head fell and he plunged forward, slipping over the horse's shoulder and coming head first to the ground, where he lay in a limp, dishevelled heap.

Freed from its burden, the animal stepped forward and moved to a tree where it had evidently been accustomed to find its feed, for it snorted impatiently and shook itself as it sniffed round the trunk. But Durham had no eyes for it; he was watching, with fascinated intentness, the figure lying motionless on the ground.

Slipping from behind the sheltering shrubs, he approached the man with noiseless steps. There was no sign of life in the figure which lay as it had fallen, but across the lower part of the back the clothes were stained with blood. A bullet had struck him almost on the spine, and the dangling limbs were explained. The shot had paralysed them.

Durham stooped over him. The faintest flicker of breathing showed he was still alive. He lay on his face, his arms out-flung, his legs twisted. Drawing the arms together, Durham slipped a strap round them above the elbows so as to hold them secure. Then he partly lifted him from the ground and dragged him to the mouth of the cave, where he sat him with his back against the rock.

The head drooped forward. In his waist-belt there was a revolver-pouch which Durham, on removal, found to contain a revolver of heavy calibre loaded in all chambers.

Now that he was unarmed and secured, Durham knelt beside him to try and revive him. He gently raised the head and rested it against the stone, holding it steady with one hand while with the other he lifted off the false beard.

As the disguise came away and left the face fully exposed, Durham's heart stood still. With a cry he sprang to his feet, staggering back to stand, with clenching hands and throbbing temples, staring blankly at the white, drawn face upturned to his.

The humming roar was again in his ears, a trembling seized his limbs, his brain reeled and the scene spun before his eyes.

"Oh, my God!" he cried.

Slowly the eyelids lifted and a spasm of pain contracted the pallid face. The glance rested for a moment on Durham as a faint wan smile flickered round the corners of the bloodless lips and the eyelids drooped again.

The sound of his own voice in a hoarse, strained whisper jarred on Durham's ears.

"You!" he gasped. "*You!*"

The eyes opened once more.

In a weak, wavering tone came disjointed words.

"You said—you—would shoot him—like a dog—and I told you—it would—kill—me if you—did."

As white as his captive, Durham stood dumbfounded.

The feeling of horror which had come upon him when first he recognised the face overwhelmed him. His heart went dead and his brain numbed. All the roseate dreams of his romance turned to dull grey leaden grief to flaunt and mock him.

Like the panoramic vision said to come to the minds of the drowning, the incidents on which his love had dwelt in cherishing delight passed before him. He saw again the sparkling eyes which had filled him with such gladness when first that love had come to him; saw the picture made by the wonderfully graceful form leaning against the verandah at Waroona Downs, bathed in the soft, romantic light of the new-born moon; saw the pleading face turned to him as the gentle voice spoke endearing words to gain a passing favour; saw once more that fleeting, taunting vision on which he had built so much despite the warning to beware of the vagaries of a delirium-swayed brain.

The visions passed. Before him, crippled and ghastly in the last agony of life, lay the author of this diabolical outrage upon every sensibility of his manhood.

A rage of blind, ungovernable fury swept over him. The primitive instinct of revenge, the savage longing to wreak, while there was yet time, a last fierce vengeance on the one who had betrayed him, filled his being. With a cry which ended in a curse he sprang to where his carbine lay, seized it by the barrel, and swung it round his head as he turned back upon his prisoner.

A gasping sigh came from the prostrate form, and the head rolled lolling to one side.

The carbine fell from Durham's hands and he stood motionless, looking down at the figure from which all signs of life had gone.

As quickly as it had come the paroxysm of rage left him.

The man was dying, if not dead, and the hideous riddle of the mystery still unsolved!

He must not die! He must not pass beyond the reach of human knowledge with the truth of that tragic drama in which he had played the leading part unrevealed.

Durham rushed to the pool, filled his cap with water and came back with it. Lifting up the drooping head, he moistened the nerveless lips and bathed the cold temples and pallid cheeks.

"In the—cave—rum."

The whisper was just loud enough for him to hear. Leaning the head once more against the stone, Durham staggered to the cave. A dark heap lay on the ground in the shadow. He struck a match.

Numbed as his brain was by the revelation that had come to him, he shrank back at what he saw.

A pile of woman's clothes; the skirt and jacket which had been impressed upon his memory only a few hours before under circumstances which form, perhaps, the one occasion when a man heeds and remembers what a woman wears; the jaunty hat which had exerted so great a spell upon the masculine population of the district, and beside it, the most horrible of all, a wig of luxuriant coal-black hair from which the subtle perfume that had so often charmed him still floated.

With hands which shook so that he could scarcely hold it, he took the bottle of rum, bearing Soden's label, from the ground beside the clothes, and hastened to the mouth of the cave.

In the cold moonlight the figure lay to all appearances dead.

Durham tore open the front of the shirt and pushed in his hand to feel if the heart still beat.

With the moaning cry of a heart-broken man he reeled back. Then, in a wild fervour born of his soul's despair, he fell on his knees beside the prostrate form and tenderly drew the lolling head to his breast and moistened the blue lips with the spirit.

"Oh, speak! Speak to me! Nora, speak to me and tell me," he wailed.

He reached to take her hands and remembered how he had bound the arms. Quickly he set them free and chafed the limp fingers.

"Rum—quick—drink," came in a wavering whisper, and he poured some of the potent spirit between the lips.

Holding her in his arms, with her head resting on his shoulder, he waited, listening to her faint breathing.

"A little more and—I——"

She was able to raise her hand to steady the bottle which he held. Then her head fell over again and she lay inert.

He turned his face to watch her. In a momentary fit of remorse and grief he pressed his lips to hers.

One of her arms stole round his neck and held him to her.

"Oh, my darling, my darling, how I have loved you," he heard her whisper. "Why did you come to me so late?"

Like a chill of death the words went through his brain.

"Tell me—everything," he whispered.

"Yes—before I die—if I can."

"Who are you?" he said. "What is your real name?"

"Nora O'Guire. I am Kitty Lambton's youngest daughter. I told you her story."

"And Patsy?"

"He was my father."

"Was?"

"Yes. He is at the house—dead—Dudgeon—shot him."

"Who was it robbed the bank?"

"Dad and I."

"And Eustace?"

"No. He was innocent."

A shudder of horror passed over him. The woman whom he had loved with such an abandon, this woman whom he held even then in his arms—he shrank away from her, letting her fall against the stone as the grim, sordid horror of the tragedy she was revealing grew plain before him.

"Ah, don't leave me—don't—don't," she moaned. "Let me die in your arms—let me—oh, I love you, love you beyond all else. I will tell you everything—everything—only still hold me."

"How did Eustace die?" His voice rang hard and pitiless.

"Oh! Give me this one last joy on earth. I am not all bad. Don't deny me now. Hold me in your arms, beloved. I had no faith in man or God till I met you, and you were good to me—in the coach—have you forgotten? Don't desert me—now."

Like a jagged claw rending harp-strings the phrases jarred and jangled every chord within his being.

"Oh, why—why——?" he cried. "Why did you come to this?"

"Hold me and I will tell you."

He knelt by her side, taking her head again upon his shoulder while she clutched at his hand.

"My strength is going—more rum—quick."

He held the bottle to her mouth in silence, loving, loathing, pitying, and condemning.

"Now. Don't stop me. Don't interrupt—only listen."

She lay still for a few minutes, gathering the last of her energy. Presently she began.

"Dad, O'Guire that is, was driven to stealing. Mother too. All the other little ones died but me. Dad trained me. Write to the police in London and ask about Nora O'Guire—there are lots of other names, but they know me under all as Nora O'Guire. Then mother died. She made me swear not to rest till we had revenged her on Dudgeon. We came out, Dad and I, came out to find him. I bluffed the bank."

"But the deeds you had with you—were they forgeries?"

"No. I stole them. From a solicitor's office in Dublin—he probably does not know they are missing. Write to him."

"Where are they now?"

"In the cellar under the house—in a stone jar. His name is on them. The bank-notes are there too. The gold is in a——"

"I have found that."

She raised her head.

"You found it? When?"

"Early to-day. Before I met you."

The head fell back. "I am glad," she said. "You are the first man to beat me—but I love you."

"Tell me how you managed to deceive everyone as you did."

"I acted. Once, for a time, when things got too hot for us, I went on the stage. It threw the 'tecks off the scent. I wanted to stay at it, for I liked it, but mother was mad to ruin Dudgeon, and Dad could not keep straight. So we began again. I wore a wig and made up. You'll find it in the cave."

"I have seen it."

"Oh, if I could only have married you," she gasped. "If I had only met you earlier!"

"But about Eustace," he said quietly.

"Yes, I'll tell you. I went to the bank—like this—and saw Eustace. I slipped into the kitchen and drugged the tea. I knew they all took it. Then Dad and I broke in. It was quite easy. I climbed up the verandah, opened the back door, and let Dad in. They were all dead asleep. We took the keys and cleared the safe. Every place was locked up again and left just as we found it. Dad went out, and when I had locked the back door I went over the verandah again."

"How did you get the gold away?"

"The buggy was in the bush. We whitewashed the horses as a blind. We knew they hated the colour up here. It puzzled everyone."

"But when did you discover this place?"

"Dad knew it in the old days. He and mother used to meet here in secret—there is a way across to the ford—the water gets shallow in one place—it was there Dad shot——"

Her voice caught and she turned appealing eyes to him as she struggled for breath.

"Give me—rum," she muttered, and he rested her head on his arm, while he slowly poured some of the spirit between her lips. For a time she lay so still he thought she had gone, till there came a wavering sigh and she moved her head slightly.

"It was—nearly—over——" she whispered.

"About Eustace?" he said. "Can you tell me now?"

"Yes—I'll try," she answered. "Don't leave me—stay with me till the end, won't you? Give me—your word."

"I will stay," he replied.

The head resting on his arm turned until the eyes looked straight into his. They were filled with the gentle light he had seen in them when, through the momentary lifting of the veil of unconsciousness, he had been enabled to catch a glimpse of her real nature.

"Then I'll tell you—everything," she whispered. "We had to fix suspicion on someone. When I saw him he had no nerve. I offered to shelter him. He agreed, and I let him out of the window, and pretended to go on talking to him all the time he was getting away into the bush. You know what happened then."

"At the bank? Yes. But what became of Eustace?"

"He was at the house. He was there the night you came. He nearly gave himself up. He was coming when he heard you say who you were. So Dad knocked him on the head and put him in the cellar."

"While I was there?" Durham exclaimed.

"Yes. When you went to see to your horse. Then later we had to trick you. Dad put something in the tea like I did at the bank, only it would have killed you all he put in. He wanted to. He wanted to after, and tried to, but I—I wouldn't let him—because I loved you. But I made you sleep that night—Dad had to make fresh tea, and I put the stuff in. We watched you go off on the verandah while you were smoking, and then tied you up. It was hard to make you wake, but we had to—Dad had taken Eustace's handkerchief—we knew you would be convinced if you found it—after seeing me—and we—we shot your horse, and made the others bolt."

"But afterwards? What happened to Eustace afterwards?" he asked as she stopped.

"We had to keep him there, then, because he knew. He was there in the cellar the night you came from Taloona. You heard him cry out. So Dad brought him here and tied him up. He was here all the time you were at the house. The evening after you saw Brennan, when you talked to me on the verandah, Dad came and found him escaping. Dad killed him. He had to. He shammed drunk next day, so that you should not suspect him. There is a short cut from the house, and Dad took it after you left, and got to the ford before you. That's all."

"When Taloona was stuck up——"

"Dad and I," she said. "We didn't know you were there. You hit me, and I—oh, darling, it broke my heart when I saw you fall, but I had to. That is why I took you away to nurse you. I kissed you when you didn't know."

"The other night—when you rode through the town?"

She lay silent and he repeated the question.

"I was—half drunk. So was Dad. We did it out of devilment. They were all such fools—all but you—and you nearly shot me. The bullet grazed my horse. You will see the cut on the shoulder. You nearly caught Dad. He was in the police-station when you got back. He cracked every crib in the place—I wasn't in that."

"Where did he hide?" Durham asked.

"In the yard—where Eustace was—you never looked there."

A convulsive shudder ran through her.

"But to-night—where were you going to-night when I met you?" he asked.

"To kill Dudgeon. Dad only just got home. I could die happy if I only had."

Again her frame quivered, and she was racked with a fierce struggle to get her breath. She lay against him, her head resting in the hollow of his arm, her eyes closed, and her mouth twitching.

"Tell him," she whispered between her panting gasps. "Tell him—I—tried——"

He touched her hands lying limply in her lap; they were icy cold. Her head was growing heavy on his arm and her lips were turning blue. He moistened them once more with rum as her breathing became almost imperceptible.

For a moment her eyes opened and looked into his with an expression of wonderful tenderness.

"Dudgeon is already dead," he whispered gently.

She started and tried to sit up, but could only raise her head.

"Dead," she whispered. "Dead!"

Then, as though the news galvanised her waning strength into one last tumultuous effort, she flung out her arms and sat up, with wide-open eyes staring fixedly into space.

"Dad! Dad!" she cried. "You did—you did, Dad. Oh, thank——"

Her arms fell, her head lolled forward, and her body lurched against Durham as, with a broken, gasping sigh, she collapsed into a nerveless, jointless thing.

He bent his head and placed his ear to her breast above her heart. There was not the faintest throb, and he took his arm from around her. As he did so she rolled over, her face upturned towards the moon, at which her wide-open eyes stared and her mouth gaped.

The Rider of Waroona was dead!

With bowed head and aching heart Durham bent over her.

All the love of his nature which had lain dormant for so long had gone out to this woman, enfolding her, idealising her, until she became to him the completement of his being, the one incentive for all which was noble within him, the mainspring of his life, the lode-stone of his ambitions. To have won her would have been his dearest and proudest achievement; to have had her love would have made existence for him a never-ending stream of happiness and joy.

As a sun new risen from the night she had come into his life, bringing light and warmth and peace where there had been only coldness and unrest. So he had dreamed of her only that morning; so she had appeared to him only a few hours since when, at her bidding, trusting her, believing in her, loving her, he had turned his back on his duty—betrayed.

Resentment at the treachery warred with his love and tinged his sorrow with bitterness. How she had played with him, tricking him, fooling him, outwitting him—and yet loving him.

The memory of the last fond look of lingering tenderness which had been in her eyes ere he told her Dudgeon was dead came to him. Why had he told her that? Why had he not let her die as she was then, with the gentle side of her nature dominating her, filled with the one soft impulse she perhaps had ever known?

The words had slipped from his tongue almost before he knew, and on the instant there had come back to her the overshadowing influence which had warped her life for evil even before she was born.

By his hand she had died; by his words her last moments had been filled with the blackness of insensate hate.

Before the mute condemnation of that self-accusing thought the bitterness which had been in his mind against her dissipated. Whatever ills she had done to him, he had done greater to her. Whatever ills she had done to humanity were the outcome not of her own nature, but of the circumstances and conditions which had governed her from the moment she was born. All that she had said during the last evening he spent at her house recurred to him and a new significance dawned into the words.

She had spoken of herself, pleaded for herself, striven to rouse his sympathy and compassion, so that, within the sombre barrenness of her ill-starred life, one spot there might be where the loving kindness of human charity had fallen and

made it bright. He remembered how he had answered her—coldly, sternly, crushing down her awakening soul with the same callous indifference which had always met her. With the pitiless weight of a loveless life, what wonder she was warped, distorted, marred? More sinned against than sinning, he had no right nor will to blame her—only the love she had inspired in him remained, to fill his heart with sadness and drag it down with the hopeless desolation of vain regrets.

For she had gone from him even as she revealed the love she bore him, gone into the darkness by his own act, gone—his throat grew hard until he choked as the thought came to him—gone from a greater degradation he, by the merciless irony of fate, would have had to fasten upon her.

Better, a thousand times better for her, that she should be as she was than that she should have lived to face the doom awaiting her—better for her—and better for him.

It was nothing to him now that the story she had told showed her, by all the laws of humanity, to be unworthy. Black as she had painted herself, the love she had inspired shone through the blackness, revealing only that which lay beyond, the radiant purpose, unmeasurable by human standards, transcending human ken.

He knelt again by her side, taking her cold hands in his and placing them upon her breast, closing the staring eyes, composing the wry-drooped mouth, straightening the twisted limbs.

"Oh, my love, my love," he wailed. "Sleep on in peace. Sleep on till I shall come to you. Wait for me, for I must stay awhile yet to shield and shelter you so that none may know the secret of your life."

Chapter XIX

The Ashes of Silence.

Wallace and Harding were seeing all was secure in the bank before retiring for the night when a sharp rap sounded at the front door.

"Hullo, what's this?" Wallace exclaimed. "Will you see who it is?"

Harding went to the door and opened it. On the step Durham was standing.

"Oh, it's you, Durham. Come in," he said. "We've been discussing things or we should have been in bed an hour or more ago. What's the news?"

Without a word Durham stepped in and walked to the room where Wallace was waiting at the door. Directly he came into the light both Harding and Wallace uttered exclamations of surprise.

"Why, what has happened?" the latter cried. "My dear fellow—you look thoroughly done up—you are as haggard as a man of sixty. You've overdone it. Let me get you a whisky."

Durham shook his head and sat down, resting one hand on the table at his side, the other on his knee. His uniform was soiled and torn, his face lined and grey, and his eyes heavy as with a great weariness. The quick alertness he had

shown when he was with them earlier in the day had gone; he looked, as Wallace had expressed it, an old, haggard man, listless, without vitality, lacking even the energy to talk.

The two stood watching him in silence, the same question in each one's mind—what could have happened to produce so great a change in a man in so short a time?

"Are you sure you won't let me get you something?" Wallace said presently as Durham neither moved nor spoke. "You are quite worn out. Won't you take——"

Durham raised his hand as he shook his head again.

"I only want you to send away a telegram at once to your head office," he said in a voice so dull and hollow that it caused even a greater shock to his companions than his appearance had done.

"There would not be anyone to receive it at this time of night," Wallace replied. "But it shall go the first thing in the morning."

"If you will write it now, I will leave it at the post office," Durham said in the same lifeless tone.

Wallace rose, forcing a smile.

"It is already written, Durham," he said pleasantly. "It states you have succeeded in recovering the stolen gold, and asks for authority to pay you the reward at once and in public."

"You must not send that."

The forced smile faded as Wallace stood staring; the expression both in Durham's voice and on his face was so hopelessly despondent, that into Wallace's mind there came a fear lest the recovered gold had again disappeared.

"Not send that?" he asked wonderingly. "Why? You said——"

"I know. But you must not send it—now. Write another."

"The gold is lost?" Wallace exclaimed.

"No. The gold is safe; it is on its way here now—Brennan is bringing it. What you must report at once is that Eustace was innocent."

"Eustace innocent?"

Wallace and Harding uttered the exclamation simultaneously.

"Innocent. Absolutely innocent. Tell Mrs. Eustace too. It may bring her a grain of comfort in her distress."

Without raising his head or lifting his eyes, Durham spoke in the voice of a man upon whom the weight of desolation has fallen. To his hearers it suggested failure, defeat, and the consequent loss of professional prestige. To Wallace, whose concern was mostly for the recovery of the Bank's money, the suggestion did not convey so much as it did to Harding. He knew more of Durham's views, had heard him express time and again his absolute conviction as to the guilt of Eustace. The case, as Durham had put it, was so entirely clear against the late manager that to hear him now declared innocent, and by the man who had accumulated evidence against him, reduced Harding's mind to a blank.

"What are you saying, Durham?" he heard Wallace exclaim with impatience. "What do you mean? Eustace innocent? Why—great Heavens, man, if he were innocent——"

"He was absolutely innocent, Mr. Wallace. As innocent as Mr. Harding."

"But——" Harding passed his hand across his forehead.

"It is true," Durham said in a subdued tone. "I was entirely misled, entirely."

"But—then—well, how was the bank robbed?" Harding cried.

"I know how it was robbed; by whom it was robbed; everything," Durham replied.

"Who was it?" Wallace asked.

Durham remained silent, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"The Rider?" Harding said.

"That name will do. The Rider and another. They are both dead. I saw one die—from a bullet in the back. I fired it. I have seen the other dead from a bullet Mr. Dudgeon fired. The missing notes I have recovered. I have them here."

He put his hand inside his tunic and drew out a closely tied bundle which he laid on the table.

"Will you check them and see if the total is correct?"

"Now?" Wallace asked.

"If you please."

"But will not to-morrow morning do? It is enough to have as many as these back without going through them so late at night."

"I shall not be here to-morrow."

"You are surely not going away—not until——"

"I shall not be here to-morrow," Durham repeated.

The tone in which he spoke stopped further discussion.

"We can check them in here—I will fetch the register," Harding said, as he rose and went to the office, returning in a few moments with the book.

While he and Wallace checked the notes with the list of those stolen, Durham sat at the end of the table in the same position he had first assumed.

"They are all here," Wallace said in a subdued voice, when the checking was complete. The presence of this grey-faced, silent, sad-eyed man was getting on his nerves.

"The gold and the things stolen from the bank will be here in a few minutes; Brennan is bringing them."

"And the deeds—Mrs. Burke's deeds? Have you no trace of them?"

"They are returned to the owner."

"But they ought to be here. The Bank advanced money on them."

"I am sorry. I cannot help it now. You will have to hold the deeds of Waroona Downs instead."

"We have those," Harding said quietly.

"Oh, well then, it does not matter so much, though it is still very irregular, you know," Wallace replied.

Durham stood up and turned to Harding. "You will tell Mrs. Eustace? Tell her I am more than sorry for her in her trouble, but she can console herself that she was right. Her husband was innocent. Good-bye."

With bent head and slow steps he passed from the room and from the bank, closing the door after him.

"But what does it mean? What does it all mean?" Wallace cried as the front door slammed.

"We may know to-morrow," Harding replied. "There must be something horribly tragic to have affected Durham so much. Better leave it as it stands, I think. He would have spoken had there been anything more he could have said."

"Did he mean the gold was coming here to-night?"

"I gathered so. Shall I walk up to the station and ask Brennan?"

But before he could do so Brennan arrived at the bank.

"Where will you have it put?" he asked. "I've got it out at the back by the fence."

"We'll both give you a hand with it," Wallace replied.

They went out at the back door. A light cart was standing beyond the fence, with something in it covered by a tarpaulin. Brennan pulled the cover away and revealed the pile of bags.

"There is hardly anything missing," Wallace exclaimed when everything had been carried into the bank and the amount checked. "It is one of the smartest things I have ever encountered. The way your sub-inspector has traced and recovered this is nothing short of marvellous."

"He told me to say, sir, that it seemed to him only a right thing for you to do to let Mr. Eustace be brought here so that the funeral could be from the bank."

"Well, of course we must consult Mrs. Eustace about that," Wallace answered. "I'll see Mr. Durham in the morning——"

"Sorry to say you won't, sir," Brennan interrupted. "He's on his way now to the junction. He told me that what he had discovered he would have to report personally to the chief. Just what it is I haven't the faintest idea, but it's something pretty hot, if you ask me. I've never seen the sub-inspector curled up over anything like he is over this."

"He told us he had shot the Rider," Harding said.

"Oh, yes, sir, he told me that too. What I'm inclined to think is that he discovered him to be a member of some big family in the south, and is anxious for their sake to keep the name secret. It's just the sort of thing some young blood might do if he were in an awkward hole—a chance of lifting a big sum such as this is a pretty strong temptation to anyone in a hole."

"That may be it. One never knows. He may even have been a friend of Durham's," Wallace said musingly. "Certainly something has upset him very much. You don't know what became of the papers he found, do you? The papers Mrs. Burke left with the Bank?" he added.

"I know nothing about them, sir; but he told me to ride out to Waroona Downs the first thing in the morning and tell Mrs. Burke to come in and see you. Perhaps she may know something about them."

"Ah, very likely," Wallace said. "He told us he had returned them to the owner. I expect that is it, Harding. He has sent or given them to her. She will be able to put the matter straight, however, when she comes in."

"I should have liked to let Mrs. Eustace know to-night, but it is too late now," Harding remarked. "It's long after midnight."

"Go over directly after breakfast in the morning. I'll see to the office until you return. It will be necessary to wire to the general manager about Durham's suggestion, but we must have her opinion first."

"I suppose she has heard about Mr. Dudgeon," Harding said. "It's a bad business all through."

"There is his will, Harding; don't forget that. Not many people would be inclined to call that a bad business if they were in Mrs. Eustace's place."

It was the one grain of comfort Harding felt he was carrying with him when, on the following morning, he walked through the town to Smart's cottage.

Already the news of the Rider's end was common property. When Mrs. Eustace came to him in the little sitting-room, it was of that she spoke.

"Oh, who was he, Fred? Bessie heard that Mr. Durham had refused to tell anyone but you. Is that so? Surely I may know. Surely I am entitled to so small a satisfaction as that?"

"I do not know who he was," Harding replied. "Durham came to us late last night, too late for me to come and tell you, but he mentioned no name. He said something I would have liked to have been able to repeat to you at once, but it was too late. So I have come as early as this. Durham asked me specially to come. He said—he hoped you——"

She drew herself up as he paused, clasped her hands, and pressed them to her breast.

"What is it, Fred? You have some—something terrible—to say," she said in a whisper.

"Not terrible, Jess, but it is sad. Durham said he hoped you would find some consolation in it. So do I. So do we all. The Rider, whoever he may have been, confessed. He said Eustace was innocent."

She remained quite still, without a sound, staring at him.

"The bank was robbed by the Rider and another, Durham said, but Eustace was not one of the two. He was absolutely innocent. We have wired to the general manager to say so."

"Fred, I don't believe it. I can't believe it. Why did he run away if he were innocent? I will never rest until I know who the man Mr. Durham shot really was. Where is Mr. Durham?"

"He has left Waroona, Jess. He told Brennan he could only report personally to his chief the truth about the man. Brennan thinks he was someone connected with one of the big families, and that is why the name is not made known."

"But I insist on knowing. Was he shot? Is it true, or is it some hideous blind? I will know, Fred, I will know!"

"Durham was too much cut up when he came to us last night, Jess, for it to be a blind. A tragedy it may be, but not a blind."

"But who was the man? Whoever he was he killed Charlie, killed him, Fred. They have no right to hide his name. Besides—how do we know he was shot? Durham said so, but where is the body?"

He shook his head.

"Jess," he said, "it is sad enough. What the mystery is I cannot say, but if it has cleared Charlie's name——"

She sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, that will not bring him back!" she sobbed. "What will that do now?"

He bent over her, with his hand on her shoulder.

"I know," he said, "I know how bitter it is, how hard."

"I said they would find him innocent when—when he had gone," she exclaimed.

"The Bank wants to make what amends it can," he said softly. "Will you let——"

"Oh, don't ask me," she moaned. "I know what you would say. Do as you think best."

"Then I will arrange it?"

She bent her head in answer.

"I should have gone away," she said as she rose and walked across the room. "You were right. I should never have stayed, never, never!"

"Don't think me cruel, Jess," he said; "but there is something more I must tell you. Have you heard about Mr. Dudgeon?"

She nodded.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "Poor old man. He was here yesterday. He——"

"He came to the bank," he said, as she was silent. "He left something in my charge, Jess, and made me promise you should have it at once if anything happened to him. It was his will. He has left everything to you."

She turned quickly.

"Fred—Fred——" she gasped as she held out her hands and groped in the air.

He caught her as she swayed.

For a time she lay in his arms, finding a woman's relief in a flood of tears. Not until she grew calm did he speak.

"You must go away to-morrow," he said softly. "Go away and rest where you will not be harassed by all the memories which cling around this place. Promise me you will."

She raised her head and looked him in the face through her tears.

"Fred, you know why I cannot leave. Even now, with all this tragedy over me, with him—lying over there—he whom I suspected and blamed—don't think ill of me; but my heart would have been broken but for you."

He drew her to him again, held her close to him, kissed her upturned lips.

"I will leave too," he whispered. "I will come after. Will you promise now?"

"Yes," she answered simply.

When he returned to the bank, Brennan rode up at a gallop.

"Oh, a terrible thing has happened!" he cried as he came into the office. "Waroona Downs has been burned to the ground in the night and both Mrs. Burke and old Patsy burned to death in their beds. I warned her that one of these days that drunken old man would do some damage, but she wouldn't listen to me. Now there's the place in ruins and ashes. It must have burned out hours ago, for there's not a spark left, only the remains of the two lying charred to cinders."

Coming on top of the other news circulating amongst the townsfolk, the destruction of Waroona Downs, with its two inmates, exhausted the local capacity for wonder.

The whole township followed Eustace from the bank, forgetting their earlier condemnation of him now that his innocence had been declared, and being only anxious to testify their sympathy with the woman who had suffered so much in their midst. They would have turned out en masse and escorted her some miles on her way to the junction when she set out from Waroona for the south, but word was passed round that she wanted to go away in silence, unobserved.

Three months later Harding followed her. There was no staying the township then. He was the last of the active participants in the tragic mystery to leave the place, and it was an open secret he was going to join the one for whom they all felt

deeply. So they made up in his send-off for the restraint they had exercised upon themselves when she bade the town a silent farewell.

The memory of that festivity still lives in the local annals, and ever, as a stranger asks for the story of the Rider, the send-off of the banker is the conclusion of the tale. In vain the stranger may ask for particulars as to who the Rider was.

The charred ashes of Waroona Downs had no tongue wherewith to tell what happened the night fire came to wipe the homestead from the earth.